

France throws masses of people off unemployment insurance

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With one in every seven people in France already living in poverty, President Emmanuel Macron's government is throwing masses of the unemployed off unemployment insurance. Its goal is to develop a massive low-wage sector.

The unemployment insurance agency, *Pôle Emploi*, published last week the results of its new system for monitoring the unemployed, set up 18 months ago under the previous, social-democratic president, François Hollande.

It stated that it had crossed off its rolls 14 percent of the 270,000 workers it had checked, that is, 37,800 people. Even the press was compelled to admit that, contrary to official claims from the state and employer groups, the screenings did not reveal hordes of "parasites" refusing to work. The overwhelming majority were actively seeking a job.

The screening and denials of insurance are part of an ever more draconian set of measures aimed at the unemployed, whose goal is to force workers into less skilled, lower-paid work.

According to *Pôle Emploi*, there are currently 6.5 million unemployed or underemployed workers in France. This is 10 percent of the country's population, and roughly 20 percent of its workforce. Unofficial estimations indicate that this is an underestimate by up to 5 million people who are not counted in official statistics.

In September, amid its "major reform" of unemployment insurance and shortly before Macron denounced critics of his social policies as "lazy," the government announced that it would reinforce Hollande's policies, quintupling the number of staff screening the unemployed. The stated goal was to make the screening "drastic." On October 17, Pierre Gattaz, the head of the Medef employers' federation, denounced "profiteers" he claimed were gaming the system and demanded daily interrogations of unemployed workers so "the system

encourages people to get jobs."

The current controls are already draconian. Workers crossed off the *Pôle Emploi* list lose their benefits, that is, their only source of income, for 6 to 12 months. If they have no other sources of support, they cannot pay for rent, water, electricity or food. They are only granted one year of medical coverage. They gradually lose any chance at a decent job, or any job at all.

Workers can be crossed off the lists for missing an appointment or refusing to take a "reasonable job offer," typically one with conditions and pay far below previous jobs, or far from home and family. Workers are pressed to accept any job and to be at the disposal of the job agency around the clock. Making a "false declaration" to avoid being crossed off the list is punished with a 12-month denial of benefits and a €3,750 fine—a vast sum for an unemployed worker.

Pressure on workers are even more intense because *Pôle Emploi* works with private contractors who organize training sessions, internships and activities to encourage "a return to work."

The new screenings of the unemployed are principally designed to force workers to be more "flexible" and send into employment large numbers of people who are forced to accept working conditions that most workers would have refused until now. The goal is to push wages and levels of exploitation towards those now in Eastern Europe, North Africa or Southeast Asia.

The ruling class is pushing for a broad increase of the low-wage sector even as poverty rates are reaching catastrophic levels. On November 9, the Catholic Aid (*Secours Catholique*) charity, which took care of nearly 1.5 million people in 2017, published its annual report analyzing poverty. It also summarized data from the National Statistics Office (Insee), showing that 9 million people, or 14 percent of the population, are living under the poverty line (a bit over €1,000 per month).

People helped by Catholic Aid had an average monthly income of €548, which has gone up only €3 in the last six years. Nineteen percent had no income; 42 could not afford their rent, 41 percent could not afford their gas or electricity, 22 percent were overdrawn at their bank, 17 could not pay their water bill, and 56 percent had trouble affording food. The report pointed to “an increasingly precarious situation for families.” Fifty-three percent were foreigners without stable legal status, who therefore are barred from work or receiving social assistance.

The recent publication of the “Paradise Papers,” which lifts one corner of the veil over the massive tax evasion organized by the super-rich, highlights the contempt of the financial aristocracy and its political servants for the masses. These documents also show how specialists in “offshore” deals work with governments to block the passage of laws that would make tax evasion more difficult.

Among the major French corporations that have appeared in the Paradise Papers, there is the global oil corporation Total, defense contractor Dassault, raw materials firm Louis Dreyfus, the energy firm Engie, as well as Bernard Arnault, the billionaire CEO of the LVMH luxury firm.

While the super-rich hide hundreds of billions of euros from tax authorities, the Macron government—having eliminated the Tax on Wealth (ISF) on the very top income bracket—has the gall to throw the unemployed off the rolls because they refuse misery and social destitution.

Conservative Senator Gérard Longuet summed up the hostility of the ruling class to the poor and the unemployed on November 6, when he went on television to say: “If these hundreds of billions of euros escape taxation and enter into the state treasury, that’s a good thing, because the state overall wastes them and spends money for no good reason.”



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