French Railway Workers’ Continued Strike Action - The Concern of All

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As this issue of The Highball goes to press, the French government’s “reform” plan promises a transformation of what has traditionally been the strongest labor sector of the French economy - rail. This attack on labor in France is part and parcel of an international drive to roll back protections, standards and guarantees of rail workers won since World War 2. Nevertheless, the rail unions that have been striking in France since early April have vowed to fight on into the Summer holiday season.

The longest railroad strike in more than 30 years in France is important to rail workers worldwide, including those of us in North America. The issues, tactics and politics are relevant to our own situation. Neoliberal French President Emmanuel Macron, using deceptive language, vowed to "reform" the French railroad labor system, along with the French National Railway Company (SNCF), which has operated the bulk of all French passenger and freight rail operations as a nationalized operation since the 1930s. The so-called reform pact, which passed into law on June 14, includes transforming the SNCF into a private Joint Stock company (with the State retaining partial ownership), which the unions view as a likely prelude to full-scale privatization and the dismembering of the national system. In addition, the new legislation disenfranchises new hires, creating a two-tier workforce with new employees receiving fewer benefits, losing various job guarantees and civil service status, and being forced to work longer and retire at a later age.

The entire narrative put forward by the government, in targeting SNCF and its organized workforce, is orchestrated to misrepresent the facts about the French rail situation. North American rails will recognize the signs of this misrepresentation. For instance, the SNCF is said to be in debt $47 billion dollars. Compare this to pretty much any other state owned sector or entity, for instance, the army. The government never says that the military budget represented a debt. The debt of the nationalized system is a bookkeeping gimmick. Likewise, the targeting of the costs of hard won worker benefits and guarantees that - like in the US - were negotiated in good faith based upon the real world difficulties faced by rail workers.

Our French brothers and sisters are organized and operate under quite different conditions than those that exist for us. Organized French rail workers are not divided by craft. They have traditionally belonged to industrially organized federations. Yet divisions do exist, often due to political and tactical differences. There are four main labor groups representing workers in the French rail system, each with a specific historical outlook and affiliation. The principal unions in the rail fight are the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes (UNSA) and the Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques (SUDRail), and the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT). In practice, the difference between the federations tends to be how much trust each of them places in the government and in negotiations, and how ready and willing they are with mobilizations. RWU members in attendance at the last three biennial conventions have been fortunate to hear directly from rank & file activists from both the SUDRail and the CGT, the two most militant of the French rail unions.

In the current strike against the Macron government’s "reforms", the unions have held together in a united front since the April strike actions began. But now that the package of "reforms" have actually been voted into law, there are cracks beginning to appear. The historically more moderate CFDT has announced that it has suspended strike action to which it had been committed until the end of June.

The strike united front by the main rail unions has been able to extract some changes in the "reform" pact. Among those is canceling of $35 billion of supposed $47 billion of SNCF debt. The government has repeatedly stated that the transformation to a Joint Stock company is not intended to lead to privatization, that the State will not sell its shares and has included guarantees of employment for rail workers displaced by changes after other rail operators begin entering the French system next year. European Union rules require opening access in the French rail system to other operators by next year.

The struggle continues ....