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France, March 22, the stakes are huge: Unions, left confront Macron's attacks on rail services and jobs

Saturday 24 March 2018, by [NICHOLS Dick](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2018).

Protests and strikes by rail workers has disrupted travel across France. France is once again on the brink of an all-out industrial war — and its outcome could transform the country's political landscape.

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The showdown is over the plans that President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe have for the state-owned National Railway Company (SNCF), which have been described by *Le Monde* as “the biggest change for the SNCF since its founding in 1937”.

The stakes in the fight are huge: France's 150,000 rail workers could suffer a defeat like that of Britain's miners under Margaret Thatcher. On the other hand, Philippe could suffer the same fate as former PM Alain Juppe, whose 1995 economic “reform” was trashed by a vast wave of industrial action and popular revolt.

As an initial response, rail worker unions led a Paris demonstration on March 22 in defence of public services that also involved workers from Air France, air traffic control centres, Paris regional public transport, public hospitals and retirement homes and other services. This demonstration was one of 150 across the country.

The country's four rail unions have also announced that they will launch 36 days of strikes over a three-month period beginning on April 3, alternating 48-hour stoppages with 72 hours of normal work.

Previously, in an unprecedented display of unity, 13 left organisations issued a joint statement calling for participation in the demonstration. The call was initiated by former New Anti-Capitalist Party presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot, taken up by Communist Party of France general secretary Pierre Laurent and eventually supported by the other main forces of the left, France Unbowed and the Socialist Party (PS), as well as by the Greens and smaller left forces.

The mobilisation attracted 400,000 across the whole of France, with 65,000 in Paris, 55,000 in Marseilles, 35,000 in La Rochelle, 20,000 in Toulouse and 15,000 in Lyon. 40% of high-speed trains and 50% of regional services were cancelled on the day.

Trial of strength

The government's plan for the SNCF covers all aspects: train operations, the rail network, infrastructure, finances, and company structure and legal form.

However, for Macron and Philippe, the plan's immediate target is the collective agreement that has covered SNCF employees since 1920. Defeating the rail workers in a fight over this contract is the key to unlocking the plan's other aspects.

Rail workers realised they were Macron's primary target on February 24, when he announced at the annual Agriculture Show that "I can't have on one side farmers without any retirement plan and on the other a rail worker collective agreement [that includes a retirement package] and not change it."

Macron did not say a word about any SNCF plans in his campaign for president. However, from his behaviour it is clear that he judges that a successful fight with the rail workers would be his "Thatcher moment" and help boost his authority.

It will also give French employers the crushing victory over organised labour that they have been seeking for decades.

Spokesperson for the rail worker division of the radical union Solidarity Unity Democracy (SUD-Rail) Bruno Poncet said: "The government wants a trial of strength. It's moving to try us out. It wants this test because it knows if it wins, the last resistance will have been overcome".

One-way dialogue

The government's first move was to accept the diagnosis and recommendations of the report Philippe had commissioned from Air France CEO Jean-Cyril Spinetta, The Future of Rail Transport.

Spinetta paints a gloomy picture of a "massively subsidised" SNCF sinking towards oblivion under a crushing debt burden, politically determined low prices and tariffs, suffocating bureaucracy, torpid management, rent-seeking unions and regional special interests.

Spinetta's 43 recommendations include: line closures (up to a third of the network's 30,000 kilometres); rises in ticket prices and freight rates; opening the SNCF network to private operators; offloading the burden of regional line subsidies onto regional governments; opening services to competition; compulsory staff transfers to private operators; and the progressive extinction of the collective agreement via the introduction of worse conditions for new staff.

The Spinetta report is also notable for what it does not say: it contains no audit of environmental and social impacts and no cost-benefit analysis. The SNCF is treated as a purely commercial operation that must recover competitiveness and profitability to meet European Union directives.

Thus, while Macron poses as world leader in the fight against global warming, he accepts a report that ignores that every passenger or tonne of freight lost from rail represents a rise in greenhouse gas emissions, road accidents and noise pollution.

As the joint statement of left organisations noted: "Throughout Europe the recipes that [Macron] wants to apply are producing line closures, price hikes, rolling stock and infrastructure decay and loss of freight.

“The population as a whole foots the bill in three ways: financially; in terms of inequality between regions; and in deteriorating health due to the extra pollution produced.”

Philippe’s following step was to stage an ostentatious ritual of meetings with rail unions. One by one, delegations from the rail worker divisions of the General Confederation of Labour, the National Alliance of Independent Unions, SUD-Rail and the French Democratic Labour Confederation had the plan explained to them and were invited to put forward their point of view and make proposals.

This, however, was not a negotiation but a show of consultation that would allow the government to say it had more than 20 meetings with rail unions. None of the unions’ proposals, nor those of rail transport users groups, were taken into consideration.

The government then announced that the plan would not be set in legislation to be debated in parliament, but instead rammed through as a temporary statute (ordonnance) by the Macronite majority, with the aim of launching the “reform” before summer and with as little debate as possible.

While the government claimed that Spinetta’s proposals in no way envisaged privatising the SNCF, when the ordonnance was published it concentrated on just two points: opening the SNCF to competition and phasing out the rail workers’ collective agreement.

Hearts and minds

The French media, alert to the presidential attack strategy, lost no time in backing Macron’s double goal: to instil the feeling that the plan is “unavoidable” and to make the rest of the working class — which has suffered a steady loss of wages and conditions — envy and hate rail workers.

In this hostile atmosphere, rail union spokespeople have had their work cut out explaining their real working conditions — on average only slightly better than the norm for most workers, but in no way privileged.

French media watch website Acrimed has been monitoring this operation, which has included biased survey questions like “Should rail workers be able to stop the trains for a month and penalise everyone in France?” and “In what way does the rail workers’ collective agreement improve service to the public?”

Acrimed noted that during one TV debate, SUD-Rail federal secretary Fabian Dumas was interrupted by his fellow panellists 66 times in eight minutes — once every seven seconds on average.

Opinion polls show that the idea that rail workers have to make a sacrifice to help out the SNCF still has majority support — 69%, according to a recent RMC poll. The poll also showed that 43% would support the rail workers if they went on strike.

Clearly, there is still a way to go in winning the battle for hearts and minds. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, signs are emerging that Macron’s blitzkrieg is faltering.

First, his determination to pick a fight has forced the four rail union confederations, with a history of conflict and rivalry, into a unified response, even though SUD-Rail — the most radical of the confederations — maintains that the rolling stoppage plan will at some point have to become an all-out strike.

This unity reflects that willingness to strike is high in all parts of the SNCF workforce. The March 10 edition of the web-based transport industry newsletter Mobilettre stated that 93% of SNCF workers

and a similar percentage of SNCF management were ready to strike.

Second, Macron's popularity is down to 41% and his En Marche! movement has suffered losses in two recent byelections.

Most importantly, the longer the battle for hearts and minds continues, the more the case against the Spinetta plan will sink in.

A big problem for Macron is that his war on the SNCF is coming late in the privatisation cycle that began in the 1980s. The evidence has long been in as to the disastrous impact of rail privatisation, with two-thirds of people in Britain, for example, supporting rail renationalisation.

In France itself, many remember that a similar restructuring of France Telecom in 1997 was sworn by the PS government of the day not to open the door to privatisation. That giant state firm has since become a gold mine for private interests.

As the fight continues, the most fundamental issue will also start gaining more weight: the need for a comprehensive rail network as part of any project for environmental sustainability.

The battle has just begun and is winnable. As "someone very close to Macron", quoted in the March 15 Liberation, said: "If Macron starts to wobble, the whole show collapses."

Dick Nichols

P.S.

* Greenleft. March 23, 2018. Issue 1174:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/france-unions-left-confront-macron-attacks-rail-services-and-jobs>

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