How the French government treats older workers from the colonies

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3 May 2006

Over the last few years, immigrant workers from French colonies who were brought to France in the 1960s and 1970s at the demand of French industry have begun to reach retirement age. According to a report by the General Inspection of Social Affairs (IGAS), in 2002 there were nearly 90,000 workers from the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco) over 65 years of age, mostly men called "chibanis" (meaning "white-haired" in a dialect of Arabic), living in France.

Recruited as cheap unskilled labor, they worked all over the country in low-paying jobs, performing the most back-breaking tasks on building sites, in steel mills, in shipyards on the Atlantic coast and in coal mines in Lorraine. In addition to their extremely demanding working conditions, they also had to endure extremely primitive housing conditions in structures that had been thrown up in haste, where they were crammed five and six to a room, or in furnished rooms in run-down hotels.

Having arrived in France with the aim of supporting their families back home, they lived modestly, prepared to make any sacrifice in the hope of being able to rejoin loved ones when they retired. But for these "chibanis" this long-awaited moment has instead meant poverty, illness and isolation.

When the time came to make their application for a pension, many of these workers, whose working lives had been made up of one unskilled job after another, discovered that some of their previous employers had failed to make the legally required payments towards their retirement fund. For these people, from the first wave of immigrant workers**,** the consequences are all the more grim when the amount of their retirement benefits is taken into account. In most cases, after all those years of work, the payment is less than €450 (US$568).

After a life of hard work, these workers find themselves in such an insecure situation that they have no option but to take the minimum old-age payment, €589 ($744) per month. This payment is made to people 65 years of age (and over 60 in cases of disability). The amount is set each year by decree as part of the social security budget. Alain Vasselle, spokesperson for the Social Affairs Commission in the Senate, stated in his report on November 9, 2005, that "this payment still represents a costly drain on social finances." In the draft budget for social security for 2006, a new stipulation was introduced: Article 46, which aims specifically at eliminating this "drain." Article 46 concerns the minimum old-age payment and mainly affects the "chibanis."

The minimum old-age payment is paid in two parts: the first part a supplementary pension of €290 ($289) a month and the second an allowance of €299 ($298) per month. The supplementary pension of €290 could be drawn even if a worker lived outside France.

Under the pretext of simplifying the social minima, Article 46 of the finance bill removes a part of the exportable minimum pension (which can be paid abroad) on which the "chibanis" depend. The saving for the government amounts to €10 million ($11,260,000) per year, as it affects some 8,000 retirees who decide each year to return to their country of origin.

The arguments advanced by Philippe Bas, social security minister for the aged, handicapped and the family, express all the arrogance and cynicism of the ruling class: "The minimum old-age payment cannot be drawn by those outside France, any more than the RMI (subsistence benefit), or allowances for handicapped adults, quite simply because these payments are calculated in relation to the cost of living in France, to

allow a level of subsistence; elsewhere, the cost of living could be 10 times lower! This situation where the minimum old-age payment could be received by people outside France is an anomaly, and we decided to put a stop to it as soon as we realized this! Besides, it is inequitable, since the shorter the time the foreign worker has worked in France, the greater the differential in the allocation, and the person who came here for a few months in the 1970s, for example, receives the most!"

The article was adopted by an absolute majority of the votes cast and came into effect on January 1, 2006.

Those who, for whatever reason, were not able to settle their family in France under the provisions of the reunification of families are now obliged to shuttle between their country of origin and France in order to see their families, or lose both their health insurance and the "non-exportable" portion of the old-age payment.

In order to qualify for the minimum old-age payment workers are obliged to live on French territory for eight consecutive months of the year. The government is also considering a further tightening of the regulations governing the conditions under which immigrant workers could bring over their families that would put this option out of reach of the "chibanis."

The regulations will be as follows, according to a explanatory note from the Senate: "In order to benefit from family reunification, they must have living quarters the area of which is proportionate to the size of the family and which corresponds to the minimum norms of habitability that apply to rented accommodation. They must also be in receipt of a stable income at least equivalent to the minimum wage, when the income of all the people living there is combined, with the exception of family allocations."

Such conditions have hardly ever been available to these workers at any point in their lives.