

500,000 LAID OFF IN FRANCE; SPEEDUP ESCALATED

Jan. 5 (IPS)--More than 500,000 French workers have been thrown out of their jobs for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks as a wave of holiday layoffs have hit French industry. Several hundred thousand other workers have suffered disguised unemployment in the form of short work weeks.

Meanwhile, workers lucky enough to keep their jobs have been subjected to killing speedup to meet previous production schedules with a reduced workforce.

Despite press reports and company announcements that the layoffs are only temporary, most French workers realize that many of these layoffs and short weeks will be permanent.

The metal industry has thus far been hit the hardest, with more than 160,000 auto workers suffering layoffs during the Christmas period. Last week Renault, the largest French automaker, laid off 80,000 workers for four days.

Five-hundred-thousand metal workers currently are now out of work--one-fifth of the industry's workforce--with the remainder forced to swallow the hated short week or face layoffs. At Lyon's Pont a Mousson steel plant, the company has announced plans to institute a 24-hour work week to begin later this month.

Other sectors are also being devastated. Rhone-Poulenc, a major textile manufacturer, laid off 20,000 workers for from two to four weeks while telling several hundred older workers that they should start looking for work elsewhere. Throughout the industry, the average work week ranges from 36 hours in the south to 24 hours in the east.

According to French industry sources, production is not falling proportionate to the massive reduction in the workforce. Citroen, the second largest automaker, has laid off 15 per cent of its workforce over the last several months; however, through intense speedup, it has managed to hold the decline in production to only 6.5 per cent. Kiebler-Columbe, a major tire manufacturer, laid off 200 workers while announcing that new production schedules would require its workers to produce 30 per cent more per day.

At such speedup rates, French workers will burn out quickly. Manpower planners are even looking beyond the growing pool of unemployed as a source for fresh replacement parts willing to work at low wages. Labor Minister Durafour announced recently that he would like to place French youth in apprenticeship brigades. As of last September, youth comprised 60 per cent of the French workforce. The National Employment Agency has given substance to Durafour's search for youthful bodies. It recently asked the parents of all unemployed youth to sign two-year apprenticeship contracts for their children. Under the terms of the agreement, the apprentice will work for no wages at all.

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