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France Winter 86-87

The railways strike

An attempt at autonomous organization

Echanges et Mouvement

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autonomous organisation
- the railways strike -

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NOTES.

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The French rail system, similarly to its British counterpart, is centred very much on the capital. Cross-city traffic is very limited, so each depot would have little contact with others, even a stone's throw away. The Paris stations are:

Gare du Nord: North Paris suburban lines and long distance traffic to the Channel ports, Lille, Belgium, The Netherlands and North Germany.

Gare de l'Est: a few East Paris suburban services, line to East France and South Germany.

Gare de Lyon: TGV services and long distance trains to S.E. and S. France, Switzerland, Italy, E. Spain, suburban services to S.E. Paris.

Gare d'Austerlitz: suburban services to S. Paris, long distance trains to S. and S.W. France and Spain.

Gare Montparnasse: Trains to W. Paris and France (Brittany)

Gare St. Lazare: suburban services to N. and N.W. Paris and long distance trains to Normandy (Rouen, Le Havre, Caen, Cherbourg).

Three other stations have been closed or substituted by new R.E.R. underground stations: Gare d'Orsay has been made into a museum, Invalides is unused, Bastille has been demolished to build a new Opera House, one of Mitterand's projects.

Goods traffic does not stop in Paris as it runs from a siding-to siding basis, avoiding marshalling yards as much as possible.

One other common point between the BR and SNCF systems, at least for 1985, there are no trains on Christmas Day or Boxing Day!

ABBREVIATIONS.

SNCF : Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français

French National railways Society (nationalised)

ADC : Agents de conduite - Drivers

CGT : Confédération Générale du Travail - union dominated by the CP

CP : Communist Party ; still a very orthodox one in France .

FCAAC : autonomous unions of the railways drivers .

CFDT : Confédération Française des travailleurs . General union still dominated by the catholics and Socialist Party orientated.

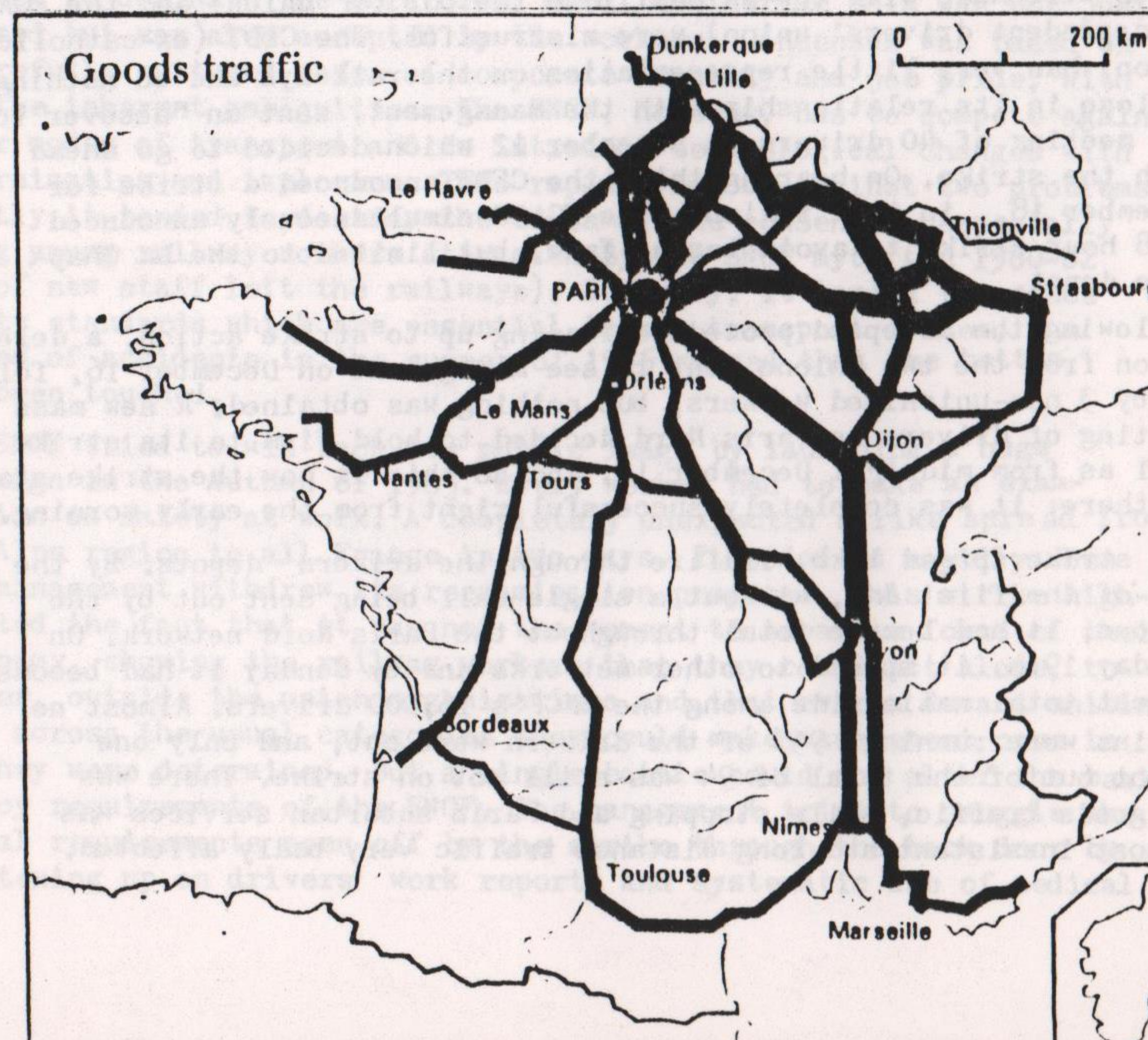
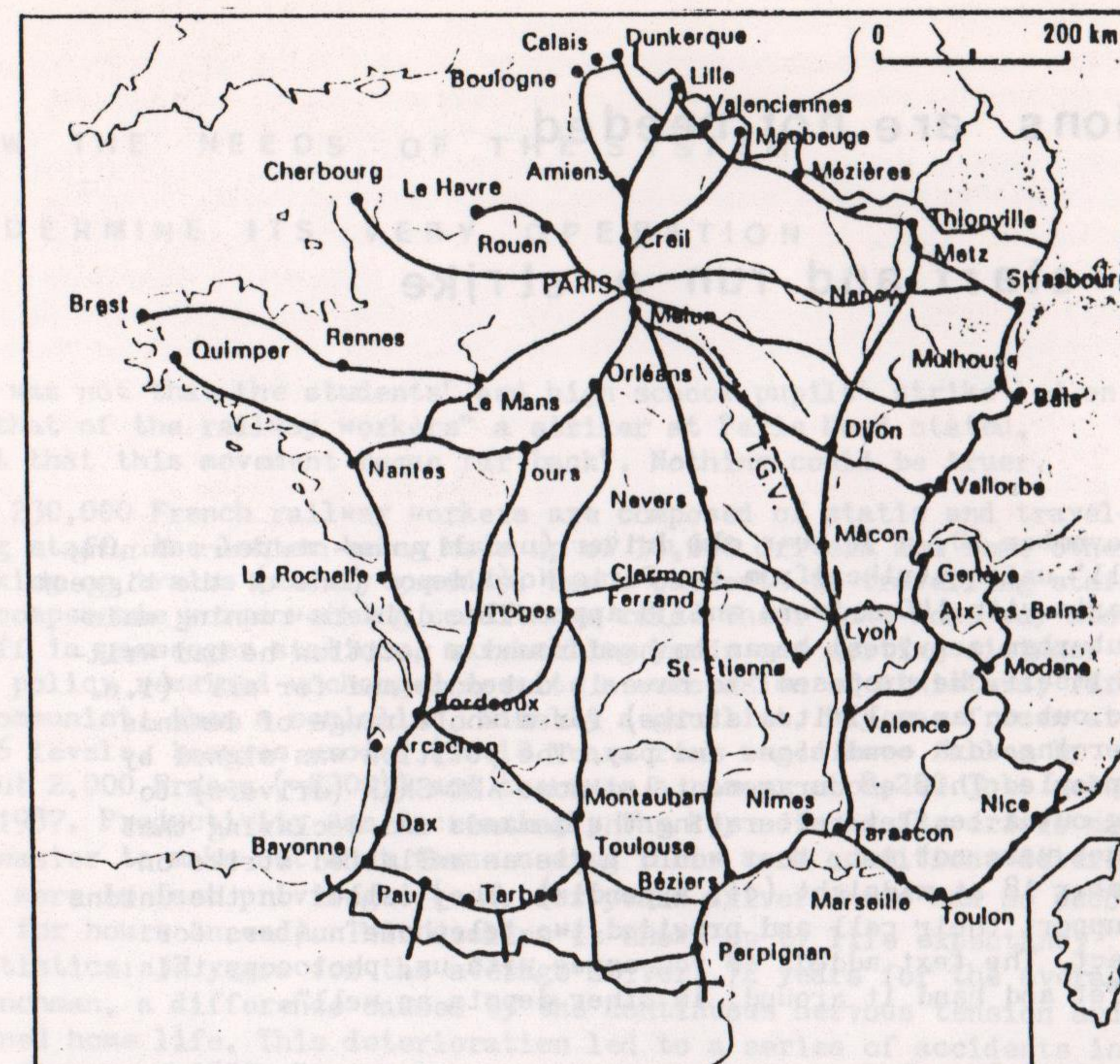
FO : Force Ouvrière : middle class general union .

LO : Lutte Ouvrière - one of the most important trotskyst organisation orientated towards the working class : paper of the same name .

Ligue Communiste : another trotskyst organisation more orientated towards the students and intellectuals : paper called Pouce.

CRS : Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité : special police for the repression of "social disorders" .

Main railway lines



unions are not needed

to start and run a strike

ON November 10, a 31 year old driver (usually non-strikers during 'small' union strikes) from the Paris Nord depot (one of the biggest in Paris with 140 drivers and 38 apprentice drivers running mainly suburban services) began to hand round a petition he had written himself. He proposed "to have it out once and for all" (i.e. to go out on an unlimited strike) for a whole range of demands concerning work conditions and pay. The petition was signed by 200 people. This encouragement led some ADC-SNCF (drivers) to bring out a leaflet reiterating the demands and declaring that if they were not met, they would begin an unlimited strike on December 18 at midnight (cf. appendix). They called on the unions to support their call and provided two telephone numbers for contact. The text added "if you agree with us, photocopy this leaflet and hand it around, in other depots as well".

It was not long before the text reached all of France. The first contacts were made with the unions: both the CGT (CP union) and the FGAAC (independent drivers' union) were mistrustful. The CFDT (ex-catholic union) has very little representation on the railways and so nothing to lose in its relationship with the management, sent an "observer" to the meeting of 40 drivers on December 12 which decided to go ahead with the strike. On hearing this, the CFDT announced a strike for December 18...in that region. The FGAAC simultaneously announced a 48 hour strike to avoid losing face, but limited to the La Chapelle depot.

Following the accepted procedure leading up to strike action, a delegation from the two unions went to see management on December 16, followed by 3 non-unionized workers, but nothing was obtained. A new mass meeting of drivers in Paris Nord decided to hold firm to its strike call as from midnight December 18. And so this is how the strike started there: it was completely successful right from the early morning.

The strike spread like wildfire through the drivers' depots. By the end of the first day, without a single call being sent out by the unions, it had become total throughout the Paris Nord network. On Friday 19th. it spread to other networks and by Sunday it had become almost total nationwide among the SNCF's 16,000 drivers. Almost no trains were running, 9% of the drivers were out, and only one depot out of the total of 94 was still not on strike. There was no goods traffic, while stopping and Paris suburban services was almost inesistant and long distance traffic very badly affected.

HOW THE NEEDS OF THE SYSTEM

UNDERMINE ITS VERY OPERATION

"It was not that the students' and high school pupils' strike led on to that of the railway workers" a striker at Paris Nord stated, "but that this movement began far back". Nothing could be truer.

The 230,000 French railway workers are composed of static and travelling staff, the latter being made up of 16,000 drivers and some others working on trains (mainly guards). Bonus payments to travelling staff to compensate worse working conditions raise their take home pay above staff in passenger stations, marshalling yards and sorting sidings. Pay policy remained unchanged despite a succession of ministers, first a communist, then a socialist, finally a gaullist. Pay was frozen at 1986 levels, bonuses eroded (in 10 years real wages have fallen by about 2,000 Francs (=£200)) and there was a rumour of 8,200 jobs going in 1987. Productivity was increasingly the key note as the crisis made it easier to make out that those seeing their work conditions deteriorate were in fact privileged (e.g. for years drivers have had no second man for hours on end). This decline is shown up by life expectancy statistics: 57 years for the average driver, 72 years for the average Frenchman, a difference caused by the continuous nervous tension and ruined home life. This deterioration led to a series of accidents in the summer of 1985. "Safety" on the railways has always been used as a lever to dominate the workforce. Until the strike this was not just imposed but was also accepted by the workers. Consensus was based on a carefully nurtured sense of corporate identity and job pride, with all the inherent ambiguities. The SNCF, however, has to compete against other modes of transport and to introduce technological changes with modernization and taylorism. This rapidly ran up against two problems. Firstly it tended to destroy the basis of the consensus, especially among young railway workers attracted by the SNCF myth (in 1980-82 50% of new staff left the railways). Secondly, it tended to reduce safety standards which are essential in any transport system. The series of accidents in the summer of 1985 showed that the bottom had been touched.

The SNCF tried to win back its public image by launching a huge campaign in the Autumn of 1985. Every worker had to take an examination on safety at work. A completely unexpected strike spread from the Alps region to all France in two days. It ended as rapidly when the management withdrew its reexamination proposal. This strike highlighted the fact that it was not the moment to separate forms of their autonomy, showing the railway workers that they could act alone, together, outside the union organizations and that over a demand uniting them across the usual categories they could make management cave in if they were determined. But a single battle could not alter the basic policy requirements of the SNCF. The management tried to smuggle the formal requirements seen off by the strike through the back door by tightening up on drivers' work reports and systematic use of medical

and psychological check-ups.

A new pay scale had been under discussion between management and unions for a while. This scale was clearly designed to reward productivity increases of those who, according to lower management, best respected work discipline and management requirements. This would have indirectly reintroduced in another form those controls which had been rejected in the autumn of 1985. Apparently the new wage scales dealt only with seniority and promotion. But the conditions on this scale hinged on the central question of the attitude to work, that is, the hierarchy's appreciation of following the rules. The degree of change can be seen from this comparison:

OLD SCALE	NEW SCALE
1. Seniority points (+20% in 24 yrs)	No points system
2. Changes in level of qualification and responsibility after examinations - 10 points	Only 7 points, based on "merit"
3. Change of indices: seniority and 50/50 choice among railway workers	Promotion based on "results"

Management began at the same time to set up "Initiative for Progress Groups", rather like "quality groups" in industry. This is a clear example of the greater emphasis being laid on "merit". Speeding up trains, cutting out the second man with the introduction of one man trains, the introduction of stricter rostering: all these slowed promotion down drastically. Lower management already decided work distribution, thus wage levels and bonuses varied with the type of work. Besides, drivers could foresee ever increasing automation, spreading from the TGV, where it had been an important question, to underground trains. Strikes were organized by the unions to stop this and to resist a series of other measures mainly affecting bonus payments. There were 14 days of strikes in 1986 in response to rank and file pressure, but their purely symbolic character made them ineffectual. However, one began to see strike committees run by the rank and file, even if during struggles willingly restricted by the unions. An example of this policy and of the trade unions response if offered by the seat reservation clerks who had originally received a requalification bonus which the management now wanted to take away. The CFDT originally backed the strike, but around the 15th., when everyone was about to leave for their summer holidays, the CGT began wheeler-dealing (mostly by spreading incorrect information) to get the railway workers back to work.

Rejection of the new scale was a central drivers' demand. The demands listed work conditions and a driver stated during the strike at a mass meeting over the management's ridiculous wage offer, "We couldn't give a damn about wages". Undoubtedly these demands lumped together a wage rise, different rest day distribution, better work rotation, more comfortable lodgings, more suitable work location and hours for workers, bonuses to be integrated into basic pay etc.. Throughout the

strike the government and management stated that they "could not improve on the offer" as it would undermine economic policy, especially pay policy. Certainly, giving in would have led to higher wage costs, but the fact that the railway workers were not looking for a percentage rise and that the management replied to an unformulated pay demand confused negotiators from the start. The unions seem to have followed the management in this.

In reality, everything was much more complex. The wage scale plan would further delay seniority payments a railway worker would have expected to receive during his career previously. This alternative way to increase wages, partially compensating for an almost frozen basic wage, had already been partially blocked by reducing bonuses. As soon as the rate of increase became based on management criteria and not on seniority, indirect pay rises could be linked to management requirements, since they decided merit judgements. In fact, although there were enormous differences between the reasons for the students' conflict and that of the railway workers, here there is a common point: a pure a simple withdrawal of a management decision. The comparison ends here, even if it was important politically. In economic and social terms it was far more important for the government to stand firm to the railway workers than to the students.

Capital in France is going through a period of intensifying the labour process by restructuring and increasing work flexibility. Surrender to the drivers' demands would be recognition, in the heart of the production process, of the right of workers to rise up against their conditions of exploitation, management decisions on work conditions and methods. This was what was at stake in this head on clash because unlike previously, capital and its bosses could no longer avoid it by making a pay offer (as was the case in June 1968 with the Grenelle agreements which led Pompidou (the then Prime Minister) to comment: "Devalue the Franc and we'll get it all back"). The crisis and international competition, linked to the instability of monetary systems would not permit the government and unions to escape this way. Thus they could not handle a situation caused by specific problems just because of this impasse.

TRADE UNIONS FACED WITH THE STRIKE

Syndicalisme Hebdo, the CFDT official weekly, could state "The unions did not see the railway workers' strike coming". This is a striking admission from an organism which, in principle, should serve as a buffer between wage labour and management. Many have written on the "weakness" of the unions who have lost members over 15 years (the three leading confederations count on only 10% of waged workers in France). Much more important is the chasm opening up between the apparatus and the rank and file. The apparatus is sclerotic, operating according to a legal formula which unites the whole structure in a real or feigned ignorance of what the workers think and want. Another factor widened this chasm in the case of the railways. Trade unions (principally the CGT) power had been undermined by

splitting up the central enterprise committees (particularly management of social activities*) into a myriad of local committees which have diverted the rank and file union militants away from union work to a kind of social assistant job cut off from the rank and file. Almost all were surprised by the strike. Even if the CFDT and the FGAAC gave strike notice, it was not because they supported the demands made or the form that the movement took before breaking out. It was not only because they had calculated the gains to be made in inter-union competition, but mainly because it was the only way to be informed and thus later to intervene as their function requires.

The CGT is the most powerful union on the railways with a following that varies according to job category and from place to place. Unlike the other union federations, it showed its hostility right from the start. This union saw it as a matter of principle to view with distrust anything that took place outside it, especially when something happens in the rank and file and tends to bypass "trade union legality". Even when the strike was making its effect felt in the Nord network, it tried to start counter-propaganda in some depots, tearing down strike posters and even organizing "work pickets" to encourage drivers not to strike. But the movement was too strong and this union had to join in with the others in trying to gain a foothold in the strike. Its own rank and file was already out and the drivers' strike was almost total over the whole railway system (75 of the 94 depots closed) when the CGT made its U-turn, calling a strike for ... December 20-24! Le Monde ran the headline "Strike - Disorder" on December 21 to reflect the unions' real position on the strike. An example of the ambiguity inherent in the unions' position, especially that of the CGT, is provided by the case of the Gare de Lyon (another large Paris station with 2,000 railway workers of all categories) where the CGT is relatively strong. The strike broke out on the 18th, when Paris Nord drivers contacted long distance drivers and train guards*. The CGT, while still opposing the strike from spreading, even trying to get the booking clerks still out back to work, after a quick U-turn organized mass meetings on Monday 22nd, by sector, all voting unanimously to go out on strike. Throughout the strike there were 5 separate mass meetings for different sectors with no contact among them, their coordination being the task of... the unions! The CGT can proclaim its support for "democratic mass meetings" as long as this democracy leaves the power of the hierarchy intact, ensures that it can monopolize information and transform the

* These "Oeuvres sociales" were set up by law to run firms' social aspects - canteens, medical services, libraries, rest homes for convalescence and retirement, holiday homes for employees and their families, sports clubs etc. and also special loan schemes and housing schemes. This is paid for by a 1% levy paid from wages by the firm to the union Comité d'Entreprise. This has a much greater importance in the SNCF because of its long tradition of "oeuvres sociales". The organization of these services also provides nice jobs for the unions, both in terms of its representatives and in terms of vote catching, thus requiring the employment of union militants here rather than on the job. There are even financial advantages, such as cases of obtaining a flat or a loan by bribery.

* By 'guards' we mean all travelling personnel, excluding the driver, but including ticket inspectors.

strikers into passive actors: the bureaucrats, used to all kinds of wheeler-dealing, the "officers and officials" (there was not even a strike committee, could grant total freedom of expression, organize votes etc., as they could swindle and change decisions if needed. But, for the while, they did not call for a return to work, even though they had won control of the organization of the struggle, because they had still to tail-end a strong rank and file current. This remained so until the closing days of the strike. Here the CGT could act in this way because it was not threatened by other forms of autonomous organization thrown up by the collective will to start the strike immediately. This was not an isolated case, but in other depots other types of organization had already been set up and the unions had to keep a weather eye out for them.

MASS MEETINGS AND STRIKE COMMITTEES

WANT TO DECIDE ON EVERYTHING

Lutte Ouvrière (27/12/86) ran an article stating that "this strike was called, prepared, organized and spread by the Paris Nord railway workers ... Depot after depot, the same rank and file railway workers spread the strike". This is both true and false.

In fact there was a group in Paris Nord, a group of non-unionized drivers who wanted, proposed and began the strike, but they were not the same people as those who "organized and spread" it. Paris Nord was run in a certain way, but was never proposed as a model of organization to be copied. It was the type of organization best suiting the situation and number of workers. They did not wish to set up a strike committee because they were always there with everyone participating, in fact they were already a strike committee, their numbers allowed them to do this, otherwise it would have been difficult. Later on a striker clearly summed this up: "Here we've got organized chaos - We don't get the same audience as before". Its very position made this into a permanent assembly for contacting all France. They went on to participate in the national drivers' liaison committee and to set up alongside it a "users committee" which in fact became a support committee for everything the strike needed. All activity was decided upon by a mass meeting with no go-betweens, so sending delegates to do this and that was almost automatic.

When Lutte Ouvrière wrote that it was "rank and file railway workers who spread the strike" this was both true and false. There were certainly firstly drivers and then other railway workers joining the strike, but in some depots and stations, as in the case of the Gare de Lyon, there were small groups of militants or politicians (mainly Trotskyists), often undercover in the unions (e.g. the Lutte Ouvrière member who organized the south west liaison committees then one of the national liaison committees and is a CFDT regional official).

who tried to push for the strike from the outset and inevitably tried to make their conceptions prevail. As Vitry himself said "I'm simply an ordinary guard elected by other ordinary guards" which is not so. He was not simply an ordinary guard because his trade union position placed him at the centre of a contacts network and because his political orientation made him stick to certain positions.

Certainly it was rank and file railway workers who spread the strike, but in this last case of Paris South West as with the Gare de Lyon, the strike committee was modelled along political and trade union lines and so took a very different turn as compared with Paris Nord as we have already noticed. Faced with deciding on organizational proposals, strike meetings at this stage of the struggle seemed to ensure running the strike and uniting the movement.

Strike committees and local and regional liaison committees were set up now under rank and file control where experience had already been gained during previous years' struggles. There were also active militants, unionized or not, who came forward and joined to provide a drive for those strike organizations. Some were members of extreme left groups while others were not. The SNCF strike was a "series of episodes" and elements from previous struggles reappeared in the new one.

In December 1978 there had been a strike for 10 days at the Ville-neuve St. Georges sorting sidings (near Gare de Lyon) involving 400 railway workers over a rest days dispute, and here a strike committee appeared. In November 1981 there was a 14 day strike at the Ivry (S.E. Paris) depot concerning the internal activity (80 railway workers) and over pay, again with a strike committee. In May 1984, several strike committees in Paris and the suburbs over the question of the 35 hour week. When the elimination of the second man on trains was announced in the Rouen division in 1979, a "united mobilization railway workers committee" had been set up by both unionized and non-unionized workers to prepare for a strike later to be renewed by the workers. But the strike only took place on the divisional network in 1983, while a local network continued in existence afterwards. This association, "la Cote 135", which involved about 100 railway workers, was also a group with other common interests and was to play a role in the "unofficial" strike in 1985.

But a division immediately appeared between drivers on the one hand and all the rest on the other and there were scarcely any united meetings. Here we are not coming up against union manipulation, but an expression of reality which led to a kind of vertical organization of the strike by job categories which tried hard to bring things together, but unsuccessfully. On the other hand the daily mass meetings in their limited form translated into a real rank and file democracy, i.e. control of delegates, whether elected strike committees, self proclaimed ones, union federations or union officials. The assemblies were to decide on accepting or rejecting the management's offers and the forms of action, that is the content of the strike, right up to the end (the unions having been reduced to messenger boys).

THE AUTONOMOUS RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT TRIED TO COORDINATE

BUT

This situation demonstrated extreme distrust of the unions. This distrust first emerged in the refusal to negotiate - the only demand was a pure and simple withdrawal of the wage scale plan. Just as with the students and the Davaquet Plan, it was all or nothing. That left the unions without a role as there was nothing to be discussed. What had justified their existence as intermediaries between the rank and file and the management suddenly vanished with this direct clash posed by the rank and file ultimatum. All this explains the outbreak of the strike with the wish to start strikes all alone, the operation of the mass meetings which, even if controlled by the unions, imposed their ideas on the daily discussions.

The strike organization and its continuation became paramount. The normal extension of the wish of the rank and file, a product of the mistrust of the trade unions, took on two forms:

- coordination of rank and file groups
- discussion with the management over the demands.

These two problems were linked: the liaison bodies could be seen as better placed spokesmen representing the wishes of the vast majority of the strikers, but this path was never taken (if it had been it would have posed more complex problems than a direct clash with the authorities at a higher level). Later one could discover the rocks on which attempts to liaise autonomous initiatives came to grief. What was to be liable, and how? The reply came from the very characteristics of the mass meetings and the way in which they functioned. We have seen what these mass meetings were like at the Gare de Lyon and the Gare du Nord in Paris. At the La Mouche depot in Lyon there were 30 scabs out of 520 drivers. A strike committee was set up by non-unionized workers and those belonging to the autonomous unions, CFDT and FO. A CGT delegate was to state "The most resolute are often those we have never seen before (that is at union branch meetings). Sometimes I feared that non-unionized workers would impose their diktat." At the Le Bourget sorting sidings the mass meetings attracted at most 30 strikers, mainly union militants. At Paris South West (660) there were two mass meetings, one CGT (60 or so), then the rest (about 600) with turn out for the meetings from 60 to 100 and for the strike committee from 10 to 20. At Longueau (a major junction 1 hour up the line from Paris Nord where the line splits between that for the Channel ports and for Lille, also centre of the Picardie Regional Network), the mass meeting unanimously called for a strike (101 out of 260 took part). The turn out for the mass meetings just about doubled in the New Year after workers returned from their holidays. The drivers' mass meetings attracted from 50% to 66% of the strikers involved.

One of the reasons trotted out by the management and by some unions during the attempt to get everyone back to work was that even if the mass meetings had given a majority vote, they often saw only a minority of the workers or strikers voting. This was partly true because, as in any strike, active participation may vary with the circumstances, which are as diverse as the struggle itself. It is also untrue because a non-appearance does not imply lack of support, lack of confidence, but may imply support later on. Nevertheless, one can see that participation in and the determination of the mass meetings would play a major role in their structuring. It is also certain the widely divergent situations would be created also by proposals at the meetings and the personality of the proponent. Other factors too could be important: previous experience of relations with the local trade union set up and, more so, their attitude at the beginning of the strike. If the Paris Nord drivers' meeting refused to form a strike committee, even one on permanent recall, and refused to have delegates (which it could have done), elsewhere strike committees were as common as flowers in spring, but in all shapes and sizes as regards their character and composition. But there was still one point in common despite all these differences: the obligation to report back constantly to the mass meetings for decisions to be made, especially on continuing the strike or to be remanded; and here we can see the principle of elected but permanently recallable delegates. At the other extreme from Paris Nord we can see the lack of a strike committee because the unions managed to take on that function. This appears to have been the case in Caen where the CGT was in the majority and at the Gare de Lyon in Paris. One cannot give a full picture of what the strike committees were really like: sometimes there were more of them, or more co-opted, here really elected, more or less imposed or self declared. But even where they existed, these strike committees, like all the mass meetings, were split between drivers and the rest. So liaison was immediately a rank and file question, firstly local then regional. Rouen had 4 separate mass meetings, each with a separate elected strike committee, contacting each other to coordinate activity. A large regional liaison committee appeared on Tuesday December 24 with 60 delegates, including some drivers. It is hard to say what role Lutte Ouvrière (trotskyist) militants or even earlier attempts to set up strike committees had on this liaison committee, but the setting up of these organizations going beyond the rank and file level was limited to a local and regional level, where confusion reigned because situations that sprang up or died down frequently during the struggle followed in the steps of the formal aspects of autonomy. The other level of liaison, the national one, saw the establishment of vertical structures, one for drivers only, the other trying to win wider support, but in fact drawing it only from the rest of the railway workers.

The first national liaison committee was formed by the drivers. It was called for by Paris Nord and Sotteville (Rouen) drivers on Friday, December 26 and accompanied by the dispatch of a list of demands to the SNCF management. 29 depots were represented, 15 from the North 9 from the West, 2 from the South East, 2 from the East and one from South West (Ivry) region. It invited and "encouraged other sectors of

SNCF to do as it had done and to adopt the means to coordinate the defence of their own demands. This is an affirmation of structures by category, but it could appear to be an expression of rank and file democracy - everyone defending what they knew. That would not be an a priori obstacle to organizing autonomous structures, even if they were only in contact vertically at a certain level. One could discuss this endlessly, the fact is that the liaison committees were set on such structures, so reproducing the same structures of work organization, including that of the unions. The drivers' liaison committee met again the following Sunday (Dec 28) at the Gare de l'Est (Paris). 37 depots sent delegations with express mandates, a dozen of the others "observers". This was to be the only mass meeting of this liaison committee. It elected a committee of 7 union and non-union members and only this continued to meet. The limits to this autonomous set up are quite evident. They show that trade union influence had not been overcome in the most active sector of the strike, despite the generalization and determination of the strikers. Even on this narrow category basis, the national drivers' liaison committee could not achieve a real level of co-ordination because it represented and continued to represent only about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the striking depots. A twin limit to the setting up and autonomous organization of the body appeared: it could have no possibility of asking the management to take part in talks and it could not hope to become the central liaison for all categories. This national drivers' liaison committee seems to have evolved in two ways, CFDT influence increasing on one hand and bureaucratization on the other. This may explain why it did not develop (because of a kind of distrust in the rank and file mass meetings), but the very fact that it did not develop may have encouraged this tendency too. (Even before the evolution became noticeable, full participation at all mass meetings had ceased because some of them were trade union dominated or because they wanted to maintain their autonomy.)

The CFDT's attempt to influence the drivers' liaison committee was skillfully undertaken right from the start of the strike and this became a reason for the CGT to oppose the liaison committee. The two national drivers' liaison committees were the first and the last. This delegate meeting was substituted with a kind of permanent office which maintained contact and distributed information over the 'phone. The evolution of the strike, which now required everyone to be present in the depots and the difficulty of getting together mass meeting delegates from all over France certainly played a role in the form adopted by the liaison committee. Moreover, the fact that Paris Nord, whose mass meeting started the strike, continued to be the de facto liaison committee (without having ever really wished to be so) consequently reduced the attempt to structure the drivers' liaison committee and to separate it very slightly from the rank and file.

One could also think that this second liaison committee too copied divisions in the workforce and unions. But it is especially marked by its origin (it was Paris South West liaison that pushed for it) and the fact that the important posts on it were taken by Lutte Ouvrière militants. After a demonstration in Paris organized by the Paris South West Regional Liaison Committee, there was a call for it to become a "provisional national liaison committee" at

a meeting at the Bourse du Travail. It also called for the strike to be organized in intercategory mass meetings with strike committees etc. and with a national intercategory liaison committee, and at a new meeting held in Paris on December 29 there were 200 delegates from 50 centres, but only 20 of these centres had provided a formal mandate to represent 10,000 "strikers" (in fact the total of those "represented"). A new meeting on January 2 saw delegates from 60 centres arrive (again only 20 having a mandate from 12,000 "strikers"). These figures show that this current was stagnating and that this liaison committee was even less successful than the drivers' one in representing a significant sector of the strike. It asked openly, however, to take part in talks and made demands previously not issued by anyone: 700 Francs a month (= £70). This was doubtlessly designed to attract small groups of non-travelling and badly paid staff. Also they called for pay for the strike period. This could only further divide the two liaison committees which could not even agree on certain types of action to take and apparently indulged in attempts to outbid each other, just like the unions. Only one united demonstration took place in Paris on January 7, proceeding from the Gare du Nord to Gare St Lazare and attracting about 4,000 railway workers.

COMPLEX AND CONTRADICTIONARY RELATIONS

WITH THE UNIONS

The relative set back to the liaison committees evidences the trade unions' offensive (supported by the SNCF management) to get rid of an autonomous organization whose development would have excluded them totally from the strike. This, however, would be to put the cart before the horse. It was because the autonomy did not go further than rank and file mass meetings (and even this was not achieved everywhere) and did not express itself at the level of local, regional or national liaison committees that the trade unions' offensive could be launched swiftly and aim at the weak points of the autonomy. This does not mean that the unions would not have acted against these liaison bodies or the bodies had established their power, but that the trade unions - rank and file opposition would have broken out much more clearly and at such a level that many things would have been altered. Certainly, each in its own way, the unions, even when supporting the strike, tried to alter the direction of its autonomous orientations: this was the real significance of all union support. The CGT, after a short period of obstruction, entered the strike with a strong condemnation of the liaison committees accused of "by-passing the usefulness of the representative trade union organizations and breaking workers' unity". It condemned one of the liaison committees as being "a political operation totally lacking in spontaneity" and the drivers' one as being a kind of CFDT stalking horse. On the 12th day of the strike, the CGT called for "reinforcing the strike" (later one

would see that this meant taking it over), set up a National Solidarity Committee and stated "We have nothing to hide so we are not to be watched over". As for the CFDT, it accused the political links of the office of the intercategory liaison committee and (temporarily it was said) suspended the committee's leader from his union office because his activities "do not correspond with the union function he was elected to carry out".

But, one should repeat, if these kinds of thing could happen, it was because the struggle, albeit having an exemplary, democratic rank and file, did not reach the stage of demonstrating clearly to all and sundry the role of unions in capitalist society. Another troskyist paper Rouge (6.1.87.) well defined the relation between the strikers and the unions. (Its members played a role in some centres identical to that of Lutte Ouvriere in Paris South West). "The strike committees are anti-union only insofar as the unions are against the strike. All experience shows that union organizations that support or go along with the strike committees, and more generally the mass meetings or inter union bodies of the rank and file, gain authority and support in them." This is a short, correct exposition not of reality but of the tactics of the union or political organizations trying to gain an audience among the strikers and to exploit their autonomous tendencies to try to recuperate their influence and finally to win supporters. But this statement totally ignores the essential dialectic of the union intervention in the strike. Just as in the students' movement, union or political organizations could only slip back into the movement by adopting the demands of the rank and file strikers and using them to their own ends, which was difficult because, at the beginning, they had to work contrary to their own identity and function, and here all the more so in that the demand for the point-blank withdrawal of the new salary scale removed their basic function and saw them forced to practise rank and file autonomy, which would have tended potentially to have eliminated them all the more as it developed. At Metz (East France) for example, strikers had forced union militants right from the start of the strike to remove their union badges. The strikers were caught in the same contradiction. They were justly proud of their movement which they had got going and developed all alone, outside the unions, but only to verify all too soon that they needed the unions to discuss with the management. They thus gave back to the unions the power that their own actions had tended to remove.

These two observations go together as they are mutually interdependent. If it was so, it was not because the strikers did not know. Various declarations express agreement on this dilemma. While the drivers' liaison committee called for "immediate talks between union organizations and the SNCF management" to gain agreement to the main demands that gave rise to the movement, it simultaneously expressed the rank and file desire and the realization that there was no other way out. A railway worker said it even more clearly. "We are a majority of non-unionized workers ... We no longer have confidence in the unions, but they alone have the legal right to negotiate. So we have to use them." (letter to La Vie du Rail, 15.1.87.) This is also what a Grenoble railway worker said in Le Monde (26.12.86.) in a similarly disillusioned manner. "We don't have the right to go there (to the negotiations), it wouldn't be legal. They (management and unions) don't want us." Another more clearly defined the split between the action where rank and file autonomy was expressed and negotiations where the unions

had a monopoly. "The basis for the negotiations? We laid them, but it will be the unions who negotiate. If the unions are our partners today, the movement started in the rank and file and remains in its hands."

OCCUPATIONS AND SABOTAGE

The Strike hardens against the bosses' and unions' offensive:
Autonomous action returns to the forms used at the start of the strike.

The evolution of the movement was to be determined by the strength of rank and file autonomy as expressed through actions brought about through mass meetings and by the potential force that it represented in class relations in France. Strikers in other sectors found themselves in a movement in which other workers tried to defend themselves by and for themselves, which explains the total lack of hostility towards the strikers when many people were inconvenienced by the strike over the New Year's holiday period; but they still did not find anything in the demands that coincided with their own interests.

The outcome of the strike cannot be seen in isolation from the attempts to stop or break the advance of the autonomous current. These attempts saw an alliance of the police and government with the management, which tried to run as many trains and replacement services as possible, and the unions which tried constantly to find grounds for negotiations from which they would be able to return with some small concessions, as the price of a hypothetical return to work. We saw in the description of the strike structure some positions they had used to influence the relations of power in their favour. All the forms of repression went hand in hand, in vain one could say because the strike ran out of steam due more to its isolation and lack of prospects, not in vain one could say because this wideranging repression was effective in limiting and emasculating it.

The first unions-SNCF meeting was on December 22. Real problems were not on the agenda and each party tried to seem to be worried about salary problems. It is hard to believe that the management could have thought they were making a real reply to such a ground swell with such ridiculous proposals: 1% in June, another 0.7% in October and a 250 Francs (=£25) bonus. No one was surprised by unanimous no votes at mass meetings: "We're not out for this". Nothing on the pay scale, nor on work conditions. This day however saw the first intervention of the CRS riot police who were used to clear the signal boxes at Lyon.

The CRS were used at Chambéry (near Lyon) to clear the tracks on December 23.

On the 24th, the unions were received one by one at discussion with the SNCF management.

On December 26th, the CGC members set up a "liaison committee of SNCF drivers ready to return to work". The government hoped that the strike was running out of steam and hardened their position. Dupuy, the SNCF director, made a radio appeal at mid-day for a return to work as a prerequisite for discussions. This caused an immediate outcry from the rank and file and the unions.

On December 27th, the director of the SNCF withdrew his appeal because of the outcry it had caused.

During the weekend the strike became more bitter. There was a generalization of occupations of signal boxes and the track and picketting in front of trains where necessary. This was as a reply both to the "provocative" appeal made by Dupuy and an attempt by the SNCF to run trains driven by lower management, retired drivers and those who had been taken off driving for medical reasons. These actions saw solidarity spreading to all categories of railway worker.

On Monday 29th, the return of railway workers who had been on holiday strengthened the strikers' ranks and made the movement even harder. The management now used the CRS systematically to clear the tracks and, with the help of radio networks, invented a return to work so as to justify the talks to be opened the next day. The few trains running, driven by lower management, were empty. The strikers were infuriated by what they had heard on the radio and blocked the tracks even more than before. That evening the radio and television carried the news that the pay scale had been "suspended", which only increased the strikers' anger as "we want it withdrawn".

The following week saw the strike movement reaching its high point. CRS intervention became routine in dealing with this hardening of the movement. Both the government and the management representatives screamed to the media about sabotage and to whine about angry railway travellers.

On the next day (Dec. 30th.) the government nominated a mediator: a new meeting between management and the unions as part of the "commission du statut" brought scanty results - 2 extra days leave and 15 instead of 14 Sundays off, rostering and a promise to improve overnight accommodation. There was almost a state of siege in many stations occupied by the CRS.

On Wednesday the 31st, a new meeting was held with the unions and the mediator announced that the pay scale had been withdrawn without actually using that word. A new scale was to be negotiated with the unions. This could only lead to further anger on the strikers' part. The SNCF was unable to continue putting out news about a return to work and had to accept that the minimum service could not be guaranteed. Everywhere the vote was unanimous for continuing the strike.

Up to the following weekend clashes continued and intensified. As regards the strikers, their action was becoming more difficult because of the presence of the CRS. The actions undertaken shifted to "sabotaging" locomotives, trains and track. Often these were cases of a small decided minority who were faced by the inactivity of the

older workers who still felt the "esprit de corps" of railway workers. The other categories of railway workers were not involved in these actions.

The situation varied from place to place. There was absolutely no traffic in the South, almost none in the North and in Brittany, Lower Normandy (i.e. around Rouen and Le Havre) and the South West. There were no trains at all on January 2 as the SNCF decided to save its lower management drivers for the weekend when many people would be returning from their holidays.

One should look at the way in which repression was used. Direct police intervention is needed when managerial and union domination are ineffective - direct intervention tends mainly to force the workers to accept this domination by refusing to allow them to take action which would allow them to liberate themselves from it.

The attempts to get trains running led to a hardening of the strike. Most signal boxes were occupied. Pickets were everywhere deemed necessary, point switching boxes, control boxes, even on the track in front of the trains they wanted to stop. This rank and file action more strongly linked various railway workers than sectorial mass meetings which divided them... The CGT launched its great offensive on all fronts at the end of the year in order to try to win over the movement. It followed the traditional tactic of expanding the strike to sectors that it knew it could control easily or alternatively where such an expansion would fail. Clearly at this point no spontaneous movement followed that of the railway workers and that the movements launched by the unions remained traditional ones. Besides the Paris metro strike, which was suspended, strike calls (electricity supply, post office) were made for the beginning of January. An alarmist campaign that was well orchestrated tried to make one believe that the movement was spreading wildly, which it was not. Bergeron, a FO union leader, took part in this campaign, giving credit to what the CGT was saying on the generalization of the movement. "It is a machine that has gone mad and we cannot control it any longer. This is very serious." If he meant union control over the railway workers, he was quite right. If, however, he was talking about the spread of the strikes, there was an unknown. The CGT's intervention aimed to grab the front of the stage of the social set up was a risky game as it could as easily rebound as sink the movement. The movement of the railway workers reached its maximum extent towards the end of the year, before the extension to the strikes supported by the CGT began. The turning point in the strike took place in this period.

Nevertheless, when the unions themselves, mainly the CGT, called strikes in other sectors, especially in the Paris transport system and in the electricity supply, the railway workers could hold onto the hope that their conflict would spread and the forms that they have given to the strike would expand. Without doubt they had won nothing with their movement and a sort of wait-and-see-what-happens-next set in. All the same, they could reasonably believe that if the unions were trying to relaunch an attack, it was to gain a toehold in the social situation, but also under rank and file pressure. For several days they could be led to believe that things would change and several mass meetings tried to get into contact with other sectors, but, in the end, the unions managed to keep control of them. Seeing that the conflict was not spreading, the stage of rank and file autonomy would not be truly superseded, not even on the railways.

The CGT, faced by persistent refusal by mass meetings to consider the proposals any advance at all, seemingly responded to rank and file pressure by calling for "reinforcing the strike" also defining the content of this reinforcement: "attempting to increase mass action rather than occupying signal boxes", and tried to get the depots to vote for running trains driven by strikers as long as they themselves ran the show and were identifiable by crossed flags on the trains. This was rejected both by the strikers and by management. The mass meetings took an opposite point of view to the CGT. The former did not want any trains to run, while the latter did everything possible to get them to run. The SNCF tried to renew its offensive on January 4, the day of the return to work after the Christmas break, by cancelling trains run by junior managers on the 1-2 to give the drivers a break along with the others used as guards. This allowed the SNCF to trumpet in the press that a start back to work began on the 4th. Maire (CFDT leader) called on the government on January 3 to "re-start negotiations so that the strike could end positively at the weekend so that everything would be working on Monday morning". The CGT called off the strike of merchant seamen with almost nothing gained while calling other strikes now the strike was having serious economic consequences.

All these attempts to get things under control coincided with a police offensive against strikers who used all means to try to stop trains from running driven by junior managers (not strikebreakers). This had already been underway for over a week, but was becoming more bitter on both sides. For the strikers' part, blocking the railway lines and, where the occupation of main signal boxes was made more difficult by a police presence, acts of sabotage both on the trains and on the trains standing on the track took place. But this type of action soon encountered a difficulty, the "railway worker" spirit, pride in the job, stronger among older workers than the younger ones, who formed a determined minority. If the action were to shift into the hands of a determined minority it would be due firstly to the fact that it was a minority action of drivers. But it was a minority action leading to another. An interesting example comes from the Rouen depot. The drivers wanted not to strengthen the strike which would certainly involve sabotage. One of the representatives of the mass meeting then declared "since you are against strengthening the strike, let's go back to work." This phrase most keenly shows the lack of coordination among all railway workers. The trade unions, especially the CGT, profitted from this weakness. Certainly in attempts to stop traffic, most railway workers had nothing to do with the drivers' actions. The 230,000 railway workers includes junior managers and non-strikers, sometimes spread throughout France and sometimes in very small groups. However, if the vast majority had given support, the strike would have been much stronger in autonomous actions against running trains again and would not have needed to have gone over to minority actions. Also police intervention would have been much less effective.

THE TURNING POINT OF THE STRIKE

"If they had taken over our strike,
we would have gone back to work."
(a railway worker)

ON January 4, the SNCF announced that 10 out of 94 depots had voted to return to work (what was contested here was not only the number, but also the importance of the depots in question). Strikers began to think that the strike might be inconclusive and the strikes launched in other sectors by the CGT did not increase confidence. They knew that these strikes were distinct from their movement and aimed at manipulating its weaker sectors. Besides, they had experienced this trade union offensive in their own mass meetings. We find an example of this at the Rennes depot. A mass meeting held on January 5 voted 130 to 99 to go back. The CGT then held a vote only for its members: 43 to 6 to go on with the strike and placed strike pickets on the gate. Guards voted 55 to 15 against a return to work. As the striker above declared, "if they had taken over our strike, we would have gone back to work".

This is precisely what happened and accelerated the return to work. Many guards stated to prefer to go back to following the CGT which, knowing that the strike was terminating, became supporters of a fight to the last.

However, the strike took a while to die down. On January 5 only 500 of the timetabled 10,000 trains ran. The sense of impotence led to a new development: revolts, sabotage and other incidents increased. The strikers at Vierzon cut off the electricity supply on January 7 and occupied the fuel depot. The loco sheds at Toulouse were occupied, the rails smeared with grease for several hundred yards and the truck depot taken over. At Bretigny, 100 locomotives were made unserviceable. A list of examples of this kind from all over France would be endless. In this period the SNCF was obliged to stop all traffic in the south west and then in the south east when confronted by the size of this movement. New discussions resulted and the offer was slightly improved. SNCF management announced on January 8 promises of a rapid reappraisal of work conditions, improved rostering, a bonus increase of 2 to 7%, 5,800 promotions instead of 5,000 in 1987, an easing of drivers' medical examinations, and a payment of the held back strike pay of 4 days per month.

The parallel "spread" of the strike launched by the CGT caused more confusion than anything. Little support came from outside the Paris metro and the electricity supply industry. The CGT in these sectors tried, sometimes with difficulty, to keep things in hand. If power cuts did not stop trains from running (power cuts would have been the best form of support for the railway workers' strike, but were they possible?), unannounced black outs in towns gave rise to hostility which the train strike had not (largely because the economic impact was immediate and direct). Attempts by the CGT (and CP) to exploit the situation shifted the range of conflicts onto the field of political clashes. However, the counter-demonstration by the extreme right on Monday, December 12 was a fiasco.

The goal sought by this spreading had been reached: the electricity strike ended, that on the metro tapered out and the railway workers found themselves even more isolated and with a feeling of total impotence despite the force their movement represented. One by one the depots went back. On January 12, 55 out of 94 were back and the bastion of Paris Nord called for "suspending" the strike. Within 48 hours everything was back to "normal" on the railways. Thus ended one of the most important movements in France since 1968.

TOWARDS OTHER FORMS

OF AUTONOMY IN STRUGGLES

It was a striker at Paris Nord, a driver on the liaison committee, who summed up most concisely the gains of the struggle. "We haven't fought for nothing, we may have offered ideas to others. This movement may well have provided ideas for others." This is true, but it is also true that what the railway workers built, albeit their own creation, was also the product of a situation within the relations of production which are not unique to this sector. This situation could have given rise to identical demonstrations of autonomy, but with different characteristics.

What remains of decisive value in this statement is that the striker considered that having obtained little, of having lost according to traditional strike terminology, was only a secondary matter. What he saw as essential and so stressed was the form that the strike had taken, the fact of having struck by themselves and for themselves. One can see in this stressing of the form of the struggle a gaining of consciousness of what the class struggle really is. Something which questions other matters than the demands concerning work itself, even if these demands were determinant at the outbreak of the strike, the struggle of one power against another. The original leaflet prepared by the Paris Nord drivers contains a phrase clearly expressing the consciousness of what had to be done: "The drivers will know what to do with trade union organizations that do not offer their support." "Know what to do" meant knowing where they were going: the form the strike outbreak took and the form of the rank and file itself well expressed the consciousness that the clash with the forces of domination in this society was the heart of the matter. It was not pure chance but the will to build something to protect their own interests. If this consciousness did not deepen and spread, it certainly has not disappeared with the end of the strike in isolation. This is what led to the end of the strike; as the strikers knew, there came a moment when they ceased to be masters of the development of the process they themselves had initiated, that is the extension to the forms of autonomy and the content of the action. They had done everything that they

could alone and they could understand what their experience meant both for themselves and for other workers. This situation meant for many of them that the return to work lacked the bitterness of defeat.

The form adopted by the struggle can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, what autonomy enabled them to do, secondly the limits, that is, what they could not do. The second point is less important for us than the first. It is not a question of playing at strategists or of rerunning the strike to find solutions for overcoming the limits. We can avoid this position by seeing how and why these limits were reached and not surpassed. Besides, it would be a waste of time to try to discover rules for other struggles, the apparatus of domination (government, managers and unions) is already at work analysing each for his own sector the best way to avoid a repetition of such struggles. Because their intervention is limited to daily work life and struggles they transmit all the more certainly the characteristics of the preceding struggle while forcing the workers to go beyond them if they wish to struggle by and for themselves. On the other hand, what the railway workers did seems to be fundamental for the class struggle. It was the first time in France that such a large movement broke out completely autonomously while simultaneously setting up autonomous organizations of direct democracy to ensure the strike's continuation. Moreover, even if they only partially succeeded here, the movement tried to extend this rank and file organization with regional and national autonomous structures. Here we can see the sketching out of a completely autonomous organization for struggles which could prefigure the organization of all social life by some kind of committees based on rank and file assemblies, taking their own destiny into their own hands and thereby eliminating all the structures in society that dominate them. The fact that the student movement had tried in its own sector to set up identical organizations shows that this is a deep seated tendency in contemporary capitalist society.

Traditional organs of mediation were seen to be particularly ineffective. It was not the setting up of autonomous organizations that made them so, but that these organizations were set up because of this ineffectiveness as had been seen in daily work and previous struggles. The strike and its organizations merely stripped away the last veil concealing this fact.

If these autonomous organizations were stopped in their tracks, it was because the organs of domination held on to some effectiveness because of the character of the struggle, at a certain level of development the relation of power shifted. This text underlines all the various contradictory aspects of the dialectic of the movement which gave rise to this autonomy, providing the movement with a wide range of more or less imperfect forms. It is always the same. Everything arises by necessity and there is no going beyond if other needs do not force an attempt to find a way of going on beyond what has already been achieved. It is the workers themselves who rediscover situations in new struggles, adopt the same or new ways as a reply to their needs at that moment because they simply come up against the same - or other - forces of repression and domination, because they have to deal with the same inadequacies, the same opposition which cause the same frustrations. The enormous contribution of the drivers' strike, as that of the students has been to put in every exploited person's mind the idea that what they did we can do too, if we need to.

SNCF DRIVERS

The drivers are showing their discontent for these reasons:

- the new pay scale project
- pay
- repeated attempts to remove gains made in the past
- ending of career prospects
- falling work conditions

They demand:

- continuation of the present pay scale with more points on each level (Over 20 years drivers have lost 58 points which in money terms is about 2,000 Francs a month)
- career advancement based solely on seniority with no reference to duties
- T5 (1) for all after 12 years
- a standard of living to match their qualifications and responsibilities
- changes to the system for calculating travelling bonuses. This new bonus being calculated on the basis of each driver's grade (and not on a mileage or duty basis) and incorporated in the offer
- replacement of the present FFA by a 13th (2)
- a red card for everyone with free access to all trains (3)
- reform of the PS4R to improve working and living conditions (4)

The drivers have decided to strike from midnight December 18 until their demands have been fully met.

They call on various trade union organizations - CFDT, CFTC, CGT, FGAAC FO - to support their movement.

The drivers will know what to do with trade union organizations that do not offer their support.

If you agree with this, make some photocopies and hand them around and in other depots.

Notes to appendix

1. T5 is the top of the drivers' pay scale.
2. FFA is a Christmas Bonus, now a regular part of the December pay and generally double that pay.
3. The Red Card is a first class travel permit. Just before the strike, the SNCF decided to restrict the distribution and use of it.
4. PS4R is the SNCF working rule book.