

Popular confidence in new French president already falling

Pierre Mabut
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Opinion pollster LH2, in a survey published in the *Nouvel Observateur* magazine in mid-July, found that 50 percent of the French population do not believe that their new president, François Hollande, will keep the promises outlined in his Socialist Party's electoral platform in May.

Forty percent thought Hollande would stand by his promises, and 4 percent gave no opinion. Only 37 percent thought he would respect his commitment to reduce unemployment. The mistrust expressed in the LH2 poll has been fully vindicated by the role of Hollande's Socialist Party (PS) government in aiding France's biggest automobile manufacturer PSA Peugeot in shedding 8,000 jobs and closing the Aulnay plant in Seine-Saint-Denis.

While Hollande and his government feigned indignation and horror at PSA's intention to eliminate 10 percent of its French workforce on July 15, ministers were already passing to the next item of business. Minister of Labour Michel Sapin simply wanted to know from the company what "propositions on matters of redeployment" were on offer.

The public's lack of confidence in Hollande's PS government after only two months is clearly connected to the record 44 percent abstention in the presidential balloting. However, this healthy skepticism toward Hollande and his policies contrasts with the attitude of the pseudo-left tendencies in France, which supported Hollande in the elections and continue to argue that the Socialist Party belongs to the "left" and constitutes a "lesser evil". In practice, this provides a cover for the PS to make French capitalism more competitive at the expense of the working class.

Amid considerable fanfare, Hollande recently increased the monthly minimum wage, now at €1,096 (US\$1,346), by a miserly 2 percent (equivalent to

€21.50 [US\$26.40] a month!). In reality, there was already a 1.4 percent automatic increase for inflation to be triggered next month, meaning Hollande has done virtually nothing for the 10 percent of workers dependent on the minimum salary. His government is also on track to reduce the public sector workforce by 5,000 jobs a year in all ministries except education and the police.

Hollande has made it clear that employers will be relieved of the cost of social security through the creation of a Generalised Social Contribution (CSG) tax, to be extracted from the working population. Tens of billions of euros will come out of workers' pockets to finance the social program, in a country where workers' contributions to social security already represent 22.6 percent of GDP, compared to the European average of 17.5 percent. This measure is intended to make industry "more competitive". Finance Minister Pierre Moscovici asserted, "We cannot continually have social charges which weigh on labour [costs]. The social security contribution is one of a number of considerations".

Reacting to the PSA attack on jobs, Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault merely asked for the "maintenance of an industrial activity at all French sites", a de facto acceptance of the PSA plan. For the benefit of public consumption, Industry Minister Arnaud Montebourg has criticised PSA management for distributing €78 million in dividends in 2011 to the Peugeot family. He has fixed a meeting with Thierry Peugeot on July 26, where "I want to know what he [Peugeot] is going to do".

Before Montebourg had even received a reply, he and his government had already announced their intention to massively aid PSA and the French automobile industry in general to build hybrid and electric cars for

export and subsidize their purchase in France. PSA already received a loan of €3 billion from the government of president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009.

A plan to facilitate job-cutting and “competitiveness” in the car industry will be unveiled at a government cabinet meeting July 25. According to *Le Figaro*, Hollande has put forward suggestions for encouraging the population “to buy more vehicles ‘made in France’,” plus help with cheaper credit for buyers and more research and innovation.

The appeal to “buy French” will be music to the ears of the trade unions (which last week collaborated at the “Social Conference” with employers and the government to reduce labour costs), which seek to divert workers’ opposition to mass layoffs into French nationalism, i.e., unity with big business in imposing the job losses on foreign workers.

The unions can count on the support of the ex-left parties, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (*Nouveau parti anticapitaliste*—NPA) and Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle—LO), in providing excuses and political cover for the Socialist Party government. These groups complain futilely about “neoliberalism” and advocate government intervention and a return to national welfare state policies, which have been undermined by global economic integration. What the “far left” really desires is the softening of the blows delivered to the working class, or their tempo, and thus the preservation of social peace.

Remarkably, the July 20 editorial in *Lutte ouvrière* asserts, with reference to the meeting between Montebourg and Thierry Peugeot, “We don’t know what the demands of the government will be. The occasion would nevertheless be opportune to show to workers and [public] opinion in which camp it [the government] considers itself”. As though this were an open question!

In the same vein, LO leader Nathalie Arthaud claims that the government is “passive” in relation to the PSA events, as though the Socialist Party had not been one of French capitalism’s chosen instruments of rule for decades.

The NPA’s Olivier Besancenot, appearing on France 2 TV on July 19, also appealed to the Hollande government to save PSA. “The state has the concrete means to prevent the closure of PSA Aulnay because there are hundreds of millions, perhaps billions in

public aid which have been given to PSA”, he said.

As workers’ opposition to the PS government’s right-wing policies inevitably grows, the unions (as in Greece and the EU in general) will function as the policemen of austerity, and the NPA and LO (like SYRIZA in Greece) will seek to smother any movement independent of the unions and threatening to the Socialist Party government.



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