

Business groups, French government prepare to eviscerate labor laws

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At the summer school of the main French business federation, the Medef (Movement of French enterprises), its leader Robert Gattaz demanded deep reforms of French labor law “by Christmas.” The day before, Prime Minister Manuel Valls had published a column in *Les Echos*, France’s main business daily, calling for “a rethink of how we deal with a labor code that has become too complex.”

Gattaz justified his haste by citing the likelihood of a major economic crisis provoked by the Chinese stock market crash. “The main reason that makes me think we should accelerate the reforms is an Asian or Chinese crisis,” in which “the rest of the world will probably be weakened.” He said he was “very afraid of what will happen to France,” if it has not “plugged all the gaps and prepared itself to deal with a second storm like the [2008] subprime crisis in six months to a year.”

The government has for months been preparing such a “reform” of the labor code. It commissioned a report on this issue by former State councillor Jean-Denis Combroxelle. In his comment in *Les Echos*, Valls said that he was very enthusiastic about the “audacious proposals” advanced in this report, slated to be submitted in September. Combroxelle’s report aims to make contract agreements negotiated at the level of individual enterprises trump all other agreements and legal requirements.

The statements of the Medef and of the government are the prelude to an all-out assault on fundamental rights of workers in France, in line with the savage austerity policies imposed by the European Union (EU) on the working class in Greece.

The Medef’s plan is essentially to do an end run around existing labor law—which privileges national labor laws and contracts reached at the level of entire industries—with contracts negotiated in each individual

business. Gattaz, who constantly invokes the bosses’ “fear” of hiring unless drastic reforms are imposed, and the government are both cynically using the pretext of a “struggle against unemployment” to market their social attacks.

The government and the Medef try to justify their plans by citing the need to boost French competitiveness and the attractiveness of France for investors. In fact, big business is trying to eliminate every obstacle posed by the labor code to unlimited exploitation and wage cuts, and the destruction of working conditions and workers’ social protections. “The government that solves this problem will go down in history,” Gattaz declared.

The attempt to negotiate workplace relations and rules that will have the force of law based on decisions made in individual enterprises would be an enormous retrogression. Eliminating wage negotiations for entire industries at the national level is an attempt to atomize the workers, handing them over to the arbitrary will of the employer, and block recourse to labor courts.

Attempts to justify this by pledging that the reform will place bosses and workers on an abstractly equal footing, as Valls does, is a political fraud.

Le Medef said it wanted to “make business-level agreements trump the law,” and Gattaz insisted he wanted “priority agreements that prioritize (sic) social dialog in each enterprise.”

Discussing this proposal, *Les Echos* wrote: “A common legal foundation would remain for all workers ... the entire question is to know how solid this foundation would be.”

Such a measure potentially would put in question the role of national trade union confederations who negotiate the national accords. This is a question that the Medef and the government, who are relying on the

collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy, are studying. Gattaz said he intended to send a letter to the trade unions to discuss it.

This offensive is a warning for the working class. If they are applied fully, they will inevitably provoke broad opposition in the working class.

This resistance, however, will confront the fact that the struggle has to be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and its political supporters. The trade unions at most have limited, purely tactical objections to the Medef's proposals. They will seek to some extent to maintain their privileges, but they have no objections in principle to the dictatorship of the bosses in economic life, in France and across Europe.

This is why they have organized no serious resistance to austerity and the rise of unemployment in France under President François Hollande and the Socialist Party (PS), or across Europe against the austerity measures imposed by the EU.

The Medef's proposals have far-reaching consequences. They go in the direction of a codification of class relations of the sort instituted by the Labor Charter of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime in Occupied France, during World War II. The Labor Charter's goal was to suppress class struggle and atomize the workers in relationship to the bosses, in the name of an abstract equality between classes supposedly guaranteed by the capitalist state.

Gattaz and the government both base their work on a book published in June and co-written by the attorney general under former President François Mitterrand, Robert Badinter, and the former professor of labor law and member of the constitutional council, Antoine Lyon-Caen. The goal of the book, titled *Work and the Law*, is supposedly "to simplify the labor code."

The Medef's plans were prepared by the Combroxelle report and this book. It claims to isolate the "principles that constitute the foundation" of labor law. It reduces the labor code as it has existed since 1973 to 50 "principles" and a list of "rights" supposed to protect workers at the level of individual enterprises which, if accepted, could serve as the legal basis for the effective obliteration of the labor code.

Under the pretext of reducing labor law to its "essential principles," the ruling elite is preparing to sideline it altogether. The "principles" are spelled out by Badinter and Lyon-Caen in a sufficiently vague

fashion as to allow each individual employer to do what he would like.

The Medef president "hailed the initiative" when the book came out in June, cynically adding that its authors were "great personalities of the left."

On August 26, he told BFM-TV: "What is extraordinary is the consensus that is beginning to emerge between right-wing and left-wing economists." He added, "The contract at the level of the individual enterprise will become preponderant ... The boss will be able to solve his problems with his workers and not with a law of 3,500 pages which no one understands."

Gattaz' comment summarizes the hostility of the financial aristocracy and the PS government to the social and democratic rights of the working class.



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