

# French unemployed fight for justice

by Christine Bierre

In a nationally televised address on Jan. 21, French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin slapped the millions of unemployed Frenchmen in the face, when he announced that, in spite of their struggle and hardships, his government would only increase the minimum assistance to the very poor to a total of \$100 million, which comes to 90 francs (roughly \$15) a month each. To justify his stinginess, Jospin invoked the Maastricht criteria for membership in the European Monetary Union which dictate member-nations' state indebtedness and budget deficits; but, the fact that, at the same time, the government is agreeing to cover the more than \$30 billion losses of the *Crédit Lyonnais* bank, proves that, between saving the banks and the people, Jospin has chosen the former.

Since December, thousands of unemployed, represented by four national associations — APEIS, MNCP, AC, and the CGT Unemployed Committee — have been demonstrating and occupying public buildings throughout France, demanding substantial and urgent increases in unemployment compensation and social assistance. During the Christmas period, the organizations occupied as many as 33 offices of the Assedic, the state office that distributes unemployment compensation. At first, the government tried to buy time, hoping the conflict would dissipate on its own. By early January, however, the continuing growth of the movement forced Jospin and Labor Minister Martine Aubry to meet its leaders and open negotiations on their demands. Soon after, the government announced the creation of an emergency fund of a measly 180 million francs, for those in most need, and, deeming that this was enough to calm discontent, deployed special riot police to remove protesters from the Assedic offices!

Naturally, the police deployment gave strength to the movement, which then proceeded with wild-cat occupations of other public buildings, moving from one office building to the next, whenever they were ejected by police.

## Workforce being gutted

Even though large masses of people were not mobilized, the movement has awakened the nation to the full extent of the destruction of its workforce under the ongoing labor deregulation, begun under the Mitterrand regime. Several reports have been published recently, including one by the national Economic Planning Commission, which cost its chairman, Henri Guaino, his job. According to this report, real unemployment is higher than 5 million people, far beyond

the official 3.2 million (12.5% of the workforce). To the official figures, the report adds unemployed workers undergoing training, those who take early retirement, discouraged workers who have abandoned all attempts to get a job, those who want to work but who cannot do so under present circumstances, as well as those working only part-time. The report also addresses the impact on whole families where one, two, or even more members might be hit by the problem. Following this criterion, more than 8 million people — that is, one-third of the French workforce — have been hit by unemployment and its consequent marginalization.

An IFOP poll published on the front page by the daily *Libération* on Jan. 19, shows that 70% of the French population sympathize with the unemployed movement: Some 78% of respondents have or have had a jobless member in their family; 38% have been unemployed themselves; and 33% fear they will soon lose their jobs. *Le Nouvel Observateur* for the week of Jan. 19 published a cover story on the “kangaroo generation,” referring to those in their 30s who still live with their parents because they cannot afford to rent their own apartments.

Facing general downgrading of skills and increased poverty, the unemployed are only claiming their due: an immediate \$250 rise in the “minimum social assistance” to the very poor. This minimum includes five categories of aid, including the RMI, assistance of about \$500 a month for childless married couples between the ages of 25 and 55, and a minimum compensation for the elderly and handicapped. The unemployed are demanding that the RMI be extended to those aged between 18 and 25, as well as a one-time payment of \$500 for emergency aid.

The unemployed movement has put tremendous pressure on Jospin's Socialist government, which is more concerned with scrambling to meet the Maastricht criteria, than addressing rising impoverishment of France's workforce. The social pressure is all the greater, in that it threatens to break up Jospin's “plural majority” coalition government. Tremendous discontent in the ranks of the Communist Party (PCF), the Green Party, and Jean-Pierre Chevènement's MDC, has pushed those parties to support and even encourage the unemployed fight. This is particularly the case with the Communist Party and the CGT union, traditionally close to the PCF, which are among the backbones of the unemployed mobilization.

Further, the government fears that this ferment will again turn against the Maastricht Treaty and all its institutions. The very parties supporting the unemployed all strongly opposed Maastricht Europe, and if the unemployed and anti-Maastricht fights link up, the result could become explosive. On Jan. 18, one day after a national action day called by the unemployed, the PCF organized a demonstration in Paris calling for a referendum on the Amsterdam Treaty — a document appended to the Maastricht Treaty, which will determine further concessions of national sovereignty by European members — drew 10,000 people.