



In French labor rites, it's stasis all over again

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Back at the dawn of the new millennium in 1999, when a Socialist government was preparing France's golden future, a cabinet minister told a reporter that, very confidentially, the 35-hour workweek it was pushing into law would really serve to bring flexibility into the country's palsied job market.

The 35-hour week might not be an automatic job-creator all by itself, he said, but it would require reorganization so great as to provide cover for thousands of individual bosses to rationalize their staffs. Considering the rigidities of French laws and French unions, the minister reasoned, this was the best (and most deniable) way of twisting the neck of an economic structure that otherwise would not hire and could not compete.

"So it's modernization by stealth?" the reporter asked. "That's your line," the minister answered.

Seven years go by. If the French didn't fill the streets to protest four hours less work per week at the same pay, the 35-hour ploy turned out to be a mirage, imitated nowhere else in Europe, and so complex that it underpinned rather than reversed French employers' standard equation: new hires equal intolerable risk.

All this in a country where capitalism actually works in very practical terms - there are terrific French companies and a skilled and motivated labor force. But coming in a place where capitalism still gets demonized in favor of worship of a romanticized revolutionary past (think of its mass demonstrations as religious processions), the Socialists' attempt by

stealth to initiate change brought nothing.

In fact, since 2002, as a sign of the failure of the entire French political class to reach toward modernization, the Gaullist-led governments of Jacques Chirac's sterile second term have fled from challenging the 35-hour week as a leftist aberration.

In a largely closed French political universe, Chirac's Gaullists tried instead to co-opt as its own the left's notions of a society where no element of individual risk is acceptable. Even more, it perpetuated hatred over simple mistrust of open markets. Result: the Chirac era reinforced the French reflex to regard change as an attack on social "acquis," a word meaning nonnegotiables in a language literally without an equivalent for those brutal Anglo-Saxons' notions of give-backs.

These days, the streets roar with the shouts of young demonstrators against a different, but as basically timorous attempt by a non-Socialist government to bring reform to what it simultaneously insists, just like the left, is France's eternal and untouchable social model.

This time, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, faced with next to no growth and massive unemployment, once again dodged what would have been directness: proposing a vast program deregulating the whole labor market and reducing the immobility created by an inflexible web of social protections. Instead, he rammed a law through the National Assembly, focusing on people 26 and under that sets up first-job contracts allowing employers to terminate them without explanation at any time

during the first two years of employment.

Somehow, Villepin missed grasping that this collides not only with the myths and lies of French mainstream politics' sacral treatment of the French social model (Nicolas Sarkozy's stance is a potential exception), and its consecrated notions of employment by decree.

But it also butts heads with everything Chirac and Villepin have been telling the country and its young people about how France can make its own exceptionalist way in the world. They are the people in power who made defending a scared, retrograde status quo into a negative, national obligation.

If France fights against opening up its borders to workers at competitive wages from the rest of the European Union through the so-called Bolkestein directive, if Villepin demands "economic patriotism" and national industrial champions, if the government beats off foreign takeover attempts on French enterprises, then it perhaps deserves the contradiction of explaining to students how it would let French bosses hire folks more or less the way they do in awful places like Canada, Denmark and Sweden.

To be honest, the students in the streets themselves have changed in ways that reflect the airless rooms of French politics. Their call is not 1968's appeal to re-do the world, or for a just chance to show their stuff, but for guarantees, promises of security, risk-removers.

Anne Muxel, a researcher at the Paris Institute of Political Science, got it

pretty much right, I think, in talking about the students being "negatively politicized," demanding that Villepin's law be withdrawn even when "the status quo is hard to defend," and proposing nothing new as an alternative.

On the French left, both pushing and tagging along with the demos, Villepin's grief is seen as a divine opportunity at a moment when presidential elections glimmer in spring 2007. The left insists the prime minister's proposal of youth job flexibility is a diktat insuring "precariousness," and couples this with appeals for a return to a vague status quo ante, meaning stasis all over again.

In a real sense, this ties up with the situation that emerged from the street riots involving immigrant youths in Paris's dismal suburbs last November: a generalized, inarticulate admission that the old French routine is getting the country nowhere, but minus politicians who believe they can both stay in office (68 percent of the French said last week they want the Villepin jobs law withdrawn) and grab France's immense problems by the throat.

An example is affirmative action that would turn around the failed integration of Muslim immigrants. It's another fuzzed-over issue just like opening up the French job market from top

to bottom, radically reducing the public sector, and cutting back on the blocking capacity and privileges of civil servants.

Sarkozy, Villepin's presidential rival within the government, had clearly said last year, let's go on all of this.

But playing it safer, he has de-fanged his diction so that he no longer mocks the hollow French social model, or preaches out loud a "rupture" with the rigidities, habits, and babble of the past.

So what can happen now? Villepin's government may fall, a general strike might disrupt the country, and in an extreme hypothesis, Chirac might be so humiliated to call it quits ahead of schedule.

Does any of that mean catastrophe? I'd say France is an immensely rich, essentially stable country, that even if demonstrative, boisterous and totally self-involved, is too rational to accept dissolving into chaos in 2006.

The problem is that France lacks politicians talking directly about real and ultimate solutions, and explaining how to get them through honesty and the acceptance of risks. With today's reality, the country could stay miserable for a long time to come.