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French Workers Step Up Labor Strikes: "With This Law, We're Going Toward a Catastrophe"

BY Cole Stangler
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France takes its summer vacation seriously: Families enjoy weeks of paid time off. Major cities empty out. Students go on break. This year, it's also when the ruling Socialist government approved a deeply unpopular and sweeping set of labor reforms—arguably, the most significant rollback of workers' rights since the nation's welfare state rose from the ashes of World War II.

From March to July, hundreds of thousands of workers, students, unionists and sympathizers protested against the so-called Loi Travail. With the country back from its collective break—and the hotly-contested law starting to take effect—rabble-rousers are ready to hit the streets again. This Thursday, opponents have called for another round of strikes and protests against the reforms, demanding the government withdraw the law.

"The objective is the same," says Eric Beynel, spokesman for Solidaires, one of several unions to endorse the latest round of protests. "We thought the law was bad before it was adopted. Just because it was adopted, moreover in a completely undemocratic way, doesn't mean we should stop the mobilization. It's only logical to continue."

Though unlikely, a victory for Beynel and company would not be unprecedented. French governments have a history of withdrawing laws amid popular protest—most recently, in 2006, after students marched and occupied universities against youth-oriented labor reforms.

Labor's gripes with the Loi Travail are many: At the top of the list is a provision that undermines large-scale collective bargaining agreements. Nearly the entire French workforce is covered by these union-negotiated deals—enshrined into law under the Popular Front government of the 1930s.

With few exceptions, before the latest reforms, company-level agreements could not include weaker standards than those within industry-wide agreements. However, the new law authorizes employers to reach deals that, for example, can force employees to work longer hours and receive less overtime compensation than what's prescribed by their industry-wide agreements. For a company seeking to tap into the French labor market and shape job conditions to its liking—Amazon, for instance—the benefits are clear.

For people like David Jourdan, they're less obvious.

"We're losing protection," says Jourdan, 41, an editor for the media conglomerate Infopro and union representative with the information and communication division of the General Confederation of Labor, France's largest labor confederation, better known as the CGT. "There's a risk now that at each company, unions could reach much worse agreements at the company-level and lose many rights that took years and years to obtain."

Under the current industry-wide agreement, Jourdan points out, laid-off journalists enjoy five times the nation's legal minimum of severance pay. And they're entitled to two days of vacation if they move. Both benefits may gradually evaporate, Jourdan worries.

Also within the reform: Provisions that make it easier for companies to pursue so-called "economic layoffs," adjust their collective bargaining agreements and make employees work longer hours. The law also creates a commission charged with proposing further labor reforms within two years—something that leads many in the labor movement to believe the worst has yet to come.

Manuela de Oliveira, 53, works at the supermarket chain Casino in Lyon and serves as a union representative with the CGT.

"I've been a union member for 15 years so it's true that every law against labor, anything that makes us regress in France, I've participated in it all," she says. "But with this law, we're going toward a catastrophe."

Given the stakes, the participation of unions is perhaps unsurprising. But the movement has also relied on a less predictable cast of characters: Young people, students, non-unionized workers who discovered the movement on social media and those who participated in "Nuit Debout," or "Up All Night," an Occupy-style protest that sprung up after a March labor protest in Paris.

For Jaspal de Oliveira Gill, 20, an undergraduate student and head of the student union at the University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, the debate isn't about esoteric labor regulations. She worries the law will directly aggravate the economic insecurity plaguing French youth, who suffer from an unemployment rate of 24 percent. (The nationwide rate is 10 percent.)

“This (law) isn’t about creating jobs, this is about making it easier to fire people,” says de Oliveira Gill. “There’s a standard for layoffs—the last one to arrive at a job is the first one to be let go—and the last ones to arrive are often students. It’s students who are hit first. This law is extremely threatening for all workers, but above all the most precarious ones, women and students.”

Danielle Tartakowsky, president of the University of Paris VIII and award-winning historian of French social movements, says the protests have been boosted by a wide coalition.

Among demonstrators, she says, the sense of frustration and “dispossession” is sky-high: Polls show seven in 10 are opposed to the law but that hasn’t stopped an already unpopular Socialist government from pursuing the reforms. The bill’s means of passage adds to protesters’ sense of grievance: the government passed the law by relying three times on an arcane constitutional provision that allows it to green-light legislation without a vote from the National Assembly—provided it can survive a vote of confidence.

Still, Tartakowsky remains skeptical about the movement’s future. The protest figures have fallen from their spring peak. And the general economic situation doesn’t bode well for the withholding of one’s labor: “We’re in a climate that’s economically difficult with extremely high unemployment—something that weighs on the ability of people to mobilize for strikes,” she says.

Supermarket employee de Oliveira Gill says the protest figures don’t reflect the true level of opposition.

“People are with us,” she says. “Wherever you go, you talk about this law, people are with you but they don’t go out in the street. They’re shy, they’re afraid, I don’t know.”