

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6366>



**France**

# **“This struggle is historic” - striking railworkers speak**

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV540 - January 2020 -

Publication date: Saturday 18 January 2020

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

**Basile, a rail worker at the Gare de l'Est station in Paris and a supporter of the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, analyses the mobilization at the SNCF** (*Société nationale des chemins de fer français*, France's national state-owned railway company), which remains exceptional in its strength and duration compared to other sectors. François-Xavier, a Paris metro driver on line 3 and an activist at Solidaires RATP (the Solidaires union in the *Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens*, the Paris region public transport company), spoke at an NPA public meeting in Paris on 16 December. We publish his intervention, which remains relevant.

### **How do you explain that railway workers are again mobilized?**

**Basile:** The fact that RATP started the ball rolling in September was a decisive factor in restoring our confidence. Despite the defeats, it seems that “the struggle leads to the struggle”. At the beginning of the movement, to take an example, a colleague naturally referred to a discussion of “the last general meeting” ... in 2018. There is also a feeling of revenge in relation to the defeats. Consciousness does not seem to have receded and the struggles have fuelled each other.

In addition, we are confronted with real and concrete attacks: the transition to a public limited company and the discussions on the status of railway workers. There is also a feeling of being the last stronghold in the face of these attacks, of having to resist.

The experience of previous struggles also produces an understanding that to win you need to be “all together”. We feel the expectation of other sectors in relation to us, it strengthens the determination. This is the complete contradiction of the “proxy strike”: it does not replace the strike, far from it, but it encourages us. We do not pull the movement; we are carried by it.

### **How big is the strike?**

**Basile:** We have been on strike for exactly one month. It's a record. The railway workers remain an exception in this capacity to build strikes so well. Beyond the railway pact, in 2018 Macron wanted to destroy a fighting sector of the working class. He failed!

The strike is holding up well, the drivers are leading the way, as is often the case. There is a turnover, with a large fraction of renewable strikers which allows us to maintain a strong movement. The movement has a large majority in the enterprise: few people have not participated at one time or another in the mobilization.

The strike is also hoping that the other sectors will follow it: the task of the moment is, based on the days of demonstrations which gather wider support, to address this. The 140,000 rail workers, 40,000 RATP agents and several thousand refinery workers will not succeed alone against a reform that affects 30 million workers.

### **What has been the impact of the mass meetings (AG - assemblée générale)?**

**Basile:** The presence at the mass meetings is variable. In Paris it is not obvious: the railway workers live further and further away. But there have been strong mass meetings in places where there was nothing for a long time. For

example, in the Paris East region, in Vaires (sorting, depot and railway city) there is a dynamic movement with demonstrations, interprofessional links. On “small sites” like Châteauneuf-Thierry or Romilly-sur-Seine, mass meetings are held every day ... but in Paris participation in the mass meetings is average.

The weakness of the mass meetings constitutes a brake on self-organization from below: the activists who set them up often gather about a dozen participants and there are many political activists. This weakness gives rise to “initiatives from above”, which illustrate more the weakness of self-organization at the base than its strength. This is normal but not satisfactory. Finally, defeats have an impact. Some go on strike with strong doubts about the possibility of winning. Still if you lose a day's salary, you gain at least one day of rest, with your family and at home.

But there is progress. The mass meetings are inter-departmental, which breaks down barriers within the SNCF itself. But the railway workers are less confident to speak they don't necessarily know each other, you have to take the microphone and so on.

### **What is the attitude of the trade unions?**

From the start in the mass meetings there were motions insisting on the withdrawal of the reform. The CGT stressed the internal situation in the company. This is not in itself false, but our main objective is to find a common denominator with the rest of the working class, and it was also a way to find a way out if the strike did not take place.

The CFDT and the UNSA are absent from the construction of the struggle. The strike is played out between the Sud and CGT teams, sometimes FO. The announcement on December 19 of the date of January 9 as the next day of strike caused disappointment. It was a long time ... But we held on! Several motions in the mass meeting asked for another date for mobilization, notably Saturday, December 28. But we can see the difficulty: we are looking for a more offensive proposal than the inter-union coordination, but we fall back on a demonstration on a Saturday.

### **What are the links with other sectors and the perspectives?**

All the mass meetings have seen interventions from employees from other sectors: RATP, national education, health, taxes, private companies and so on. With the private sector, the link is mainly made up of railway workers towards the private sector. They are more mobilized on issues specific to the enterprise such as layoffs than on pensions. The distribution of leaflets to users and at the doors of private companies are all going well. The reception is very good. We sometimes meet very precarious employees who support the movement without really being able to join it. But the strikers return encouraged.

All this is positive. This struggle is historic, it produces new collective experiences. We haven't won yet, but we can't hear Macron anymore, except for the wishes. We obtained Delevoye's departure. The explanations for this reform which seeks to privatize pensions, and which is part of the neoliberal logic of privatization over the past thirty years are widely understood.

The fact that the railway workers or the Opera employees refused the selfish dupe deals - the grandfather clause - which were offered is a great message to the whole world of labour and an encouragement to all come together.

---

## **“Macron, Delevoye and the whole clique have awakened the RATP”**

## “This struggle is historic” - striking railworkers speak

---

I want to thank Macron, Delevoye and all the clique, because without them, at the RATP, we would not have succeeded in waking up all the employees, and it does a lot of good. It wakes us up and it shakes us up. Unlike the railway workers who have been struggling for a while, the strike culture had diminished at the RATP, particularly following the implementation of the “minimum service” in 2008. Some have even told us that strikes at the RATP would not be seen again. But there, even with the “minimum service”, we proved that we could bring Paris to a halt, with the railway workers. Minimum service or not, when all employees are mobilized, it shows, and it works. On September 13, there were seven closed metro lines, zero RER lines working, 98% on strike across the enterprise.

The minimum service means that when an employee wants to go on strike, they must declare this 48 hours in advance. This therefore poses organizational difficulties, and it took time for the employees to take ownership of their organization: since 2007, the date of our last mobilization against the pension reform, there has almost never been a strike picket.

What emerged from the discussions with the employees was the problem of trade union division. The representative organizations did not necessarily carry the demands of the employees and did not build trade union unity to be able to obtain satisfaction. It was one of the ingredients of the current struggle, which allowed us to organize ourselves. In July, during the Ratp inter-union coordination, we were able to issue a joint press release and the employees were just waiting for that. Delevoye and his report also helped us well.

Since July, employees have been organizing in all the bus depots, in the RER, in stations - because it is not necessarily obvious, but station agents are also very mobilized today. It took two months to prepare for the September 13 strike. We had to discuss with each other, go and explain to everyone what a picket is, what it is for, because this culture has completely disappeared. The employees had also lost the habit of general meetings and it was necessary to rebuild solidarity between ourselves.

As of September 13, after two months of preparation, we managed to bring Paris to a halt. It was extraordinary because a year ago, we saw our fellow rail workers mobilize but we had not managed to enter the battle. There was a daily discussion between employees. And that is what allowed us, gradually, to arrive at this strike on December 5, with two and a half months of preparation. With a strike there is not only the financial aspect, it is also a reflection on what it represents, how it will involve us, what does it mean to be on picket all every day from 5 a.m., to get up at 3 a.m. We managed to do it and the employees understood the interest of being there. The point is to decide together, to be the driving force behind the action, to be the sole decision makers of what we want tomorrow.

Macron proposed a pension reform that does not correspond to us, and all the French have expressed it, the workers express it, nobody wants it! They may try to divide us on the theme “it only concerns special plans”, this does not work at all on the ground with employees. Proof of this is that, despite the prime minister's speeches announcing “solutions”, all the employees received a letter from the Ratp explaining to them, individually, that they were not affected: “why go on strike? You are not affected”. This letter made us laugh. And the resignation of Delevoye right then, even more. We drank in the terminals and in the pickets to show them that their lies do not hold.

We don't want this society, we don't want to survive, we want to live. We want another choice of society for our kids, whether we are teachers, whether we are civil servants, whether we are Ratp, in health or private. The employees of the Ratp and of the other sectors in struggle are mobilizing for all the employees, for the withdrawal of this reform, and nothing else, and we will continue this strike until Macron and his pension reform proposals are beaten.

Source : **L'Anticapitaliste** 10n janiver 2020, [Basile](#) and [François-Xavier](#).

## **“This struggle is historic” - striking railworkers speak**

---

PS:

*If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.*