

Real target of French strikers is the Maastricht Treaty

by Christine Bierre

In response to French Prime Minister Alain Juppé's nationally televised address on Dec. 5, the strike wave that has been under way since Nov. 24 has expanded and intensified, as strike leaders adopt an even harder line. Juppé, speaking in an arrogant and patronizing manner, refused to withdraw his austerity program or to make any major concession to the demands of the strikers. At best, in an effort to divide the opposition, he indicated a willingness to negotiate on the government's intention to increase the years of work necessary to benefit from full retirement pay, from 37.5 years presently, to 40 years.

To the hundreds of thousands who demonstrated in response on Dec. 5, in the streets of the 60 main cities in the country, to the millions who have participated in strike actions since Nov. 24, and to those who are still striking, Juppé must have appeared like a man living on a different planet.

The gulf between Juppé and President Jacques Chirac on the one side, and the French population on the other, appears at this point to be unbridgeable. In taking these decisions, Juppé seems to be listening only to an internalized audience composed of the parliamentary majority that fully backs his "reform," and to the "markets," which inject large sums of money into the Paris Bourse every time the prime minister takes a turn in favor of British liberalism.

Lyndon LaRouche commented on the situation in an interview with "EIR Talks" radio broadcast on Dec. 6: "This is no mere strike wave. This is an existential crisis for not only France, but for the entire European Union structure, as it has been evolved over the recent period." The key issue, LaRouche stressed, is the European Union's Maastricht Treaty, whose purpose is to destroy the nation-state. "Maastricht can be seen," he said, "as a continuation of the efforts in the United States, of people such as Newt Gingrich, to impose austerity, to the effect of killing people by cutting entitlements, whose reduction would actually affect life, that is, would actually accelerate the death rate. . . ."

"It looks as though Maastricht in France will die, or if Chirac attempts to defend it, the French government continues to take a stubborn hard line, the French government could be destabilized. Even the Presidency, as well as the government, could be destabilized, by continuing to stubbornly cling to a hard line, when they've lost the battle in the country. They've probably lost almost 70% of French popular opinion so far; and it's a *violent* loss."

Unions take a hard line

The response of the trade unions to Juppé's intransigence was swift. Louis Viannet and Marc Blondel, respectively the presidents of the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) and of Labor Power (FO), the two unions that are leading the strikes, both rejected Juppé's plan. We do not intend to sit at a negotiating table with the government to determine the "modalities" of how to implement its reform, stated Viannet, who called for the government to withdraw its program. Blondel stated that Juppé's response was not on a par with the tremendous protest movement which is sweeping France.

Both unions called on their workers to strike and to participate in demonstrations on Dec. 7 throughout the country. The teachers unions, which had already been partially on strike since the beginning of the week, at 15% participation, will be shutting down the schools and have threatened to pursue their strike action further. Throughout the country, actions continue strong: 4% on strike in the public telecommunications sector, where such actions had not yet had a massively disruptive effect; in the public utilities companies (gas and electricity), 20% of the workers are on strike; in some areas, the workers have decided to charge a low fee to all users in order to win their support for the strike.

The movement has been particularly strong in the provinces outside Paris, and escalated further after Juppé's speech. Some 500-800,000 students, civil servants, workers, and teachers are estimated to have participated in the Dec. 5 demonstrations throughout the country. Fifty thousand demonstrated in Marseille; 40,000 in Bordeaux, the city in which Juppé has just been elected mayor; 30,000 in Toulouse, Grenoble, Montpellier, and Nantes; 20,000 in Clermont Ferrand, a city of only 200,000 inhabitants! After Juppé's speech, whatever was left functioning of the public transport in the city of Grenoble came to a halt, and in Toulouse, all the schools closed down.

Effects in Europe

Even though in France, the unions and the political parties have refrained from speaking openly about the Maastricht Treaty, for fear of reviving the strong fight which had split the country down the middle in 1992, when the national referendum to ratify Maastricht took place, France's European partners are fully aware of the implications of this national strike.

The anti-French sections of the British elite seem to be rejoicing at the strike and are trying to use it to split the Franco-German alliance, their old enemy on the continent (see *Documentation*). In Germany, however, the French strike has caused a panic.

Indeed, if Juppé backs down to the strikers, France will not be ready to become a part of the single currency and central banking system that the European Union is supposed to adopt under Maastricht in 1999. At present, only one country is in compliance with the stringent monetary criteria demanded by the treaty to enter this last phase: Luxembourg, an entity which resembles a bank more than it does a nation. All the other countries are way beyond the limits tolerated by the treaty: 3% of GDP for the budget deficit and 60% for public indebtedness.

The difficulties in achieving this last phase of Maastricht are such that many in Bonn have already mooted the possibility that only Germany, the Benelux countries, and France (the strongest countries) could join in this phase, while Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the rest would have to remain outside. Bonn knows perfectly well, therefore, that if France cannot join, the treaty is finished.

The common conception that France and Germany are opposed to the British on this issue, is totally false, because the economic foundations of the Maastricht Treaty and those promoted by the British are the same: monetarism and liberalism, in the purest tradition of British economist Adam Smith. The Maastricht Treaty offers no alternative to British free trade, and it blocks the way to real alternatives, such as the new Marshall Plan to reconstruct eastern Europe and the Mediterranean proposed by American economist Lyndon LaRouche and his co-thinker in France, former Presidential candidate Jacques Cheminade.

Documentation

From British press coverage of the French strike:

The *Times*, by Lord William Rees-Mogg, Dec. 4:

“The gathering storm in France is surely the most threatening event in western Europe during the 1990s.” Observers of French politics warn of “revolution on the street in six months.” One of France’s problems is that it did not carry out Thatcherite reforms already in the 1980s, but the French “‘nervous breakdown’ is part of a wider European disease. For at least 20 years, the western European economy has been sliding backwards. . . . By 1990 . . . the European Community . . . was already moving toward a bureaucratic model based on those old European *dirigistes* Bismark and Colbert.”

The *Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 5:

“ . . . I mean we, the British, have been here before. As



Farmers demonstrate in Strasbourg, France, against the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), in December 1992. The farmers' opposition to British free-trade policy has now been joined by millions of urban workers, in the biggest strike wave since 1968.

one international currency dealer put it last night, the parallels with Britain in September 1992 are uncanny, when we, too, were locked into an unsustainable parity with the deutschemark, and then crashed out. . . .

“M. Juppé and his colleagues are facing a deepening temptation: to back down; to cut interest rates and let the franc slip; to let the economy breathe again without risk of inflation, and get the mob off their back.

“And if they do that, it will be the end not just of the franc-mark parity, it will be the end of monetary union by 1999. France will fail to satisfy the Maastricht criteria. In Bonn there will be shock, in London relief. A new and uncertain chapter will be opened in European history.”

The *Times*, Dec. 5:

“Since the mid-1980s, French economic and foreign policies have been subordinated to . . . the creation of an economic and monetary union with Germany by 1999. . . . Combined with an over-valued exchange rate and interest rates determined by the Bundesbank . . . M. Juppé’s reforms look like the latest in a long series of national economic humiliations, aptly described as an economic Vichy.

“The sense that a foreign body is imposing national hardship is probably an aggravating factor in today’s French strikes, just as it was in Britain in the late 1970s, when the Labour government was under the sway of the IMF. If people are asked to accept sacrifices, they must believe that the interests of their own nation are being served. French workers do not want to lose their pension rights in the interests of Franco-German monetary partnership.”