



C'EST DIFFICILE

On 30 January - six weeks before the parliamentary elections of 16 March - the CGT, still the largest confederation in France's divided and now depleted trade union movement, was holding the latest in its series of national days of action to protest against the Socialist government's bill to revise the labour laws.

A long and bumpy road has been travelled by the French unions since those heady summer days of 1981. Then, with four Communist ministers in the cabinet, a euphoric but uneasily united Left government set about implementing a programme of social reform that was to rival in significance the historic achievements of the *Front Populaire* 45 years earlier.

With the 1936 government, French workers won the 40 hour week and paid holidays: those *conges payes* that were to transform working class culture in France. With the government of 1981, they obtained a fifth week's paid holiday, a working week reduced to 39 hours, retirement at 60 and *les lois Auroux*: legislation extending the rights of workers at the workplace, including rights of organisation and the right to company information.

As President Mitterrand was able to recall in his New Year message-cum-election appeal of January 1, 1986, these are major advances for working people that remain substantially in the credit balance.

A negative balance has been acquired, too; it was not evoked in the presidential message. The austerity policies and public expenditure cuts that were introduced with a vengeance from 1982 have not purchased a reversal of the upward trend of unemployment.

Now battle is being done, and vicious

battle at that, over the 'flexibility law' that the government is intent upon enacting before the end of the present legislature.

Under the bill, which was bitterly contested by the Communist deputies when it had its first reading in the Assembly in December, unions and employers could negotiate a revision of the 39 hour week, allowing workers to work more flexible hours as long as their annual tally added up to an average 38 hour week. The bill, since equally fiercely opposed by the Communists in the Senate, is seen as small beer by the right opposition, which would be happy to sweep away all labour laws and leave everybody to the mercy of market forces.

The government argues that the 39 hour week is increasingly honoured in the breach and that it makes sense to recognise seasonal changes in the rhythm of work and to codify what is actually happening. Politically, the Socialists have used the battle over the bill, which proposes enabling legislation and not a statutory requirement, to present themselves as the protagonists of the modernisation of industry in '*la France qui gagne*' ('France who is winning').

The Communist party, as the political ally of the CGT, projects itself as the only authentic defender of the workers in the coming elections.

The CGT says that ending the 39 hour week will effectively reduce wages by enabling employers to avoid paying overtime rates. But beyond this, there is the question of the integrity of the labour laws: any abrogation is seen as undermining gains fought for by generations of workers.

This question of strictly codified law is especially important in Cartesian France. And it is in any way understandable that a

traditionally smaller and weaker trade union movement than has been built in Britain should have this attitude.

While British unions have remained faithful to the god of collective bargaining, French unions have sought to bolster and protect their gains within a legislative framework. Thus, many campaigns have been fought in France over the *level* of the guaranteed minimum wage; in Britain it is only recently that the *concept* of a national minimum wage has been brought to the centre of debate.

Statistics issued recently by the French engineering employers' association credited the unions with organising now only 15% of the labour force - a drop of 5% over a decade. This would compare with a figure approaching 50% for British unions. These employers' statistics were challenged at the last annual congress of the CGT. But the CGT said that the reality it recognised was bad enough: 700,000 members lost, bringing its claimed total down to 1,600,000. The CFDT - which vehemently backs 'flexibility' - claims a membership approaching a million and a half, the FO around a million and the CGC (managerial grades) and CFTC (Christian unions) around 250,000 each.

Whether or not the Right manages to grab power after the March elections, the French trade unions face formidable problems. In their present divided state, and with shopfloor militancy at a low ebb, as the CGT has discovered to its cost, they are not presently well equipped to confront them.

Peter Avis

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