

# France: Popularity of Socialist prime minister plummets

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Just seven months after taking office, French Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin has seen his popularity plummet by 22 percent. Two opinion polls published this week showed his ratings falling below the 50 percent mark for the first time.

The coalition government headed by Jospin faced its first major challenge in November when hundreds of thousands of truck drivers brought much of European road transport to a halt in a strike for better wages and conditions. Then in December and January a series of protest actions highlighting the plight of the unemployed received widespread media coverage and evoked significant popular sympathy.

Demonstrators have carried out occupations of benefit offices, town halls, Socialist Party offices, the Paris Bourse and chambers of commerce. In Paris they blocked the high-speed TGV train lines. Many of the protests, which have been peaceful, have been broken up by the CRS riot police.

Unemployment stands officially at 12.4 percent, some 3.1 million, but this excludes many people without work who do not qualify for state support. The real level of joblessness has been estimated at more than 6 million.

The main demands of the protesters have been for benefits to the long-term unemployed to be raised to the level of the minimum wage, i.e., 5,200 francs (\$850) a month—a 1,500 franc increase—and for restitution of the end-of-year supplement of 3,000 francs (\$500). The supplement was abolished by the conservative Juppé administration, which preceded the coalition headed by Jospin.

Fearing the development of a more generalized struggle for improved conditions and higher wages, Jospin agreed to make 1 billion francs (\$164 million) available to finance retraining and other programs for

the long-term unemployed. However he refused to raise benefits to the level of the minimum wage and restore the end-of-year supplement, saying this would cost over 35 billion francs (\$6 billion), and might jeopardize plans to join the European Monetary Union, due to start in 1999.

In order to meet the EMU requirements Jospin has pledged to keep public spending on a tight rein. But he will be forced to go further and introduce new austerity measures, because the financial meltdown in Asia has led to a downward revision in France's projected economic growth rate.

The attempt to impose such policies led to the downfall of the Juppé government, despite the fact that it commanded a massive majority in the National Assembly. Juppé's regime was paralyzed by a wave of mass strikes and protest actions that convulsed France in November and December of 1995.

In the aftermath of the strike movement, right-wing President Jacques Chirac gambled on calling early elections in June 1997. Socialist Party leader Jospin was elected after making promises to reverse Juppé's attacks.

Since then these promises have been systematically broken. Millions of workers who hoped that a Socialist-led government would provide an alternative to its right-wing predecessor are being disillusioned. Even the *Economist* recently stated that Jospin's policies "are beginning to look uncomfortably like the ones pursued by the right-wing government humiliatingly ousted last summer."

The jobless protests have won significant support in the working class. According to opinion polls, 63 percent of the population does not believe the unemployed receive adequate benefits. But the actions themselves have involved only small numbers of

people. For this Jospin has his coalition partner, the French Communist Party (PCF), to thank.

Initially the PCF played a dual role. While voicing support for the movement of the unemployed outside parliament, the four PCF ministers in the government gave their full backing to Jospin. Meanwhile the lower echelons of the PCF, together with the Stalinist union federation, CGT, have been the main forces organizing the protests.

The small numbers actually taking part are largely drawn from middle-class radical groups such as Lutte Ouvrière and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, which support the Stalinist leadership and portray its campaign as a genuine attempt to defend the working class.

The demonstrations have been of a preemptive character—limited protests to let off steam and head off a serious challenge to the Socialist-led coalition, which the Stalinists and radicals portray as the “only realistic alternative” to a government of the right.

In recent days the Stalinists and their allies in the leadership of the jobless protests have abandoned their previous posture of opposition to Jospin. They are now seeking to divert the strivings of the unemployed for an improvement in their conditions behind a CGT campaign of open support for the government.

The device for accomplishing this is Jospin’s pledge to establish a 35-hour week, which is presented as the central part of a strategy to create new jobs. The main banner of the march in Paris organized by the CGT and unemployed groups to coincide with the January 27 opening of the debate on the issue in the National Assembly read: “All together for an increase in the social wage and purchasing power, and for the 35-hour week.”

Christophe Aguiton, a representative of one of the organizations involved in the jobless protests, said, “Our principal objective remains, of course, an increase in the social wage. But we also want to support the government so that the law on the 35-hour week is voted through.”

Jospin’s legislation for a 35-hour week has nothing to do with a struggle to seriously reform, let alone abolish, the existing economic and political system in France. On the contrary, it is intended to serve as a means for driving through further cuts in jobs and wages and further increases in labor productivity.

The Socialist Party election manifesto promised the 35-hour week with no loss of pay, and this demand became the centerpiece of the coalition agreement with the PCF and the Greens. Since then Jospin has said this was never his slogan, and declared that such a measure would be “anti-economic.”

Responding to opposition to the proposal from the employers’ organizations, Finance Minister Strauss-Kahn has stated that its success would depend on the ability of the trade unions to impose a wage freeze on their members. The worst scenario, he said, would be an increase in wages, because this would “cost tens of thousands of jobs.”

While rejecting the demands of the unemployed for improved benefits, Employment and Welfare Minister Martine Aubry told the National Assembly that employers could receive up to 13,000 francs (\$2,160) per employee as a sweetener for cutting the work week, if they took on more staff in low-paid, unskilled jobs.

In November/December 1995 the PCF and the radicals played the key role in bringing the mass movement under control and channeling it behind the perspective of electing a Socialist government. Now they seek to restrict growing opposition to Jospin to a series of protest gestures, and in this way prevent the emergence of an independent political and social movement in the working class.



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