

The Tragedy of the Cheminots: The Deep Meaning of the French Railroad Strikes

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The current series of railroad strikes in France are portrayed in the media as “labor unrest”, a conflict between the government and trade union leaders, or as a temporary nuisance to travelers caused by the self-interest of a privileged category of workers. In Anglo-American media, there is the usual self-satisfied tongue-clicking over “those cheese-eaters, always on strike”.

In reality, the strike by train conductors and other employees of the SNCF (*Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer*) is a deeply significant chapter in a social tragedy that is destroying France as we have known it.

What has made France a most comfortable country to live in for over half a century is not only the food and the scenery. Above all, it has been the public services – the best in the world. The postal service, public education, health coverage, public utilities, railroad service – all were excellent, exemplary. True, the French telephone system for a long time lagged far behind other developed countries before catching up, and there have always been complaints of over-the-counter rudeness in governmental offices, but that can happen anywhere. The important point is that thanks to its public services, France ran smoothly, providing favorable conditions for business and daily life. When people take good things for granted too long, they begin not to notice as they are gradually taken away.

President Emmanuel Macron’s program for destroying the SNCF is a wakeup call. But there is reason to fear that much of the public has already been plunged into a slumber too deep to be awakened.

It takes a long history to produce something as good as French public services. It goes back to the centralization of the French state in the seventeenth century, associated with the finance minister of Louis XIV, Jean-Baptiste Colbert. The SNCF was formed in 1938 by merging France’s various railroad companies as a state monopoly as part of the progressive social reforms of the Popular Front. At the end of World War II, public services received a decisive boost from the paradoxical alliance between the opposite wings of the French Resistance, the Communists and the Gaullists. General Charles de Gaulle, although anti-communist, was the sort of conservative (look back at Bismarck) who understands that a nation’s strength and unity depend on a modicum of social justice. Despite open opposition on many issues, the Gaullists and the communists joined in a unified National Council of the Resistance, which in March, 1944, adopted a program calling for a mixed economy combining free enterprise with strategic nationalizations, along with social security programs and trade union rights. This program of social justice laid the groundwork for an extraordinary increase in economic development, called *Les Trente Glorieuses* – the glorious

thirty years of peace and prosperity. The French mixed economy functioned better than either the bureaucratic communism or profit-centered capitalism in terms of freedom, equality and human well-being.

It is harder to build things up than to tear them down.

The Thatcher neoliberal putsch signaled the death sentence of the glorious thirty and the start of the forty inglorious: the persistent campaign, ideological and institutional, to destroy the social state, lower wages and benefits, and eventually transfer all decision-making power to the movements of finance capital. This is variously called neoliberalism or globalization.

The counter-revolution struck France in the early years of the presidency of Socialist President François Mitterrand, causing his government to change its policies and break its “common program” alliance with the Communists. To hide its anti-social shift, the Socialist Party changed its line to “anti-racism” and “the construction of Europe” (meaning the European Union), presented as the new horizon of “progress”. The concern of workers to maintain the standard of living they had achieved in recent decades was derided as “reactionary”, in opposition to the new concept of borderless, global competition, the new “progress”.

In reality, “European construction” has meant the systematic deconstruction of member states’ sovereignty, bringing about the destruction of social welfare systems bolstered by sentiments of national solidarity for which there is no substitute in the vague abstraction called “Europe”. Step by step, Europe is being deprived of its social protections and opened up to the whims of the likes of Goldman Sachs, industrial takeovers and shutdowns, and Qatar.



French railroad workers

The *cheminots* – France’s railroad workers – are not just fighting for themselves. They constitute the front lines of the final battle to save France from the ravages of neoliberal globalization.

Emmanuel Macron – protégé of the Rothschild bank, which helped him join the ranks of millionaires – presents his “reform” of the railways as a measure of “equality”, by depriving railroad workers of their “privileged status”.

Privileges? Train conductors lead a hard life, long hours and few weekends to spend with their families. The lives of millions of passengers depend on their concentration and devotion. In consideration of all this, their “privileged” status included job security and relatively early retirement (privileges that the rich can give themselves, and which are standard in military careers).

The striking rail workers protest that they do not want to be “privileged” but rather wish to see such “privileges” extended to others. In any case, much more is at stake here than wages and hours.

Public services in France were more than conveniences. For millions, they were an ethic, a

way of life. In many countries, public services are totally undermined by corruption and neglect. This does not happen when people believe in what they are doing. Such belief is not automatic: it is historically acquired. The French *cheminots* have been like an extended family, held together by belief that they are carrying out an essential social duty. In fact, many are literally “family”, as the job of train conductor often passed from father to son, as a matter of pride.

This devotion to social duty is more than a personal attitude: it is a spiritual value that a nation should treasure and preserve. Instead, it is being sacrificed to the demands of finance capital.

How is that? There is now an excess of capital sloshing around the world on the lookout for profitable places to invest. That is what “neoliberalism” is all about. Ordinary businesses may go broke, or at least fail to turn a profit to stockholders. That is why the public sector must be privatized. The great thing about investing in public services, is that if they don’t make money, the government will step in and subsidize them – at taxpayers’ expense!

That is the attraction of the arms industry. It can also apply to education, health care, transportation, communications. But the official pretext is that these services must be privatized because that will make them “more efficient”.

That is the big lie.

It has already been exposed in the United Kingdom, where the privatization of the railroads has produced not only worse service but fatal accidents, especially since there is no immediate profit in rail maintenance.

Pride in the job well done was a much-neglected aspect of the rise of socialism. Artisans who were obliged by the rise of capitalism to abandon their independent activities in order to become slaves of industry were often the vanguard of the socialist movement in the nineteenth century. Such pride is a far more stable element of social cohesion than increasingly childish anarchist calls to “destroy the system” – with no alternative in sight.

Macron is only a pawn. It is not Macron who decided to destroy France’s rail system. It was decided and decreed by the European Union, and Macron is merely carrying out orders. The orders are to open the rail system up to free international competition. Soon, German, Italian, Spanish trains may be sharing with French trains the same rails – rails whose upkeep is turned over to another company, also in it for the profit. The stress of the rail workers will be increased by their insecurity. To fill the profit margin, passengers will inevitably have to pay more. As for residents of small rural communities, they will simply lose their railroad service altogether, because it is not profitable.

Run as a public service, the national railroad used its benefits from lines with heavy traffic to finance those in more sparsely inhabited rural areas, this providing equal benefits to people wherever they live. That is on the way out. The destruction of public services hastens the desertification of the countryside and the growth of mega-cities. Hospitals in rural areas are being shut down, post offices closed. France’s charming villages will die out with the last elderly inhabitants still clinging to them.

That is the “modernization” program underway.

Overlooked in the multitude of foreign misunderstanding of France is the hallucinatory

power of terms such as “modern” and “progress”. The champions of privatization attempt to mesmerize the public with these magical words, while meanwhile slyly cutting back service in order to prepare the public to accept the planned changes as possible improvements.

Two things should be mentioned to complete this sad story. One is that in the wake of its privatization, France Télécom underwent a wave of employee suicides – 39 in two years – certainly in part due to stress and demoralization, as methods were introduced to reduce the quality of service and increase profits. When pride in work is destroyed, the path is short to indifference, negligence and even corruption.

Another point to recall is the propaganda campaign mounted about twenty years ago to smear the SNCF for its role in “deporting Jewish children” to Nazi concentration camps. This was unjustifiable, considering that the Nazi occupiers confiscated the French railroads, which had no choice in the matter. Moreover, railroad employees (many of them communists) played an important role in the Resistance by sabotaging military trains – until the United States Air Force pounded the hell out of most major French railroad stations (and the surrounding neighborhoods) to prepare for the Normandy invasion. This slander of the SNCF was naturally used by U.S. rivals to exclude French fast-speed trains from the U.S. market.

As Macron raises taxes to build up his military industrial complex, the only public employees who will soon be left to enjoy social benefits and early retirement will be the military – whose task will not be to serve France but to act as auxiliary in United States foreign wars.

Until soldiers are replaced by robots.

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