

The US media and the French referendum

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In the week since French voters gave a decisive “no” to the referendum on the proposed European constitution, it has been clearly acknowledged throughout the continent that the rejection was motivated in large measure by working class resentment against the right-wing program of slashing social spending, driving down wages, cutting taxes on the wealthy and deregulating business, which every bourgeois government in Europe, whether social democratic, Christian Democratic or “conservative,” has been imposing. Tens of millions in France, followed by millions in the Netherlands, showed their determination to defend their social position.

The American media has responded to this political fact with a fit of vituperation and scorn directed against the people of France. According to pundit after pundit, the French people are irrationally clinging to an outmoded way of life, and political leaders like French President Jacques Chirac must be pushed aside in favor of more determined advocates of the capitalist “free market.”

David Ignatius, foreign policy columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote, “Living in France for four years, I came to appreciate what a wonderful country it is, with a quality of life that is truly the envy of the world.” The French want to keep this way of life, he said: “They want to maintain inflexible management and labor unions, six-week vacations, a 35-hour workweek—and also to be a growing, dynamic, entrepreneurial economy. Chirac never had the guts to tell the French they couldn’t have it both ways.”

Post columnist George Will looked down his nose at the “civilized” character of French society, which he described as “short workweeks, many weeks of vacation, laws ‘protecting’ labor by making it difficult to fire people.” Clinging to such conditions was childish, he said, because “Children are unaware of the costs of things, and the incompatibility of many

desires.”

Neither Ignatius nor Will, nor any of the other highly paid and privileged denizens of the American press, indicated whether they would be willing to swallow the same medicine they prescribed for the French, and accept a massive cut in their own living standards as a contribution to solving the problems of unemployment, poverty, low wages and lack of health care that plague American society.

The *Post* editorial page remarked that what France and Germany need is a dose of hard-right medicine. “Both countries need to endure painful economic restructuring of the sort that Margaret Thatcher forced on Britain in the 1980s,” the editors declared.

The *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial on the French vote made the diagnosis, “Economic anxiety is a product of the welfare state.” The right-wing *Journal* had the same prescription as the “liberal” *Washington Post*: Europe must complete the dismantling of all forms of social protection for working people.

A familiar set of targets were identified for elimination: “highly generous welfare benefits for the unemployed; state ownership and subsidy of key industries (such as Airbus); rules that make it difficult to hire and fire workers; prohibitions against closing down plants; heavy protections of labor unions against competitive forces; mandatory worker benefit packages that include health insurance, child care allowances, paid parental leave, four to six weeks of vacation; shortened work weeks; and, alas, high taxes on business and labor to pay for these lavish benefits.”

How destroying such elementary prerequisites of a genuinely civilized society would reduce economic anxiety, the *Journal* did not bother to explain.

The *New York Times* editorial was more muted, expressing concern that the French vote had revealed an “alarming” political differentiation: “a loss of common ground between business and political elites and

ordinary people: the workers, farmers and poor who cast the majority of ‘no’ votes.” But the *Times* reiterated the demand for abolition of the 35-hour-week in France, while advancing its own slander, suggesting that the “no” vote was motivated largely by “Turkophobia,” i.e., prejudice against Turkish and Muslim immigrants.

Two *Times* columnists added their voices to the campaign. Conservative David Brooks wrote, “the European model is foundering under the fact that billions of people are willing to work harder than the Europeans are. Europeans clearly love their way of life, but don’t know how to sustain it.”

Thomas Friedman of the *Times* made perhaps the most contemptuous and ignorant of all these attacks on the French voters in his June 3 column, headlined, “A Race to the Top.” Writing from Bangalore, India, Friedman sneered that “French voters are trying to preserve a 35-hour work week in a world where Indian engineers are ready to work a 35-hour day. Good luck.”

Hailing Bangalore as “the outsourcing capital of the world,” Friedman added, “The dirty little secret is that India is taking work from Europe or America not simply because of low wages. It is also because Indians are ready to work harder and can do anything from answering your phone to designing your next airplane or car.”

Friedman concluded, “this is a bad time for France and friends to lose their appetite for hard work—just when India, China and Poland are rediscovering theirs.”

In the course of Friedman’s absurd depiction of the Indian masses as wildly enthusiastic over the ruling elite’s repudiation of Indian “socialism” and its attack on previously established social protections, with Indian workers chomping at the bit to be super-exploited by native entrepreneurs and global corporations, the *Times’* columnist noted in passing: “Sure, a huge portion of India still lives in wretched slums or villages...”

Such casual indifference to the horrific poverty that grips hundreds of millions of Indian people bespeaks a level of intellectual and moral depravity that requires little additional comment. Suffice it to say that Friedman has the same attitude to the conditions facing workers in France, or in the United States.

None of these pundits bothers to explain why the

spread of technology and industrialization to formerly backward and isolated countries like India and China should require the destruction of living standards and social benefits in the more advanced countries. Globalization in and of itself is an inevitable process, driven by the expansion of man’s productive forces to the point where they can no longer be contained within the narrow and historically outmoded confines of the nation state. It has the potential to vastly increase economic output. Why, then, does it require the destruction of wages and conditions for the workers who produce this wealth?

The revolution in telecommunications, computer technology and transportation which has made globally organized production possible is an enormously progressive development. It demonstrates that it is now objectively possible to overcome the scourges of poverty and ignorance and raise the standard of living of all human beings on the planet to a decent, civilized level.

But globalization in its *capitalist* form, under the domination of giant multinational corporations and within the framework of a system that subordinates all human needs to the accumulation of personal wealth, inevitably means an intensification of exploitation and a further growth in social inequality, with the hundreds of millions of new workers in the labor market, mainly in Asia, used as a battering ram to undermine the social position of the working class in Europe, North America and Japan.

The Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, a supporter of the European constitution, noted regretfully the widespread popular belief the European Union was “becoming a giant machine, in which the interests of the market replace those of the people.” The US media dare not even broach this subject. They cannot even hint at the most elementary fact of modern social life: that the interests of the working people and the interests of the capitalist ruling elite are diametrically opposed.



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