

France: The war over the minimum wage never took place

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The following article was sent to the WSWS by a correspondent in Paris.

The first government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin (between the presidential and legislative elections in May and June) boasted that it had resolved the long conflict with the physicians by granting them an increase in the cost of consultations, which has risen to 20 euros.

The second Raffarin government (consolidated by the victory of the right-wing in the second round of the legislative elections June 16) announced, even before the usual meeting with the employers' federation and the unions, that the July 1 increase in the minimum wage would be limited to the automatic rise of 2.4 percent—without the extra increase that previous governments had granted when there was a change in the parliamentary majority.

Alain Juppé granted 2.2 percent extra in 1995 and Lionel Jospin 2.26 percent in 1997, but M. Raffarin took it on himself to personally announce: "The minimum wage will rise 2.4 percent on July 1; for anything else, we will see." End of statement.

The left and the union bureaucracies make quips about the prime minister "loving the 'little man' so much that he wants him to remain little," but these are just the obligatory criticisms made of a new right-wing government. Not a single party or union has called on workers to take strike action against Jean-Pierre Raffarin (prime minister), Francis Mer (minister for the economy, finance and industry) and François Fillon (minister for social issues, labor and social services) like the doctors did. For the 2.7 million people on the minimum wage, who make up 13 percent of the working population, there were just hollow phrases.

The French Communist Party cries: "The mask has fallen." The Socialist Party accuses the government of

having "forgotten its promises" (Jean-Marc Ayrault, president of the group of Socialist Party deputies in the National Assembly). The CGT (Stalinist-led union) speaks of "a very bad postcard sent by the government" (Bernard Thibault, secretary-general). The CFDT union believes that Jean-Pierre Raffarin has "made a gaffe" (François Chérèque, secretary-general). FO gives him a "yellow card" for "awkwardness" (Marc Blondel, secretary-general). And the CFTC union says it is "disappointed" (Michel Coquillion, spokesperson). These verbal darts don't conceal the fact that these are the very organizations that called unreservedly for workers to vote for Chirac on April 21 and that consequently gave him a blank check to carry out his antisocial policies.

What do these reformist demagogues propose to the millions of minimum-wage workers and the millions of unemployed? Nothing! Michelle Biaggi, spokesperson for FO, claims hypocritically that "Force Ouvrière will stand with any employees who wish to fight for a pay increase." What if a general were to let his troops go into battle with no military objective, no strategy and no logistical support and just watch from the rear while half-heartedly encouraging them? Marc Blondel, the leader of Force Ouvrière, summed up the bureaucracies' reproach of the Raffarin government: "They could at least have followed procedure in their dealings with the unions." Clearly, they oppose the government not over the content but over the form! The football metaphor focuses not on the antisocial nature of the measure, but only on the social awkwardness of its premature announcement.

The left did not want to oppose the government, since it is responsible for a bizarre situation. The law of February 11, 1950, which established the minimum wage (Salaire minimum interprofessionnel garanti, or

SMIG), was introduced along with procedures for resolving “labor conflicts,” that is, strikes, in exchange for union participation in the management of labor contracts. The law of January 2, 1970 replaced the SMIG with the SMIC (Salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance) and indexed it to the inflation rate.

The Aubry law of 1998 complicated the system by creating multiple levels of payment, the number of levels varying according to the date when the 35-hour-week law was passed. Thus, there are seven levels of the SMIC on July 1, 2002, and there will be 10 in 2005! François Chérèque admits that “there can be up to 111 euros a month difference in the payments to two workers who both receive the minimum wage,” due to the way the 35-hour-week law was introduced.

François Fillon is in a position to say: “These people [the left parties], who were in power just a few days ago, who did not increase the SMIC in 1999, nor in 2000, and in 2001 gave it the most minimal of boosts [0.27 percent], are today trying to tell us what to do.” The left in power increased subsidies for corporations (350 billion francs), increased the number of temporary jobs, introduced penalties for job-seekers who fail to fulfill government requirements and manipulated the unemployment figures (the number of job seekers taken off the lists increased 60 percent in a year). The SMIC is not a social gain; it is a device that, in the hands of successive governments, has reached the point where it benefits the corporations most through a reduction in payroll taxes (they pay about 15 percent on a minimum-wage 35-hour-a-week job as opposed to 40 percent for a “normal” job).

The employers’ federation and the government trot out the same arguments that have been used in the past to put a brake on increases for the lowest-paid. When the employers maintain that “each one-percent supplementary increase in the minimum wage could destroy 29,000 jobs,” and François Fillon claims, “You can’t increase the payload on the cost of labor without running the risk of increasing unemployment,” they are recycling the arguments of M. de Villoutreys in 1950. Speaking on behalf of the commission on industrial production, he said, “The commission cannot view without concern the return to the free movement of wages, for an increase in cost price not only would deprive us of external markets, the indispensable source

of foreign exchange, but would also put manufacturers in a difficult position in the national market.”

The right knew full well that the left parties and the unions, who got Chirac elected, would not actively oppose a bare minimum increase in the SMIC. Despite his affable ways, Jean-Pierre Raffarin has shown them who is boss. He has scored a point in relation to the negotiations to come: over the reestablishment of a single-level SMIC, over jobs (especially for the under-25s and over-50s), over retirement, over the introduction of the 35-hour week in the public service and small and medium-sized businesses, over obligatory minimum service on the railways and the Paris Metro, etc. Verbal assaults will have no impact. The employers federation and the government both know that the unions will meekly participate in the negotiations and will ask only not “to be short-circuited on procedure.”



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