

Labor in Focus by Laurent Murawiec

Lorraine on fire

The suicidal French decision to further slash the steel sector has led to riots and a general strike.

Lorraine, the eastern steelmaking region of France, came to a halt on April 5. Shops, schools, and city halls remained shut and public transportation went dead in a general strike, while tens of thousands of demonstrators marched through the streets Longwy, Thionville, and the towns of the steel valleys, where furnaces first went up in the 17th century.

For the past 10 years Lorraine has undergone the systematic destruction of its steel industry under the "post-industrial society" policies enforced by the European Commission, the instrument of the most backward-looking "families" of Europe. Now the final blow had been delivered: a plan to cut steel jobs by 28%.

Church bells rang and 25,000 marchers protested the "Steel Restructuring Plan" put forward by the Socialist government of François Mitterrand, which calls for the phasing out of 25,000 steel jobs within two years—most of them in Lorraine. One job lost in steel means three others lost in related sectors.

On the day the plan was proposed, riots had broken out. Rail installations were attacked, Socialist Party and steel company offices ransacked and put to the torch, statues torn off city squares, tax offices and public buildings defaced and damaged. Steelworkers and others clashed with the riot police; 15 were injured in Longwy, several severely.

"Lorraine Betrayed" was the banner headline of the region's leading

daily, the *Républicain Lorrain*. During the day-long general strike, the region was cut off from the rest of the country. "Lorraine Secedes," a newspaper wrote. Four Socialist members of Parliament quit their party; so did one Communist mayor of a nearby small town (the party is in a coalition with the Socialists).

On April 4, Industry Minister Laurent Fabius, visiting Metz, the capital of Lorraine, declared there would be no change in the steel plan.

On April 10, trade unionists in the Lorraine region declared: "No new industries will be created on the ruins of the steel industry," and announced a mass march on Paris April 13.

The Mitterrand government's decisions, taken under pressure from Finance Minister Jacques Delors and the European Commission, will cut one in four steel jobs from today's 90,000, after a loss of 40,000 jobs in the past 10 years. France's most modern mill, the specialty steel plant at Fos sùr Mer near Marseilles, will be shut down. The planned universal strip rolling mill at Rombas-Gandrange in Lorraine will not be built. A slew of other mills will be shut, and the government's inept plan will concentrate 27-30 billion francs of expenditure (15 billion for investment) on "plant modernization," only 7 billion in Lorraine. As prescribed by the European Commission, no state "subsidy" can be extended without capacity reduction. The EC plan calls for 5.3 million tons of capacity to be cut in France.

EC Commission deputy chairman Viscount Étienne Davignon, whose name has become synonymous with de-industrialization and economic devastation, has sponsored a Malthusian plan to massively contract Europe's steel production, under the pretext of "adapting to crisis conditions." Italy is reducing capacity by 5.8 million tons, Britain by 4.5 million, West Germany by 7 million. Luxembourg's output will shrink by 25%. Holland's Hoogovens company is reducing capacity by more than a million tons this year alone.

In Belgium, as a precondition for the government takeover of \$1 billion of its debt, the large Cockerill Sambre company is cutting capacity by 2.7 million, from 9.7 million tons, shedding 9,000 jobs and negotiating a 10% wage cut for the remainder of the workforce. In Germany, 30,000 steel jobs are slated to go, a spokesman for the Iron and Steel Association stated this month. Not yet a full EC member, Spain is following suit: 10,000 of the 36,000 employees of the three major steelmakers will be laid off within five years, 4,000 within six months.

Mitterrand promises that "no worker will be laid off," since early retirement and retraining schemes are planned. This has been received icily by steelworkers. A government that is cutting 30% of shipbuilding capacity at the same stroke, and plans to misinvest masses of taxpayers' money in post-industrial electronic gadgetry—under the influence of the President's bizarre adviser, video-game fan Jacques Atali—is not trusted to provide jobs.

While the Soviets are pouring their steel into military hardware—it takes a lot of steel to build a giant submarine or a tank—Europe's defense potential is being destroyed by Davignon and Company.