

France: strikes, protests mount against plant closings and pension cuts

Alex Lefebvre
11 February 2003

The worsening economic situation in France has triggered layoffs and plant closings throughout the country. These, together with the government's anti-pension offensive, have provoked a wave of strikes and protests, throwing the Raffarin government off balance.

Metaleurop, a metals firm operating in the northern French town of Noyelles-Godault, announced that it was closing its lead-producing factory there, which employs 830 people in a town of roughly 5,000. The firm further enraged townspeople and public opinion by refusing to include any cleanup plan, even though it acknowledges that the factory has severely polluted the area. Many children in the region suffer from lead poisoning.

Daewoo-Orion closed its cathode tube plant at Mont-Saint-Martin in eastern France with a loss of 550 jobs. After resistance to the closing from workers, the factory burned, leading to a rapid liquidation and closing of the facility. The press almost universally labeled the fire "suspect," and Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin added, "When a factory burns, one must know why."

Many other major firms have announced mass layoffs. Arcelor, the steel maker, will eliminate several thousand jobs as it closes mills in Belgium and eastern France. Pechiney, the aluminum-producing and packing company, will fire 600 workers. In Southern France the Houillères-de-Provence coal mine in Gardanne closed, citing the need to prepare security measures for the final abandonment of the mine and the lower price of coal extracted in Africa and Asia.

LU, the food giant, will destroy roughly 2,000 jobs by closing biscuit factories in Calais and Evry, promising that it will convert the facilities into shopping malls and hire back its fired employees—although it is unclear what sort of a pay cut will be involved. GIAT, the defense contractor that builds the French army's

Leclair tank, is reportedly considering firing 3,000 of its 6,700 employees as it closes five of its nine industrial facilities. Further job losses are threatened at the airline Airlib, ACT Manufacturing, Noos, and Grimaud Logistique.

These layoffs come on top of the recent announcement that 100,000 jobs were lost in France in 2002, in a trend that seems to be accelerating: 17,700 of these losses came in December alone. These job loss statistics do not include the present wave of mass layoffs. The center-left daily *Le Monde* indicated that government officials "do not expect an improvement of the job situation in the coming months: the prospects for new hiring are mediocre, and CEO investment plans are nil."

Workers have responded to layoffs, together with the kickoff of the government's pension-cutting drive, with a wave of protests and strikes. Some 2,000 people marched silently in Noyelles-Godault, some wearing "I support Metaleurop workers" armbands. Hundreds of Daewoo-Orion workers marched in Paris under banners that read, "Daewoo is a thief, the state its accomplice." Miners blocked the entrance to the Gardanne mine. Strikes are spreading at Air France, Paris public transport, the education sector, and at newspaper companies.

The Arcelor closings have triggered strikes in Belgium, where Arcelor is under legal obligation to renovate certain facilities that it has slated for closure. The Belgian government is divided over whether or not to press for damages. Arcelor is planning on firing 1,500 steelworkers in Liège; officials have calculated that the town will lose a further 5,000 jobs indirectly.

The conservative Raffarin government has responded to the workers' mobilizations and public anger over the layoffs with a shift in its public rhetoric. In the course

of several days, Raffarin has gone from embracing “entrepreneurship, [which] for me, means values” to proclaiming how “revolted” he is by the mass layoffs, which his own legal reforms have made easier by gutting previous layoff legislation.

The mounting opposition has also produced changes in the public posture of the Socialist Party. The head of one of the openly pro-business factions of the party, Laurent Fabius, has coined the term “CEO hoodlums” to decry what he considers to be isolated cases of unjust layoffs—despite the fact that the right wing of the Socialist Party, in the person of Jean-Marie Bockel, mayor of Mulhouse, was recently proclaiming that “social justice” had to be “compatible with free enterprise.”

While declaring that it cannot “oppose the layoffs,” the Raffarin government has announced plans to give jobs to laid-off workers and funds for regional development in industrial areas hit hard by layoffs. As an Associated Press release noted, “These measures are not far removed from the methodology of previous governments.” The main difference would seem to be that the Raffarin government, with its fixation on increasing police and military spending and cutting taxes for the wealthy, has even fewer resources for social spending than its predecessors.

However, internal government documents leaked to *Le Monde* indicate that the government is not planning on implementing even these types of measures. The documents argue instead for an attempt to convince workers that they should welcome losing their jobs.

They stress the need to make workers feel that layoffs are a source of “dynamism” in the economy about which they should not have a “defensive” attitude. Workers should be encouraged to undergo job retraining, and financial resources should be focused on “hard-hit sectors”—something which may be difficult, the documents note, because “current crises involve many sectors, some of which seemed up until recently to have brilliant futures.”

This hopelessness masquerading as policy gives a palpable sense of a government in crisis, underscored by falling approval ratings of public officials and repeated press commentaries on the government’s “limited economic maneuvering room.”

French unions have responded to the crisis by criticizing some of Raffarin’s legal moves that make it

easier to sack workers. However, their perspective limits itself to the hope of reinstating previous laws, so as to return to a period when companies had somewhat more generous severance packages. For the union leaders, this latest round of job-cutting is one more regrettable sacrifice that workers will ultimately have to make in the interests of corporate profitability.

While visiting a hot-rolled steel facility slated for closure by Arcelor, Georges Muschiati, general secretary of the CGT, vented his frustration: “The Fensch valley steelworkers did what they had to in order to make the site profitable. And they’re going to get screwed again!” For the union official, the workers’ “doing what they had to do” meant accepting decades of job cuts, in which the Lorraine region’s steel industry went from employing 100,000 workers in 1960 to 12,000 today, of which at least 1,500 are now slated to lose their jobs.



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