

French Prime Minister Valls' district threatens to suspend social spending

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The Essonne department in the Ile de France (greater Paris) region is threatening to unilaterally cease financing mandatory essential services for dependent people. Besides associations for child protection, and social and medical establishments providing care for the aged and the handicapped, these cuts would also target home help, benefits and compensation for handicapped people.

The Essonne is represented in the National Assembly by Manuel Valls, the current prime minister of France.

At the end of December, the president of the Essonne department council, François Durovray of former president Nicolas Sarkozy's conservative Les Républicains (LR) party, sent a circular to 600 establishments informing them that the department was unable "to pay bills now outstanding [amounting to €108m owed to them]... as of November 20, 2015."

For a local government to renege on these statutory obligations is unprecedented and puts in question basic social rights guaranteed by the French constitution and legal system.

The circular blamed the "constant rise in obligatory expenditure (social solidarity, schools, roads)...and a big reduction in our resources, notably the national state's subsidies to local authorities."

Durovray sought to dissuade care establishments from taking legal action to oblige the council to pay them by claiming that the central government representative, the *préfet*, had given the council the go-ahead with its scheme to reschedule over 6 years its €108 million debt to them.

Guillaume Quercy, the Ile-de-France director of the regional union of private health and associations (Uriopss), declared : "This is an obligatory expense, one has to pay it. ... It's totally outrageous and unheard of in France, the most vulnerable people are being hit."

He pointed out that several establishments and associations "have no funds and could be put in a very precarious situation if payment were delayed."

Vital services are already reporting a breakdown of their ability to aid persons in need.

The director of Résidence Soleil, which runs institutions for handicapped people in Essonne, told the press: "I've got people who were packed and ready to go to a new home...I had to spend 20 minutes explaining to them that they couldn't go. A woman was crying...These are mentally deficient people and this situation is completely beyond them."

She added, "The departmental council's decision was taken from funds already earmarked and moreover without any consideration of the tragic human consequences. These choices are being made to the detriment of the most helpless citizens."

Welfare associations, exasperated by the wrangling over responsibility for the situation in Essonne between the former PS council leader Jérôme Guedj, defeated in the March 2015 departmental elections, and his LR successor Durovray, told the media on Wednesday that they resented being "taken hostage in political manoeuvres."

Durovray, backed by accountant Michel Kopfer, accuses the PS of illegally manipulating budgetary allocations to hide the €108 million debt to the 600 aid providers. He points out that Essonne's debt had risen five-fold between 1998 and 2015 under the PS and is now at €1 billion, including a toxic debt incurred to finance the fire and rescue service.

Guedj has retorted that the PS administration left Essonne's finances in a "sound state" and pointed to LR's budget cut of €30 million and pledge to cut taxes.

According to *Le Monde* , "All people acquainted with the affair concur that, on Manuel Valls' territory,

a political game is being played between the new right-wing majority and the former left one.”

Indeed, the PS government reduced national local government endowments by €1.5 billion in 2014 and €3.5 billion in 2015. This will rise to €10 billion by 2017 under conditions where their debts were already above €9 billion in 2013.

These cuts are accompanied by a massive propaganda attack on “lazy” local government workers and the services they provide, with sackings, lengthening of working hours and reduction of hourly rates and holiday rights already being imposed in towns including Nanterre and Agen.

The Essonne council’s callous assault on basic social needs of the most vulnerable sections of the population is part of a European-wide offensive supported by social-democratic parties like the PS, the trade unions and their satellites to repay debts to the banks and effect a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the super-rich. It is part of the same process of destruction of social services and living standards which has pauperized the Greek working class under governments run by the social democrats, the conservatives, and finally the Syriza party.

Under conditions of the current three-month state of emergency, which gives the state the right to repress any resistance to its policies with arbitrary searches, imprisonment and house arrest, and in the context of jail sentences for workers at Air France and Goodyear for defending their jobs, the government is clearly using Essonne to test reactions and resistance to the deepening of attacks on social rights in preparation for the next phase.



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