

French Unemployed Organise and Fight

Anarchist Communist Federation

1998

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A mass wave of occupations of unemployment benefit offices swept through France in December 1997 continuing well into the New Year. Organise! takes a look at this welcome resistance.

This phenomenon should be looked at in detail as it should provide lessons and examples to all unemployed who are looking to defend themselves in Britain and round the rest of the world. As the French magazine Courant Alternatif, the paper of the Organisation Communiste Libertaire noted in a February editorial: "Once more, libertarians were omnipresent in the action."

The movement of occupations began in December when some local unemployed groups, as well as the national unemployed co-ordination Agir contre le chômage! (Act against unemployment)-AC! occupied the offices of Unedic/Assedic – the equivalent of supplementary benefit – in Arras in northern France and Marseilles in the south. They demanded an immediate payout of 1,500 (francs (£150) for the long term unemployed.

A new left government under Lionel Jospin came to power in France last year. Apart from his own Socialist Party, the cabinet included 4 ministers who are members of the Communist Party. The new government promised the creation of 700,000 jobs, 350,000 of them in the public sector. The private sector promise of unemployment failed to get off the ground straightaway, as the private sector bosses refused to release finance, and the State would not subsidise them. Similarly a government promise of a universal 35 hour week has met with fierce resistance from the employers.

The election of the left destroyed any remaining illusions among the unemployed that anything would be done by the State to tackle unemployment. This is why unlike the usual demobilisation in France after elections of left governments, this new movement, starting out with small numbers, quickly increased in size and militancy and continues to be active. This should be compared with the social movement of November-December 1995. This time it is a government of the Left in power, and as a result the usual manoeuvres of the Left to demobilise any social movements have been that little bit more difficult to carry out.

Enough is enough!

The Unedic is a joint government/union body headed up by Nicole Notat, leader of the CFDT union (noted for its "radicality" and talk of "self-management" in the 70s and for a long while a close accomplice of the Socialists). Notat refused to pay the sum demanded by the unemployed activists. Conditions have deteriorated rapidly for the unemployed in the last 2 years, to the point where many are not far off of almost complete destitution.

The actions were set off by the unemployed committees of the CGT (large union central controlled by the Communist Party) in the Marseilles area. But this does not imply a manipulation by the Communists. Rather it was a movement from the base that was taken up by multiple unemployed groups and activists, including the CNT (Anarchosyndicalist union) and by many anarchist/libertarian militants as well as by those in no group or organisation.

Assedic offices everywhere were occupied with large united demonstrations of the unemployed and employed in many main towns. The demand for a payout was raised to 3,00 francs, and demands were then put forward for a rise in benefits for all of the equivalent of £150, with a new benefit for the under-25s, who receive no benefits at all.

The old carrot and stick tactic that the Left in power/the unions had used to finally demobilise both the lorry drivers strike (late autumn 1997) and the struggle of the sans papiers (immigrants

without official stay permits) did not immediately work this time. The movement put at the head of its priorities the human and social factors, refusing to be taken in by various economic arguments (one union leader said that the unemployed were taking jobs from the employed!). In certain areas, the unemployed broke with the old schema of trade unionism: corporatism, strike, negotiations, end of struggle.

Indeed, the frontiers of what was “possible” were pushed back considerably, with hundreds of buildings occupied day and night, and groups of unemployed demanding and taking food in the supermarkets and in the most posh restaurants! All of this might be seen as symbolic, but demonstrates the determination and willpower of a social movement, weak numerically, but which is a great novelty in a situation where most workplace struggles are defensive and well controlled by the unions.

If the movement is weak in numbers, this is hardly surprising. Hundreds of thousands are today totally defeated in their daily life where survival is their main preoccupation.

For those who did engage in struggle, for many there was a massive widening of horizons leading to the questioning of the capitalist system in its totality. Yes, when one is out of work, one has time to become totally depressed, but one also has time to think. If waged workers have the “muscle” to potentially back up their struggles, they are also the victims of paralysing alienation. Hence a paradox in both waged and unwaged sectors. This vulgar economism is an enemy of all revolutions.

The new demands were met with an offer of the equivalent of £50 million for retraining and a promise that 216,000 unemployed would get additional transport subsidies of about £3 a week. This was met with an escalation in the number of occupations. The government then decided to give out £100million in unemployment benefit. Again this was met with derision. This meant the princely sum of £30 per person! Now Jospin talked about his commitments to the European Union, and refused to give any more money.

First sops, then cops

The riot cops were sent in, evicting the occupations in an euphemistic “evacuation”. Up to this time, the Communist Ministers were saying things like: “The first measures taken...make good sense”, supporting the sops given out by the government. Now it was: “The Assedics must rediscover the possibility of fulfilling their role”- in other words, “riot police, charge!” For their part, the Greens also supporting the Left government played it both ways, reflecting their minor influence on the government. One Green leader visited occupying unemployed and denounced police attacks whilst another said he was in solidarity with the unemployed whilst supporting the government at the same time. Once again, as in the last few strikes and social movements the extreme right Front National failed to offer an opinion apart from remarking in their paper that the unemployed were profiteers who lacked decency.

For their part, the Trotskyists put forward the usual transitional demands, seeking to limit the movement to the “possible”. Some of their organisations are deeply implicated in support for the Left government. For example, Lutte Ouvriere, a Trot group with several thousand members, denounced anarchists as provocateurs, in line with the talk of the Communists/CGT who constantly droned on about “casseurs” (breakers) and uncontrollables. For its part the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, French section of the Fourth International, was doing its little wheelings and

dealings, in line with eventually joining the Socialist Party en masse. One of its leaders, Aguiton, also a leader of AC! and the SUD union, had several meetings with Cambadelis, number two in the Socialist Party, and an eminent Trotskyist himself (in a different faction) assuring him that “we are not looking for a crisis”.

Now the CGT union moved to fulfil its role as saboteur of struggle. On January 27th they called out over 20,000 people in 3 separate demonstrations in Paris- unemployed, railworkers, road maintenance workers. All demonstrations were concerned with unemployment, but the Communists made sure that they marched in different parts of the capital.

The radicalism of the movement was shown in occupations of Socialist Party offices, in the blocking of railway lines to stop the TGV high speed trains, in the questioning of work itself. During a demonstration in Paris on 17th January, which brought out 25,000, a meeting under the banner We Want Shit Work paid with Crumbs a group of people whipped themselves whilst demanding work at any price. Some of their slogans were Work, no wages and overtime -One solution, exploitation,- Bosses join us, your slaves are in the street,- The unions are our friends, they have never betrayed us,- 35 hours a day. The meeting went from 50 to 400. After this demonstrators broke a police blockade of an occupied building, occupied a shopping centre and forced one of the swankiest Parisian restaurants La Coupole to provide food. On other occasions attempts by the AC! bureaucrats to negotiate were thwarted by mass meetings. At many mass meetings, people questioned the whole nature of waged work.

Demobilisation?

In towns like Nantes the high school students began to take part in the struggle. A thousand marched to join the unemployed in Nantes and took part in an occupation. The Act-Up committees (organising around AIDs and HIV) took part in most of the actions calling for the same benefits for AIDs sufferers as for other claimants.

The number of anarchists/libertarians involved in the movement was far from negligible (for example 400 people in the Federation Anarchiste contingent on a Lyons demo). Beyond satisfaction at the good health of different libertarian organisations was there the influence to create a self-organised movement of unemployed and those in temporary work, independent of the parties and the State, leading to the creation of a movement of social resistance capable of creating a new society?

The Left government has put forward its plans for a 35 hour week that it says will solve unemployment. It hopes to introduce this by the year 2000 and to encourage bosses to create jobs. But in actual fact the bill does not mean that pay will not be cut in line with reduction of hours, that 35 hours will be compulsory, that job creation will not be paid out of taxes rather than by the bosses. In addition, the 35 hours will be “flexible”. It will be calculated annually, so that one week you might work 60 hours, and another 10, which suits the needs of the bosses very well!

The movement is being demobilised on this 35-hour promise. The Communists are busy winding down the movement. AC! and other unemployed organisations feel smug that they have been received by those in power, have begun to be integrated into negotiation structures, and will go along with these manoeuvres At Marseilles where the action first started, this is already under way, but as we write other towns have seen an increase in the strength of the movement. The government will both hope to destroy the movement with the help of its allies in the Commu-

nist Party and the unions, and with brute force. Already a member of the Federation Anarchiste, Christophe Fétat, has been arrested in Lille for taking part in actions. If the movement does come to an end, what needs to be built upon by anarchists/libertarians is a radicalisation of those involved, and the establishment of occupied buildings that can continue to service the unemployed, operated by autonomous committees of unemployed/those in temporary work outside of the control of the parties.

And in Germany

After the German government announced the highest unemployment rate since the war, 4.8 million-14% of those able to work-a mass wave of demonstrations effected 200 cities and towns and involving 40,000 people in early February. Contacts between French and German unemployed have been established with the French giving advice from their own experiences.

STOP PRESS: As we go to press, we hear of the following.

6th February Occupation of public transport building initiated by CNT in Paris. Building surrounded and 80 (!) arrested by police armed with assault rifles. After identity checks all released.

11th February 150 unemployed/temporary contract workers arrive at the Cash Converters store. This scummy business buys the property of the poor who urgently need money, at derisory prices, and sell it to other poor people at a profit! That's the market for you! The objective of the 150 was to bring the goods out on the pavement to distribute it free. The police attacked violently. 40 arrests. 30 released in the evening, the rest kept overnight in cells and released the following morning. Possibility of prosecutions. Media imposes blackout on many actions. At Poitiers police physically attack occupying unemployed (5 Feb.) Growing radicalisation as many unemployed see the role of the Left and of the police.

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