

Rising poverty and exploitation: France on the eve of the parliamentary elections

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The French legislative elections scheduled for next Sunday take place against the backdrop of a deeply polarized society. While the upper layers of society have enjoyed a dramatic increase in wealth and luxury—according to official figures, the profits of large corporations rose by 36 percent last year—and many firms are paying out large dividends to their shareholders, the living conditions of the great majority of the working population are becoming increasingly difficult.

Over the past five years, under the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and his “left” coalition (composed of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens, the Civil Bloc of Jean-Pierre Chevènement and the small party of the Radical Left) social inequality has become ever more pronounced.

In recent campaign speeches the representatives of the Socialist Party (SP) regularly point out that between 1997, when the Jospin government took over, and 2001 the jobless rate fell from over 12 percent to 9 percent, according to official statistics. However, these figures are highly deceptive, because the statistical lowering of unemployment was bound up with far-reaching changes in working conditions entirely to the disadvantage of the employees.

Most of the much-touted 1.4 million new jobs created during the Jospin era belong to the category of so-called “precarious employment” (*travail précaire*), i.e., contract positions and temporary jobs. These have a fixed length, they pay far below the official scale and many of them are part-time. Most of these jobs are brokered by private agencies, and the workers lack even the most minimal social protection. According to official figures, 2.2 million people in France, i.e., nine percent of those able to work, hold such “precarious” jobs.

This type of employment has led to the rapid expansion of a new kind of poverty that first emerged on a large scale in the United States: the phenomenon of the “working poor,” i.e., people who are not able to cover their basic needs even though they have a full-time or several part-time jobs. A recent report by the Ministry for Employment and Solidarity, entitled “Fighting the New Poverty,” begins with the words: “The high level of unemployment, the difficulties in reintegrating a large number of youth into working life, the growing rate of divorces and the excessive debts of more and more households have contributed to the emergence of a new kind of poverty.”

The figures cited in the report, which are supposed to demonstrate the government’s efforts on behalf of the poor, illustrate the enormous scale of social misery. According to the

report, the government spends 28 billion euros per month (one euro = 0.95 US dollars) to support the lowest income families, which comprise approximately six million people. In addition, special payments go to nearly 500,000 unemployed who are no longer eligible for regular assistance. Further financial support goes to 2.8 million workers who are employed either part-time, by temporary employment agencies, or on fixed-term contracts, and who receive less than the legal minimum wage (a net sum of 5.27 euros per hour).

Because of the international economic downturn, the official rate of unemployment in France has been rising again since the beginning of 2001, in spite of the creation of a cheap labor sector. Seventeen percent of French youth between 20 and 25 years of age are officially out of work, although the general assumption is that the real number is considerably higher. In the working class suburbs of Paris, now notorious for their poverty and social degradation, youth unemployment stands at up to 50 percent. Petty crime has doubled over the past 10 years. Beggars, prostitutes and pickpockets are present everywhere, and not only in the suburbs.

Several reports put the number of homeless at 200,000, while pointing out that an additional 1.5 million people have “very bad housing.” The condition of public housing has deteriorated and more and more families are no longer able to pay their rent.

Last month the death of a little boy caused a national outcry. While playing on the staircase of a high-rise building, he fell down the elevator shaft and died because the door of the shaft had not been properly bolted. The public housing agency reacted with arrogance and indifference to the ensuing protests of the tenants, saying that the bad state of the elevators in public housing had been well known for years and it was simply irresponsible to let children play near elevator doors without supervision. Such statements only increase popular hostility towards the authorities and the politicians of all the governmental parties, right and left.

Another extremely alarming symptom of the diseased condition of French society is the increase in the number of suicides. According to a study by the National Association for the Prevention of Suicides, in 2000 suicide became the most common cause of death among young people between 25 and 34 years of age. Every 40 minutes in France a person dies from suicide. Not surprisingly, the suicide rate is 14 times higher among the unemployed than among business executives.

“Mortality increases as one descends the social ladder,” *Le Monde* commented a few days ago. The article, entitled “A Social

Layer in the Grip of Inequality,” described the deplorable state of the health system.

The article proceeded to point out that the income gap in France has widened dramatically. From 1983 to 1997, with a Socialist Party prime minister or president in office 12 of those 14 years, the percentage of workers falling into the lowest income category doubled from 5 to 10 percent.

The introduction of the 35-hour workweek by the Jospin government is especially significant for what it reveals about the deep-going social transformation in France over the past several years. The call for a significant reduction of working hours was for years a central demand of all of the trade unions, which felt obliged to raise the demand under pressure from their members. Feeling deeply about the diminishing prospects for the younger generation, many workers felt that a reduction in working hours was the only means for ensuring their sons and daughters the opportunity to obtain decent employment. This issue was widely raised by workers during the strike movement of 1995.

When the Socialist Party-led coalition government of Jospin took office in 1997, it made fulfilling this demand one of its central pledges. The manner in which it was carried out, however, revealed a great deal about the class interests that the government served.

Innumerable studies explored the “possibilities of employment policies” bound up with a shortening of working hours. After years of negotiations, last autumn the French parliament finally passed a law “on the reduction and re-organization of working hours.” Martine Aubry (Socialist Party), who headed the Ministry of Labor at the time, praised the law as a “historical milestone in the improvement of employment and workers’ rights.”

Since then, hardly a month has passed without workers in industry and in all areas of the public services—hospital staff, teachers, operational services—going on strike or protesting against the consequences of the new law. It turned out that the “RTT” law (*Réduction du temps de travail*) was devised not so much to reduce working hours as to provide the employers with new means to impose labor flexibility and unpaid overtime. The actual workload, on average, has increased to an unprecedented level.

The second article of the law contains a new definition of the term “working hours.” It now refers to the time during which an individual worker is at the disposal of his employer and directly subject to the employer’s directives. It no longer includes the time necessary for so-called personal matters, such as commuting, changing clothes, work breaks and some aspects of business travel. This enables the employer—private or public—to formally reduce working hours without actually shortening the time the worker spends on his job by a minute. Frequently, the opposite is the case.

Previously the standard working time was a five-day week, followed by two days off. These regular weekly working hours were one of the gains of the general strike movement of 1936, which no government had subsequently called into question. However, with the introduction of the 35-hour week the situation has changed fundamentally. Working hours can now be calculated on a yearly basis. A worker, according to Article 8 of the RTT law, is obliged to work 1,600 hours a year. Weekly working hours can vary and may rise to 48 hours or more. Only the *average weekly*

working hours in the course of a year must amount to 35 hours.

Following the general strike of 1936, daily working hours were limited to a maximum of 10. However, according to the new law, workers can be employed up to 13 hours a day, six days a week. This has not only dramatically increased workloads, but also driven down wages, because the employers are no longer required to pay overtime.

Prior to his defeat in the presidential election in April and his resignation as prime minister, Jospin tried to answer the critics of the RTT law by pointing out that the new regulations were entirely in line with the 1993 European guidelines on work organization. According to the Maastricht treaty on European integration, each country in the European Union (EU) has to guarantee that its national labor laws are in accordance with the EU guidelines and with the decrees of the European Commission. The European Commission has turned out to be one of the major driving forces of the deregulation of employment relations in Europe. For example, it has legalized paid nighttime work for women and child labor for 13- to 16-year-olds.

Even the most preliminary discussion with French workers reveals the enormous anger this fraudulent “reduction” in working hours has provoked. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this measure alone contributed materially to the defeat of Jospin in April.

The SP candidate received 2.5 million fewer votes in 2002 than he did in 1995. Among young voters, turnout was a historically low 53 percent, and within the working class as a whole it was only slightly higher. In many working class areas, less than half of those eligible to vote turned up at the polls.

The response of the pompous SP leadership and the pro-SP media is to blame the population for not seeing the benefits of a “left” government. As this brief review indicates, the reality is quite the opposite.



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