

France: Artists and entertainers strike continues

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In his speech to the nation on July 14, French President Jacques Chirac congratulated himself for protecting the uniqueness of French culture, declaring that it “can be written into the Convention (of the future European constitution).” “That is a great victory,” Chirac enthused, boasting that France is “the only country where there is a consciousness of the necessity for public support for creativity and the arts in all their various forms.”

As Chirac was making his boast, freelance artists, creative artists and technicians in the entertainment industry (“*Intermittents*”) were engaged in militant protest action that many regard as essential to their cultural survival.

After a series of different actions, artists from cinema, media and the theatre organised a national day of protest and spoke out clearly against an agreement arrived at four weeks ago by the employers’ organisation—Medef—and three trade unions (CFDT, CFE-CGC and CFTC). The agreement contained a new draft of unemployment conditions applying to the culture sector.

The *Intermittents*’ unemployment fund, which is at the heart of the dispute, represents an important source of support for many cultural workers. The fund was first established in 1936, and now extends its services to around 200,000 actors, musicians, dancers, directors, stagehands, camera, light and sound technicians, costumers, film, TV and radio technicians, as well as circus performers and artists.

The fund has been under continual attack from the employers’ federation and right-wing politicians for over a decade. Their justification has always been that there was too much “abuse” of the system, although in practice it was often show business employers who misused the fund by employing artists full-time, but then allowing them to register as unemployed during pauses. Now those who can least afford it—small and independent artists without fixed contracts—will be forced to give up their

“service to culture” as they can no longer rely on any unemployment support.

The current strike is the continuation of a struggle that has been building up for years and reached its high point with a general strike by art and entertainment workers in February 2003. The criteria according to which artists receive unemployment support have been made more difficult by the new agreement. Technicians, for example, must have worked a total of 507 hours in the previous 10 months (for artists, 10-and-a-half months), instead of the former period of one year. Moreover, they receive money for just eight months instead of the previously stipulated year.

The period used to make this calculation is based strictly on the time that a technician or artist spends on or behind the stage, or in a studio. The many hours required by an actor to learn his part, the work involved in the preparation of a new piece of theatre or film, finding a promoter willing to put the piece on—all this is excluded from the new calculations.

Theatre artists have written as follows: “It is impossible to say we have only worked 507 hours per year. We work the entire year long (on average 60 hours a week) but only 507 hours of our work is recognised. These paid hours represent the time we spend on stage and not the unpaid time which we spend away from the stage in order to invent, to organise, to learn thoroughly and to rehearse and then sell our performance. We are therefore working continuously but are only irregularly paid.” (From the Internet forum *Culture en danger*—strike coordination of the theatre workers.)

The latest agreement means that nearly a third of those formerly entitled to support and who live in the most precarious circumstances will now be deprived of any help. This will inevitably mean the end for many small theatre groups, independent music concerts and street theatre.

It was no coincidence that the Raffarin government, which feels itself emboldened after its recent success in pushing through its pension plans in the face of broad resistance, left the signing of the new agreement until the end of June. It had obviously not reckoned with any opposition at the beginning of the summer season when, traditionally, a series of large scale festivals get under way throughout the country.

However, to the surprise of government officials, their announcement of the imminent signing of the contract led to an unexpectedly large movement of solidarity, combined with expressions of anger that have not subsided. Throughout the country artists and show business technicians reacted with strikes and imaginative boycott activities. Many of the most famous summer festivals could not take place, including the festivals at Avignon and Marseilles, the festival of lyrical art in Aix-en-Provence, the Francolies in La Rochelle, the jazz festival in Tours and the Montpellier dance festival. In Paris the final performance by the German choreographer Pina Bausch was cancelled, along with that of Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* at the Comédie Française.

In Lambersart near Lille demonstrators blocked the entrance to the studios of France-3 in order to disrupt coverage of the Tour de France. In Chalon-sur-Saône artists organised a "March of the artistic army," proclaiming art as a "weapon of mass construction."

The struggle by artists and technicians is broadly supported by the French population. Many filmmakers including Jean-Pierre Törn, Christian Vincent and Jacques Maillot have joined the strikes by withdrawing their films from international film festivals at the Paris-Cinéma, Festival de Foix and the La Rochelle festival. Maillot explained that his intention was to demonstrate the consequences of the new law for French cinema. He said: "People have accused us of sawing away at the branch that supports us, but the truth is that Medef [the employers' federation] has cut down the entire tree."

A petition of 1,109 artists (directors, actors, technicians and producers) was signed by such prominent figures as film director Bertrand Tavernier, and in an open letter 650 filmmakers called on Chirac to "once again seriously think over the financing and role of culture in France." Together with Tavernier, the letter was supported by actor Gérard Dépardieu, director Constantin Costa-Gavras and others.

The reorganisation of the unemployment fund for artists and technicians takes place under conditions where art and culture are being more and more forced to adapt to

the general trend of the commercialisation and privatisation of public institutions. Since taking office the right-wing government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin has made the most radical cuts ever in the French budget for art and culture. Total investment in the arts is now not allowed to exceed 1 percent of the entire state budget. According to the plans for decentralisation being pursued by Raffarin, in future it will be up to the regions, which are already suffering severe financial problems, to compensate for deficits in the sphere of culture.

The broad mobilisation of artists is also partly directed at the increasing commercialisation of culture which favours thoroughly exploitative television programmes such as "Loft Story" or "Big Brother" at the expense of more imaginative and demanding forms of art and culture.

However, the commitment and imaginative actions undertaken by artists stand in stark contrast to the behaviour of the trade unions involved in the strike, the CGT and FO, as well as organisations representing the artists' collectives such as Attac or the environmental groups around José Bové. Following the success of the government in pressing ahead with its pension reform these organisations have been thoroughly intimidated and have given up any hope of being able to seriously counter the attacks made by the government.

It is the political cowardice of the trade unions and associated organisations that has enabled Chirac to pose as the defender of culture and protagonist of social dialogue, at a time when he is dismantling fundamental social rights and attacking strikers. In a recent comment he made clear that if the issue did not proceed as the government hoped, "Well, then the government will take its responsibility seriously and propose a new law in this situation."

The strike by workers in the culture sector demonstrates once again the depth of the crisis of working class leadership in France. The CFDT immediately signed the agreement and thereby made clear the position of the Socialist Party with which it has close relations. While the Stalinist-dominated CGT and FO have not signed the agreement they have indicated their readiness to compromise with their demand for the "resumption of real talks over a just reform."



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