

## Gulf widens between French elites and striking workers

by Elisabeth Hellenbroich

The mass strikes in France which came to an end the week before Christmas have brought about a fundamental change in the social political environment, both there and in Europe as a whole. Spearheaded by the SNCF railworkers and strengthened by the political support of the majority of the French population, this strike signalled a new era of mass ferment not seen in Europe for over 25 years. Although the trade unions, in particular the railworkers, obtained major concessions from the government (cancellation of the plan to “downsize” the French state railway, the SNCF, and maintenance of existing retirement plans), they were not able to force Prime Minister Alain Juppé to withdraw his social security “reform.”

This means that the fight over the mass strike’s real underlying issues—the European Union’s Maastricht Treaty and the primacy of neoliberal economic policies—has not been resolved. The French government has been stubbornly insisting on carrying out the austerity demands which the Maastricht Treaty places on France—the European version of Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America.” Dealing with these issues has only been deferred, and political observers believe that, by spring at the latest, after most households have filed their tax returns, a new round of mass protests could open up in France.

One of the triggers for renewed protest actions will be the economic effects felt by the French population as a result of the austerity measures which went into effect on Jan. 1, 1996. The most controversial of these is the infamous RDS (reimbursement of social debt), an income tax surcharge of 0.5% which will be paid by every taxpayer in order to lower the deficit of the social security system, which includes pensions and health insurance. In addition, the government enacted an increase in hospital costs: Every patient will have to

pay 70 francs (\$14) per day of hospitalization. There will also be a 4% tax increase on tobacco, and increases in fuel and telephone costs. It is estimated that all the measures decided upon since last summer by the government will impose a financial burden of some additional 100 billion francs (\$20 billion) in toto on French households!

A second trigger would be the publishing of new economic data on France, beginning in March, which are expected to reflect a disastrous situation. At a recent press conference of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), convened to present economic forecasts especially for France and Germany, the speakers made clear that their economic figures would have to be revised, given the overall drop in economic activity in France in November and December.

### Political ramifications

Under conditions of renewed social ferment in France, the future of Alain Juppé would look very grim, and President Jacques Chirac could be obliged to look for a successor to his prime minister. One option might be Philippe Seguin, the president of the French National Assembly and a member of the neo-Gaullist RPR party. But despite his Gaullist phraseology, many think that he would be unlikely to introduce any fundamental changes, given his profile as a political opportunist and his inability—which he shares with all other possible political options—to come up with an alternative program to deal with the systemic crisis.

President Chirac’s New Year’s address revealed the “logic” which the French government is locked into. His message was designed to win “confidence” from the French population for the government’s chosen policy course. He identified three lessons that should be drawn from the recent mass

strikes: 1) It is not possible to continue governing today as we have done over the past 20 years, i.e., avoiding the real problems, applying band-aids to wounds instead of healing them, postponing till tomorrow what should have been dealt with today. "We are at the end of that system. We must understand that if we want to be a country at peace with itself, which counts in the world, we must move, we must adapt ourselves, adapt our defense, our education, our production to the constraints of planetary competition." 2) There can only be a new France if all Frenchmen participate in it, which means that *dialogue* is the only way to arrive at new solutions. Blinded by his adhesion to austerity, Chirac offered as an answer to unemployment a "collective effort" to reduce work hours, share the jobs, and integrate unemployed youth into society. 3) There must be more "confidence" in order to get an economic policy of growth going. "The government is fully mobilized, and has taken measures to relaunch consumption and investment so as to create employment. I demanded that the government no longer resort to new taxes or social cost increases, but diminish them when possible."

By opting for a "negotiated" solution, without changing the Maastricht austerity logic, Chirac will not get the support he wants from the majority of the trade union movement, which has signalled its readiness to resume protest actions, if its basic policy demands are not fulfilled. A first signal in this direction was given after the "social summit" which had been called by Prime Minister Juppé on Dec. 22, with the participation of trade union representatives such as CGT General Secretary Louis Viannet, Force Ouvrière Secretary General Marc Blondel, CFDT Secretary General Nicole Notat, and others. This summit gave "birth to a mouse," the CGT head declared, since it did not address the demands raised during the strikes. Viannet predicted an "erosion" of the population's purchasing power as a result of the increased social costs imposed on French households, which in turn would lead to a renewal of the protest movement. A similar strain was heard from the Force Ouvrière's Blondel, who qualified the social summit after three weeks of strike as "surrealist."

In an interview with *La Tribune* of Dec. 27, Blondel said he was "sure that at the end of the month of January," when the price of the Juppé policy begins to hit, "there will be a reawakening of demands." A meeting of the Executive Commission of Force Ouvrière is scheduled for Jan. 15, at which there will be a review of the "state of mind in which our [constituent] organizations find themselves. . . . It is possible that we will examine thereafter the conditions for a possible mass action."

In any case, this French winter of discontent has proven that there is a gulf between the Parisian elites and the French citizenry, and that the old administrative methods used by the former to rule over the latter no longer work, within the parameters of Maastricht and of neo-liberal austerity. A change is therefore certain; the only question remains, how and when it is going to take place.

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## Commentary

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*A study recently released by the Bayerische Vereinsbank, one of the top five German banks, concludes that the budget cuts demanded under the Maastricht Treaty will inflict upon Germany losses of DM 20 billion (\$13 billion) in 1998 alone, primarily as a result of declining exports. No country will profit less from the European Monetary Union than Germany, according to the study.*

*Lyndon LaRouche was asked to comment on this, in his radio interview with "EIR Talks" on Jan. 3. Here is his reply:*

Go back to 1976. I was in London for a series of meetings, including with a meeting with the then-head of the shadow Foreign Ministry, whose name I shan't mention at this point, who told me, when we were discussing France, "Mitterrand's ours. We own him." That, in summation, together with the corroboration of that fact, is the key to Maastricht.

President Mitterrand is the anti-Charles de Gaulle of France, who in his life tried to destroy everything that Charles de Gaulle sought to build. And, by the time he left office, he had nearly succeeded in that objective.

Among the concoctions which the British were able to create, as a way of trying to destroy the continental European economy, was to use Mitterrand and British influence in Benelux and in Germany, in particular, where the British have almost a controlling influence over about half the elected officials, parliamentary officials, of each of the parties, sometimes more. So, on the basis of that, they got this crazy deal through, called the Maastricht agreement, which is like a guy going into a barroom and saying, "Why don't you two guys fight, while I watch?"

The Bayerische Vereinsbank has simply typified the realization of some sleepy-eyed German officials who are coming reluctantly to the recognition, that Maastricht was an invasion of Germany, aimed at its destruction.

The Maastricht agreement, if you look at it, was no different than, essentially, what Gingrich and company are trying to do to the United States government, and the United States economy. Gingrich and his crowd are out to destroy the U.S. economy. If you see his background, study his profile, study what he has said over the years, look at the people who backed him, the people who created SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], for example, the SDS Steering Committee, back over the 1961-65 period, he is a product of that. This guy is an ultra-leftist radical turned to the right, without having changed anything. He is an ultra-leftist, in the sense that he has got another ultra-leftist, Alvin Toffler, who now comes on as ultra-right, simply because he is crazy. And these guys are out to destroy this civilization, because they have a different agenda, shall we say, just an ideological agenda; and Maastricht represents a part of that same agenda.