

# France: Unemployed worker sets himself on fire outside job centre

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On Wednesday afternoon, Djamel Chaab, 43, an unemployed Algerian worker, doused himself with petrol and died by self-immolation in front of the state employment agency (Pôle emploi) in Nantes in western France, which had cancelled his eligibility for unemployment benefit.

The previous day at 10 a.m. he had written to the local paper, *Presse Océan*, asserting his right to the benefit: “Today is a great day for me because I will burn myself at the employment agency. I have worked for 720 hours and according to the law it’s 610 hours. And the agency has rejected my claim.”

At 1 p.m. the same day the paper received another email, which read: “I went to Pôle Emploi with five litres of gasoline to burn myself, but it was closed ... so it will happen tomorrow the 13th or the 14th, because it really would be better to do it at Pôle Emploi, thank you.”

Julian Chaillou, a union spokesman for the CGT (National Confederation of Labour), explained: “He would have received unemployment benefit for a period when he was working. In that case he’s being hit twice: He has to return the money he was not entitled to and his right to benefits is not recognised for this period.”

Chaab finally carried out his suicide pledge just after 12 noon on Wednesday. In order to avoid being prevented from doing it he set fire to himself some 50 metres from the agency and ran to the entrance, where a single security guard was on duty and unable to save him.

The police said that Chaab was married, had a 10-year residence permit, had no criminal record and led a normal life. He had recently completed a boiler manufacturing course.

How was it—despite the obvious seriousness of his

intentions and the precise details of how, when and where he would carry them out—that the authorities did not prevent the tragedy? The measures taken appear to be the minimum necessary to provide a cover for allowing this obviously desperate man to kill himself. AFP reports, “According to the Employment Agency, staff called him to help him find alternative solutions, for financial aid and in order to spread out payments which he owed to the agency. But on Wednesday morning, at the home he rented, the police got no answer. The calls from the agency also received no answer.”

Contradicting this account, Jean Bassères, general director of the agency nationally, claimed: “When he told us that he intended self-immolation, we alerted the police and the firemen. We were able to contact him, we offered him an appointment to examine all possibilities of dealing with the situation. He did not want to come and that morning we tried again to phone him.” Bassères continued: “The staff there feel that they did all they could to avoid this tragedy.”

Yet, on Wednesday morning Chaab was able to catch a bus, get off it 50 metres from the agency, douse himself, set himself on fire and make his way to the entrance unrestrained. One news account says there was just one security guard posted outside the agency. Bassères says there were some inside the building.

On Thursday, Labour Minister Michel Sapin travelled personally to Nantes, where he told reporters that everything had been done to prevent Chaab from killing himself. “Everyone acted as they should have,” Sapin said, adding that the deceased “was in such a state that no helping hand could have stopped him.” Socialist Party Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, former deputy mayor of Nantes, expressed his “Great emotion” over the situation.

The hypocrisy of these statements is breathtaking, coming from men who are implementing the government's drive to increase the competitiveness of French business by destroying labour protection laws and cutting back costs at PSA Peugeot-Citroën and Renault through mass sackings and closures.

The European Union's austerity programme, which they are vigorously supporting and implementing, has contributed significantly to the contraction of the EU's economy and led to record unemployment, particularly in Greece and Spain. France had zero growth in 2012 and has an unemployment rate of 10.5 percent—3.13 million people with no work, and if the partially employed are included, 4.6 million jobless.

One element of the government's austerity programme is to make it as difficult as possible for workers to access their unemployment benefits.

Advocates of the unemployed have condemned rules that push people into poverty and which “merely serve to punish, police and humiliate the unemployed.” It is calculated that the state saves €5 billion because many eligible for benefit are unaware of their rights, or are put off by the complicated procedures for claiming it. Vast sums are also lost because employers evade paying their contributions.

On Friday, another unemployed worker in his 40s, no longer eligible for benefit, attempted self-immolation in the street near a primary school in Seine-Saint-Denis in Paris and is in hospital.

In August 2012, a 51-year-old man died from injuries sustained after he lit himself on fire at a welfare agency in the city of Mantes-la-Jolie, around 50 km west of Paris. Similar to Chaab's fate, it appeared to be an act of desperation after finding out welfare benefits would end.

Djamel Chaab's tragic end was reminiscent of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in December 2010, an action that gave impetus to the Tunisian revolution.

Gérard Schmit, a professor of psychology at Reims University, commented that Chaab's suicide sounded like what experts call an “altruistic suicide”, which is perceived as an act of sacrifice by the victim. “It may seem to outsiders like the actions of an isolated person”, Schmit said, “but that person strongly believes he has a message to convey on behalf of others.”



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