

INTERVIEW

Saving France's Railways - "We're at a pivotal moment"

Saturday 24 March 2018, by [PONCET Bruno](#), [STANGLER Cole](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2018).

Yesterday, French rail workers kicked off months of rolling strikes against Macron's attacks on their working conditions.

Last week, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe unveiled sweeping reforms to the publicly owned French National Railway Corporation (SNCF). As with the pro-business labor law reform last fall, Emmanuel Macron and his government aim to approve the changes by executive order, thereby reducing parliamentary debate. Under the orders, rail workers would lose key employment protections and the SNCF would see its legal status shift from a public company to a "publicly financed" corporation.

In the eyes of organized labor, the legislation marks the opening salvo to a full-blown dismantling of the nationalized rail system, which has been in public hands since its creation in 1937. Unions recently announced their mobilization plans, which will consist of rolling strikes from April 3 to June 28, a series of two-day long strikes punctuated by three-day intervals. Railroad workers also joined striking civil servants in protest today, March 22.

Cole Stangler spoke with Bruno Poncet, federal secretary for SUD Rail, an independent left-wing union affiliated with the national labor organization Solidaires, and the most militant of the four major unions at the SNCF. Poncet's union has called for railroad workers to decide strike actions themselves in general assemblies. They discuss the stakes of railroad reform, the strike plans, and why rail workers are such a potent symbol of resistance in France.

Cole Stangler (CS)

Why are you against this reform?

Bruno Poncet (BP)

This reform is going to destroy the public railway transit system. The SNCF was created to allow everyone to travel across the country at low rates. This new law is going to allow the private sector to enter the system, companies looking to turn a profit. In order to turn a profit, a lot of things will be abandoned. Working conditions will become worse. This reform needs to be fought against because we're going to get to a moment where they're going to break the railroad system as we know it today — one that allows for real social equity for French people — and move to an à la carte system with clientelism.

CS

The two big pieces here, when we're talking about the reforms, are the end of railroad

workers' special employment status and the transformation of the SNCF into a publicly financed corporation. Right?

BP

These are the pieces the government is advancing but that's not all of it. The statut applies to just 140,000 people, and it's not preventing the SNCF from making a profit. Last year, the SNCF made €1.3 billion. Secondly, yes, the move to a publicly financed corporation is a real concern for us. But the bigger problem is that the rail system has €50 billion in debt and this debt generates financial costs and job cuts. This problem of the debt hasn't been addressed. Our statut is a footnote, it has no effect on the profitability of the company.

CS

What is the relationship between the reforms and the European Union's railroad directives?

BP

The EU's fourth railway package, which imposes competition on passenger transit lines, takes effect on December 25, 2018. Before December 25, European states that haven't already allowed competition need to prepare for competition that will be operational at the end of 2019. We've seen that in foreign countries, in England, in Italy, for example, that competition has brought insecurity — that is to say, serious accidents — and has resulted in price increases. We think France has every interest in taking lessons from all this, so that at the end of the day, this European directive is limited. Spain, for example, has pushed back the beginning of competition for several years.

CS

So it's possible to not follow these directives?

BP

Yes, definitely. We can push them back. For example, for transportation in Ile de France — Paris and its suburbs — they've pushed it back until 2036, 2039. At the end of the day, it's possible. There's a real will from the state to break the SNCF's monopoly and allow the private sector into the system.

CS

What should be done about the SNCF's debt, which has been a backdrop to the reform discussions?

BP

This debt belongs to the French state. The state oversaw major construction projects that didn't have [proper] financing, and so by putting them onto the SNCF's [balance sheets], they allowed them to take place. If the debt shows up on the French state's books, Europe will penalize France. France will be overly indebted and won't be able to borrow within Europe. [The debt] comes from the creation of new TGV lines, many of which aren't very useful. They aren't profitable, and at the same time, result in the abandonment of daily commuter networks. These networks weren't restored while we created new lines that don't serve much purpose.

CS

To turn toward the movement, the unions have announced rolling strikes. What's the goal?

BP

The goal is to have real leverage to negotiate with the government. In the end, when they presented the law with the executive orders, it's clear they hadn't listened to any of the unions. This strike allows us to have some real leverage to explain, "it can't work like this," and that railroad workers,

like passengers, are against the law.

The method of two days of strikes every five days, it allows for the preservation of unity between the four labor unions [officially recognized to engage in collective bargaining at the SNCF]. For us, SUD Rail, we think we need a tough movement. That is to say a full and long-lasting work stoppage, right away. And even for that, it's not SUD Rail that will decide, it's not the other unions. What will happen is that in general assemblies that will take place every day during the strike, people will decide for themselves the conduct of the strike. Every day, people will decide if they'll continue or stop. It's strikers who will decide. That's how a strike works.

CS

You mentioned the topic of public support. Looking at the polls right now, opinion isn't exactly sympathetic to your cause. One poll showed nearly 7 in 10 are in favor of the elimination of railroad worker's special employment status. What are you going to do to change public opinion?

BP

We have only started. In recent days we have distributed flyers to passengers in all the major rail stations and our presence was welcomed. Passengers understand our struggle. They understand that we're not just about saving the statut, they understand our struggle is for quality public service, it's for them. But there's still education to be done, for passengers. And for railroad workers. To explain to them what's behind this law.

CS

The idea is that by mobilizing you're not just protecting your employment benefits, you're engaged in a broader defense of public services.

BP

Yes, that's our discourse, and we're spreading it everywhere. Today there's a real attack on public services. We have less and less people in hospitals, in schools, in rail stations. They're being intentionally abandoned in order to allow the private sector in. We say "no" to this. We need a real convergence of struggles.

CS

Since the arrival of Macron, there's been a lack of opposition in the street. Do you think that's going to change?

BP

There's a real discontent that's growing and getting stronger. I think today a lot of people are worried about the future of public services and even about the future of work. If today we're able to set the tempo, to lead by example, I think a lot of people are going to join our struggle. And the struggle for public services in general. The spark is just missing for things to take off.

CS

There's a particular culture among railroad workers in France, a political culture, a broader culture. Could you explain that a little?

BP

It really goes back to the foundation of the SNCF. We were created in 1937, in order to have a single company that would allow all French people, who won paid vacation rights in 1936 [under the Popular Front], to be able to travel anywhere in France. This was extraordinary.

During the war, and during the five years of resistance, from 1940 to 1945, railroad workers were at the center of the battle. Today, we forget it a little bit, but railroad workers broke tools in order to prohibit the Germans from advancing. Railroad workers blew up rail lines. Railroad workers were really on the front lines of the resistance.

We've always been on the front lines of social movements because we had this political culture. It's also been applied to politics [too]. When the Left was in power [under Socialist President François Mitterrand], the Transport Minister was from the Communist Party, a former railroad worker. There have been others.

It's broken down a little bit today because the world is changing. There are less and less people who remember 1945 or 1937. But when you enter this company, you have this feeling of belonging to a historic company.

CS

There was also the mass movement in 1995 that's being mentioned more and more today.

BP

Yes, it's sort of the fantasy. It's kind of like May 1968. 1995 was our last big victory. People remember this a bit. But you have to remember, 1995, it came out of nowhere. There were some movements of contestation, around retirement and social security. At some point, people mobilized by themselves, "this concerns all of us, we need to go [protest]." We hope it starts up again like this. Today it's hard to make everyone feel like they're concerned. People are more and more isolated.

CS

What is the significance of this strike for the future of France's union movement?

BP

We're at a pivotal moment. We're the last ones. If tomorrow they break the SNCF, there won't be resistance in France and Macron knows it.

Today we're really the last major company where there's a real social resistance. In other words, if you touch the SNCF, unions prepare for battle right away. If you touch the EDF [Electricity of France that was partially privatized in 2004], it was already done, we barely saw anyone. The postal service [that was partially privatized in 2010], they were broken. We're really the last ones, the last center of resistance.

People are looking toward us to resist. If we don't succeed, people are going to feel defeated. They'll say, "if the railroad workers lose, it's not worth it." It's important for us to stay strong. There is this sense of "you're an example, if you fall, everything behind you falls too." Macron, he understands this. And we're worried, because he understands things quickly.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 03.23.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/france-railway-strike-macron-sncf>

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