

BY BAG

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France

SAVING TELEGRAM
FROM PARIS
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FRANCE : INDUSTRIAL UNREST

1. For the first time since the Socialist government took office in France last June there has been widespread industrial action in many sectors as a direct protest against the manner in which part of the government's programme is being implemented. The trigger for protest was a government ordinance on working time, holiday and fringe benefits. In particular, the decree promulgated on 16 January, laid down a reduction in the standard 41 or 40 hour working week to 39 hours from 1 February (as the first step towards the objective of a 35 hour week) and introduced a fifth week of paid annual holiday. Managements in a number of enterprises and in the Civil Service have interpreted the ordinance in ways which have been taken by the employees as reducing advantages already obtained. As a result there have been a mixture of strikes and working to rule by customs officers, some civil servants, employees in the retail sector and some groups of industrial workers (including part of Renault).

2. The most publicised campaign has been a work to rule by customs officials which has led to long delays for air travellers and even greater disruption to trans-frontier freight movements. In one incident lorry drivers who had been forced to wait up to 5 days at the Franco-Spanish border took matters into their own hands. On 1 February they surrounded the customs office at Biriadou (Hendaye). On the Prefect's orders 20 customs officials were withdrawn for their own safety under police escort and lorry traffic from Spain is now moving freely again, with no customs checks at all being made. This state of affairs is clearly temporary : the customs Trades Unions involved now threaten an all-out strike.

3. The ordinance implementing the 39 hour week is no more than a statement of principles. Individual managements and Trades Unions are expected to negotiate all the details. As a result many different issues have surfaced as points of contention, both for management and the Unions. The latter have called for their members to be paid the same, or very little less for the shorter working week and also argue that the revision of working hours should suit the workforce and not the management's convenience. Some unions have requested the extra hour off each Friday : others that it should accumulate and be taken on a monthly basis. The government appears surprised by the extent and strength of hostile reactions to what it expected to be a popular move. Part of the explanation may be that the new legislation in fact disturbs existing de facto arrangements which are as good as, or better than the proposed reforms. Union opposition to the fifth week is based on the fact that length of service by certain workers already provides some or all of this. In short, it appears that the government failed to do its homework adequately on the existing situation and is now faced with embarrassment as well as industrial unrest.

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4. The Minister of Labour, Jean Auroux, commented on television on 2 February that the government had never expected the reduction in working time to proceed smoothly, after 50 years of stagnation, but that the measures were designed to give workers more free time, to improve their working conditions and to share the work available more equitably between the present workforce and those currently unemployed. Agreement in the end may well be reached between most of the unions and the employers who signed the Agreement on the reduction of working time on 17 July 1981 which was the basis for the present government ordinance. The communist-dominated Federation of Trade Unions (the CGT) has not signed the Agreement and has consistently opposed the manner in which the government has pursued this reform (see Reed's letter to Armour (WED) of 22 December 1981). It is therefore likely that there will be considerable further industrial unrest over the issue.

HIBBERT

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