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France's Transit Workers: "We're Fighting for Everyone" — More than forty-three days

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A six-week strike has paralyzed France's bus and rail networks, forcing Emmanuel Macron to water down his pension reform. The transit workers at the heart of the strike want to block the reform entirely — but their hopes of victory rely on other groups of workers joining them.

It's early morning at the bus depot in Ivry-sur-Seine. With around 150 buses scheduled to depart for the first shift of the day — mostly northward to Paris — things usually move at a breakneck pace. But not today — nor much at all recently. For over forty-three days and counting, workers here have been on strike over the government's proposed pension reforms, leading to dozens of cancellations and delays every day.

Like others in the Paris metropolitan area, the Ivry depot bears the signs of a long and bitter struggle. Handwritten banners hang from the employee cafeteria reading "Depot on Strike" and "Immediate Withdrawal [of the government's planned pension reform]." Under the gaze of supervisors and several police officers across the street, about a dozen strikers maintain the picket line, delaying but — in accordance with the law — not physically blocking drivers who start their routes. A stereo blasts contemporary pop and French hip-hop while supporters, many of them students, gather around a brazier to keep warm. According to union officials, between 30 to 40 percent of bus drivers scheduled to work Thursday morning (January 16) are on strike or on sick leave.

"We're against this reform that's going to make us lose a lot of money in our retirement," says Jean, forty, a driver and veteran of six years' employment at the Paris transit authority, who has been on strike since December 5. Like others, he declined to give his last name for fear of workplace repercussions. "But it's not just for us, not just for the special pension schemes. We're fighting for everyone, our kids, everyone."

Known in French as the Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens (RATP), the Paris transit system is at the heart of France's historically long strike movement. Along with the national rail network, the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français (SNCF), it's seen one of the highest rates of walkouts nationwide — sending ripples throughout the rest of the economy and disrupting life as usual in the French capital. Both firms have powerful unions and cultures of workplace militancy, forged by decades of struggles. But their employees also stand to lose a lot from the reforms, which would merge all of France's forty-two separate pension schemes into a single system.

The government recently announced a concession, scrapping a proposal to hike the earliest possible age at which most workers could retire from sixty-two to sixty-four. A small piece of the much larger reform package, the measure was designed to appease the moderate French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT) and would only take effect if unions agree to a separate set of cost-

saving measures. Workers at Ivry are unimpressed.

“It’s not a concession,” says Jean, who, like many of his striking colleagues, doesn’t belong to a union. “We want the withdrawal of the reform because it’s an unfair reform. It’s going to push us toward a private-funded pension system. We want to keep the system like the one we have today with innovations — but not a private system. We don’t want to end up with an American system where you have to take out a credit card to get health care.”

Public support for the strikes remains impressively high, with a recent poll finding that 60 percent still back the movement. However, in recent days, the pressure to get back to work has intensified. Among others, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe and CFDT general secretary Laurent Berger have called on the strikes to end. These admonitions have come with the usual chatter from talking heads about the supposed “privileges” of rail and transit workers. Under current law, they’re allowed to retire earlier than much of the rest of the population.

“It’s really shameless,” Jean says. “People who say that are making more than €10,000 a month. When a minister says that we’re ‘privileged’ with our salaries, we want to say, well, what does that make them then? I think they have more privileges, whether it’s in parliament, government, or high-ranking state officials.”

How to Pay the Bills?

For all their grit and determination, it’s unclear how much longer strikers at the RATP can hold on. With their strike fund paying out only a small fraction of regular earnings, some employees have already started to return to the job. And at this point, doing so comes with no hard feelings from coworkers vowing to stick to the bitter end. On Thursday, they showed little hostility to those who left the depot to begin their routes.

“It’s always a bit the same,” says Fabien Cormier, a fifty-three-year-old union representative with the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) as he steps away from a departing bus after chatting up the driver. “People are wondering, how are they going to pay the bills?”

Back in the employee cafeteria, Kamel, forty-five, says winning the strike is “going to be complicated.” A RATP employee for the last fourteen years and member of the CGT who’s gone on multiple stretches of strikes since December 5, he works for the network’s night service, providing aid and information to passengers and bus drivers. “I think honestly the reform will go through . . . we have a government that’s stubborn,” he says, running his hands through his hair. “At the moment, strikers that have been here a month, they’re not going to go on strike for three or four months.”

Many strikers at the RATP also share a sense of exasperation over the fact that much of the French workforce — despite broad sympathy for the movement — hasn’t joined them in walking off the job. Since December 5, six national mobilization days led by the CGT have seen daily strikes in sectors like public education, the civil service, and the state electricity provider. But these work stoppages have failed to endure — and the private sector has seen few walkouts of note. In the meantime, protest turnout has slumped on days of national demonstrations, falling to 187,000 nationwide last Thursday, according to the Interior Ministry — down from 806,000 on December 5.

Romain, thirty-five, is a bus driver and CGT member who has been at the RATP more than thirteen years. On strike at Ivry since the very beginning and admittedly tired, he’s trying to remain hopeful.

“For some [workers], if they go on strike, their boss will tell them, ‘Okay, you’re fired,’ and that’s what scares them,” he says. “Then there are certain large firms where there could be high strike rates, but it’s hard to be angry at them. We still need to go see them, we need them to go on strike and join the movement.”

As fatigue sets in, talk is circulating within the RATP about shifting to a so-called rolling strike schedule: stretches of strikes over multiple days, interspersed with standard workdays. In fact, the UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Unions), especially strong in the Paris subway system, has called for an end to its “unlimited strikes” as of Monday, urging members to adopt a “different form of action.” In any case, unions have kept up calls for another national day of mobilization for January 24 — the same day that Macron’s cabinet plans to examine the pension reform legislation. With the National Assembly slated to take up the reform in mid-February, that leaves opponents some time to maneuver. If they’re to stand any chance of blocking the reform, they’ll need reinforcements from outside the Paris metro system.

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 01.19.2020:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/france-strike-transit-rail-workers-ratp-sncf-macron>

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