

International Rail Worker News

All Rail Crafts and Unions Across France Unite and Take Strike Action

In a powerful display of unity, all of France's rail unions – and others – have come together to oppose the proposed reforms of France's President Emmanuel Macron, a 40-year-old former investment banker. In a series of executive orders last August, Macron laid out his pro-business and anti-labor agenda: to give companies more flexibility in hiring and firing workers plus more power to negotiate working conditions directly with employees, to assume less financial risk in cases of wrongful dismissals, to hire more contract workers, and to slash budgets across the board, including cuts of 120,000 public-sector jobs.

In late March, railroad workers took the lead by declaring strike action at the national railway SNCF, announcing a series of intermittent rolling strikes throughout the spring, in the hopes of inspiring other workers to fight back. They have been joined by airline and other workers who share their concerns. To date, the strikes have been largely successful and effective at shutting down operations across the country.

Unions have called for the "strongest possible" strikes in order to protest the proposals which they believe would erode workers wages, benefits and working conditions, and would ultimately lead to the privatization of the railways. "We're striking for several reasons, but at the top of the list is the government wanting to open up the service to competition," stated Eric Santinelli, spokesman for the relatively new union SUD Rail.

At the RWU Convention April 6th in Chicago, members present heard an account of the action from Maurice Amzallag, a retired French railway worker and union activist. Brother Maurice explained that while the majority of railway workers are not union members, most are involved in the strikes and demonstrations. Every day there are rank & file assemblies of workers – union and otherwise – who collectively decide action. Members of all four rail unions are present at all assemblies, and cooperation and mutual respect is the order of the day.

But the workers and their unions have their work cut out for them. Not only are they diametrically opposed to the French President's vision of a "new" France, they are squaring off against the basic thrust of the European Union to open up the European rail system to private and international competition. If the French railroad workers lose this fight, there is every reason to believe that outright privatization - such as has taken place in the UK - could be the endgame. The result: longer



French railway workers of the union SUD - Rail march in Paris. The initials stand for Solidarity - Unity - Democracy. Coincidentally, this is the very same slogan used by Railroad Workers United.

hours, job cuts, contracting out of work, "flexible" work rules, downgraded retirement benefits, and increased stress for workers; higher fares and service reductions for passengers; and a loss of trains altogether in rural ("unprofitable") regions of the country.

Both the government and the workers have made it clear that they will not concede, with each viewing the strikes as a test of resolve and credibility. Students and others have joined the strikes and demonstrations to create scenes that are reminiscent of the mass uprising in Paris 1968. Other sectors are expected to join the action in protest of the broader changes to labor laws proposed by Macron. Unions fear that if he triumphs in the rail dispute, Macron could soon push through controversial reforms areas like education and pensions.

The French government has been attempting labor law "reform" for decades, including a restructuring of SNCF. But they have backed down when railroad workers and their allies mobilized mass opposition. By summer, it should be apparent whether or not rails can defeat the government once again.

UK Rails Fight Driver Only Trains

Meanwhile in Great Britain, railroad workers keep up the fight against "Driver Only Operations." The struggle - which has been waged for two years now - has garnered support from transport unions around the world including RWU. While there are a number of differences, the struggle is similar in nature to that in North America against single employee train crews. But just as solidarity between the two unions of the operating crafts is crucial to our fight on this side of the Atlantic, so it is as well between the unions there in the UK - the RMT that represents the Guards (conductors) and ASLEF that represents the train drivers (engineers).

