

Hollande turns to French trade unions to undermine the Labor Code

Anthony Torres
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Following the line of the Medef employers' organization and Prime Minister Manuel Valls' pledge for a "thorough-going overhaul" of labor law to "adapt it to reality," French President François Hollande is moving to undermine fundamental workers' rights by exploiting the complicity of the trade unions.

Hollande's Socialist Party (PS) has been preparing over the last several years to carry out reforms to the Labor Code which will be an unprecedented attack on all the social rights of the working class.

These reforms, including the effective destruction of the regulation of work hours and working conditions, aims to return the working class to the unlimited exploitation it suffered before 1910, when the Labor Code was drafted.

In June, former PS minister Robert Badinter and academic Antoine Lyon-Caen laid out the main lines of the reforms, denouncing the current Labor Code as obese and overly complex, and therefore inefficient. The reform plans were then taken up by the Combrexelle Commission, based on the work of specialists affiliated to Terra Nova, a PS-linked think tank which released its own report.

Terra Nova recommended allowing the adoption of provisions violating the Labor Code or national legislation in contracts negotiated between bosses and union officials at the level of individual companies or industries. Thanks to the complicity of the union bureaucracies, which have been systematically bought off, employers could, at will, modify the length of the work week and the rules on union negotiations. Thus, companies will be able to go around the Labor Code without directly abrogating it.

The aim is to increase exploitation and lower wages into the indefinite future, as well as destroy working conditions and social protections, in order to impose a

deterioration of living standards on a scale similar to that carried out by the European Union (EU) in Greece.

Hollande endorsed these reform proposals in a press conference yesterday in which he also called for war in Syria. He made clear that the "Combrexelle report will be the foundation of a law to reform the Labor Code."

This is a warning to the working class. With the open support of the bulk of the union bureaucracy, the PS and the Hollande administration are launching a new offensive against the workers, acting as staunch defenders of capital and of corporate competitiveness against the interests of workers.

Medef chief Pierre Gattaz pointed to the significance of these reforms to the Legal Code for the ruling class, stating, "The government that solves this problem will go down in history."

The main danger facing the workers is that none of the currently existing establishment organizations will defend their interests against the diktats of the PS and the EU. The unions, which in France supported Hollande against his conservative predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy, will adapt to any reforms that are passed, whatever tactical criticisms they make of the accord. The PS-linked French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) has already stated that it supports a reform of the Labor Code.

France's unions are empty bureaucratic shells, almost entirely financed by the state and employers' federations, working to coordinate attacks on the workers and strangle workers' struggles. (See: French unions secretly financed by millions of euros from business groups)

In order for the bourgeoisie to buy off the unions more effectively and with a veneer of legality, Terra Nova's Labor Code reform program proposes the creation of a "trade union cheque." This would be a

sum of money that a firm would hand over to each worker, who would then be required to hand it over to the trade union of his choice.

The trade unions themselves have a key role to play in many of the attacks foreshadowed by the proposed reforms. They will be required to allow the bosses to dictate massive cuts in hours under conditions of economic crisis, in line with the *Kurzarbeit* (“short working”) imposed on German workers.

Currently, the legal mechanism for imposing such attacks in France is the Accord for Maintaining Jobs (AME). However, workers can refuse to accept the AME, leading to their dismissal for economic reasons, which workers can contest before labor courts in at least 60 percent of cases. These procedures, which last on average 18 months, often end with rulings awarding substantial damages to the laid-off workers.

The terms of the proposed reforms aim to close this loophole and make it possible to impose short hours on French workers without challenge. According to *Le Monde*’s analysis of the law, the trade unions and the employers “could prevent the granting of damages to workers who are facing dismissal because they do not want to obey an AME order.”



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