

Socialist Party government ignores mass protest to attack French culture workers' jobless benefits

Pierre Mabut
18 June 2014

Ten thousand entertainment industry workers protested outside the Ministry of Culture in Paris on Monday and took strike action throughout France in an attempt to stop the Socialist Party (PS) government from ratifying a deal struck between the Medef employers' association and the unions reached March 22 to reduce their unemployment benefits.

Most of the 112,000 workers, known as "intermittents," depend on such benefits to bridge the gap between periods of work on short-term contracts.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) appealed to the minister of culture, Aurélie Filippetti, to suspend the new unemployment rules, to no avail.

Production was hit at TV news studios, cinemas and dozens of festivals in towns and cities across southern France, where summer festivals generating millions in tourist revenue are due to start. These include Lyon, Montpellier and Toulouse, where 11 theatres and cinemas were closed.

The Comédie Française in Paris pulled its production of *Phèdre* in solidarity with the strikers. The Aix-en-Provence Festival and the Avignon Festival, which attract 120,000 spectators, are threatened with cancellation now that the government has ratified the agreement.

In order to buy time and sow illusions in the government's intention to protect itself from the economic fallout of a cultural blackout this summer, Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced, "We must find an immediate solution [to the intermittents' demands]."

The government intends to rapidly overhaul the benefits system. With unemployment at 5 million, the PS government, supported by the employers and the unions, is gearing up to massively increase flexibility of employment on short-term contracts.

For two months, the "intermittent" workers have been

in struggle against attacks on unemployment benefits. The UNEDIC administration for financing unemployment payments (jointly overseen by employers and unions) is running a deficit of €4 billion. The latest deal makes savings of €800 million at the "intermittent" workers' expense. The new rules for unemployed entertainment workers will run for two years.

As part of the PS government's €50 billion cuts in public spending to meet the European Commission's target for budget deficit reduction, unemployment benefits are now in the government's cross hairs. The aim is to cut the UNEDIC deficit by €2 billion over 3 years.

Retired workers over 65 will now, for the first time, have to pay into the UNEDIC unemployment fund. The unemployed will now have unused periods of benefits credited to an account for use in further layoffs. A ceiling has been placed on entertainment workers' accumulated benefits and wages for a given period. Pay-in contributions of 4.8 percent will be applied.

Since taking office, President Hollande and the unions have overseen an explosion of one-month temporary work contracts (CDD). They accounted for eighty-six percent of all new work contracts in 2013. The total number of workers on such contracts has doubled in ten years, reaching 3,707,483.

The unions agree entirely with this form of exploitation on condition the employers pay a little more into social security funds. Last year, Eric Aubin, the chief CGT negotiator on "reforms" to unemployment benefits explained, "the CDDs are a lot more costly for unemployment benefits than long term contracts (CDI's). The extra cost must be met entirely by those who use them [the employers]."

The March 22 deal negotiated between the Confederation of French Democratic Labour (CFDT),

Force Ouvrière (Workers Power), the French Christian Workers Confederation (CFTC) and the employers association Medef has laid a trap for workers, forcing them into more CDD contracts on low pay.

The treachery of the unions signing the deal is only matched by the perfidy of the Stalinist General Confederation Labour (CGT) union, which is now organizing “intermittent” strikers. The CGT refuses to sign various reactionary deals it has helped negotiate with the government, but in practice accedes to employers demands and supports the PS government.

A real fight to defend unemployment benefits must be based on a struggle to mobilize the entire working class to bring down the Hollande government and similar anti-worker governments throughout Europe, which have proven they intend to make no concessions on austerity.

None of the unions, the CGT included, intend to conduct a fight against the government, which they helped vote into office. The CGT, while making tactical criticisms of different social cuts in the Responsibility Pact, stressed that it did not oppose the Pact as such.

The CGT entertainment’s section leader Denis Gravouil told the press: “For the moment, we have not given strike notice for July for a simple reason, which is that we hope we are listened to.”

Gravouil addressed a groveling open letter to President Hollande saying, “you cannot remain indifferent, without replying...to keep your promises [made before Hollande’s election], to ensure respect for social democracy and not to sacrifice culture and social protections.”

In fact, Hollande has no such intentions and recent elections show workers’ mass rejection of the PS austerity measures. President Hollande has shown a determination to accelerate the attacks on workers and is sacrificing all the gains won from employers over 60 years.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact