

Strike wave makes all French candidates into demagogues—but one

by Christine Bierre and Eric Sauzé

This article was translated and adapted by Nora Hamerman from reportage by Christine Bierre and Eric Sauzé for the French newspaper, Nouvelle Solidarité.

Over the last two weeks of March, all the media-sanctioned French presidential candidates have been vying to give the most exaggerated promises in social policy: Almost all of them, from Prime Minister Edouard Balladur on the right to Robert Hue on the left, with neo-Gaullist Jacques Chirac and Socialist Lionel Jospin in between, have been shedding crocodile tears about society's outcasts and pronouncing themselves in favor of higher wages.

One might well ask if this is an April Fool's joke. Indeed, all of these statements contradict the speeches favoring greater "labor flexibility" and opposing "the overly high cost of wages," which the same candidates gave only a few weeks ago. Even Balladur—a partisan of analyst Alain Minc who, in his report *The Challenge of the Year 2000*, asserts that job loss in France is due to excessive wages—was the first to support the appeal of the president of the CNFP labor confederation, Jean Gandois, for a wage increase. It does not seem to matter what one promises in order to get elected, and the level of demagogy in this campaign, as the first round for election to the seven-year term of the French head of state approaches, on April 23 (the second round is on May 7), has been frankly shameful.

In fact, the fear of a social explosion in the relatively short term is quite real. Although the lid was kept on too long while the standard of living was steadily deteriorating, the pressure-cooker of social demands now threatens to explode any day.

The March 30 day-long strike of the subway, railway, and Air Inter state-owned domestic airline workers, described as "Black Thursday" in the international media, was a lot tougher than most expected. Although the strike demands varied—the rail workers' main battle is for the defense of public sector jobs under impending privatization, the subway workers are demanding wage hikes, and Air Inter's union is defending its contract in the face of the upcoming merger with Air France—the breadth of the movement attested to deep fears about future wages. The movement in public transport, strongly inspired by the strike at Renault, has spread

like wildfire into other sectors. Seven hundred workers in Chausson participated on Friday morning, March 31, in blocking traffic in the Oise department: 200 new Renault vans were parked and left, locked, across the highways, which caused monstrous bottlenecks in the region. This was on the eve of the opening of negotiations with the public authorities, talks which have been off and on for three years without reaching any lasting solution. The postal strike on March 30 was also largely successful. Work stoppages hit some 20 departments, three of them hard: Var, Bouches-du-Rhône, and Loiret. The Social Security unions announced a strike for April 11, and in Paris, on Sunday, April 2, it was the turn of two teachers unions to demonstrate, to demand that all teachers be allowed to join the professors' labor contract by the year 2000 rather than 2017, and the retail workers unions, to protest having to work on Sundays.

These actions were, of course, much encouraged by the declaration of Jean Gandois as well as by the candidates' promises, based on the illusion of the supposed economic recovery. Chirac claims to be able to increase direct wages by shrinking social security withholdings paid by employees, which represent 20% of gross wages; Lionel Jospin also proposes a kind of apportioning of social costs; Robert Hue has long advocated raising the minimum wage to 7,500 francs and hiking wages under 15,000 francs by 1,000 francs; while Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National Front leader, recommends a 7,000 franc minimum wage.

Reorganize the monetary system

But as Jacques Cheminade, the candidate supported by the Federation for a New Solidarity, insists on underlining, all these promises are made by men who are standing on the *Titanic* a few minutes before it sinks. Despite the alarmist statements of the international money managers—the men in charge of the big international financial institutions, heads of the central banks, the treasuries, and ministers of finance—not one of these politicians seems to realize that the international monetary system is on the brink of a much bigger crash than that of 1929. Unless we move toward reorganizing the international monetary system, wage increases will not only be impossible, but chaos will be unleashed on the economy as a whole.

Cheminade expressed his total support for the transport strikers, in a statement to the press released on March 30, saying, "We have been living for years in a system where financiers and speculators proliferate at the expense of producers, wage-earners, and the most deprived." Yet, while a wage increase is perfectly legitimate and the public service must be defended, he warns against other candidates' demagoguery in promoting the recovery myth.

This is where candidate Cheminade has some concrete and original ideas to propose, which parallel those of the American political economist Lyndon LaRouche: putting the international monetary system into orderly bankruptcy proceedings, along with a series of approaches which will discourage financial speculation and reorient money into production. In addition to his proposal for a "Marshall Plan" for the countries of the East and South, centered around launching big infrastructure projects, Cheminade has just made public a whole series of innovative projects in the areas of housing, the suburbs, management of territory, space and defense policy for France (which has been reduced to bare survival), as well as for agriculture.

So far, the Paris media's boycott of his candidacy has been almost total (which is remarkable, given that Cheminade's success in obtaining the 500 signatures of elected mayors which are required for ballot status, when some much better known and better-funded politicians were having trouble making the grade, is a highly newsworthy event in itself). Only *Quotidien de Paris* voiced, in an article on March 28 on "Pierre" Cheminade, the real fear of the entrenched Parisian bureaucracy: that in a period of trouble and crisis like the present, the "preposterous" ideas of this candidate might begin to spread.

Campaign's impact in French regions

The Paris media's attitude has certainly not been reflected in the provincial parts of France, where Jacques Cheminade recently began a campaign tour that will take him to every region in the country, and which national media are following quite closely.

His metaphor of the unsinkable *Titanic* ("The other candidates are making grand speeches from the bridge of the *Titanic* and they calculate their programs while pretending they don't see the iceberg") has been taken up by numerous articles and media reports. In general, his battle against speculation and against the domination of finance over economic life is welcomed with open arms, in farming areas as well as by business.

The tour started in the Rhône-Alps region. At Moire, in the Beaujolais region, Cheminade arrived on March 28 to visit a wine cellar, invited by Jean-Paul Gutty, one of the 500 mayors who signed petitions for his candidacy, who had invited two mayors of neighboring villages. The FR3-Lyon television channel covered the visit on that night's 7 o'clock news, and a journalist from Agence France Presse,

the largest French wire service, interviewed the mayor and candidate. France-Info, a national all-news radio channel, broadcast an interview with Cheminade, conducted at Villefranche-sur-Saône, four times that day.

That afternoon he was in Lyon for a press conference, and held an impromptu meeting with about 15 local sympathizers of the Federation for a New Solidarity. In the evening, invited to a dinner-debate organized by some business people in Lyon, Cheminade developed his conceptions on the scope of the world and national economic and financial crisis, for a group of decisionmakers, who welcomed the chance to discuss these matters with someone with a grip on reality.

The next morning in Thonon-les-Bains on the Swiss border, Radio Thollon interviewed the presidential candidate. This station covers the region from Geneva to Lausanne, Switzerland, as well as the French periphery of Lake Lemane and some of the North Alpine valleys.

At noon, accompanied by about ten supporters, Cheminade laid a wreath at the Memorial to the Victims of Vercors, a high point of the anti-Nazi Resistance. The silent ceremony was filmed by FR3 Grenoble. When this was aired on the evening local news, the reporter commented that for Cheminade, the fight against the Holocaust was not just a past episode to commemorate, but also a present duty: If we had drawn the lessons of the Second World War, we would never tolerate today's genocide in Bosnia.

At the end of the afternoon, the candidate was invited to visit a mountain village of Vercors, Malleval, where Mayor Kempf guided him on a visit to a snowy mountain tourist spot and a farm where cheeses are produced. After touring l'Isère, Cheminade wound up his Rhône-Alps sojourn in Lyon by holding a forum for some 30 supporters.

Cheminade then headed for Burgundy. During an appearance at the market in Mâcon—a name famous to wine lovers around the world—FR3 television filmed him, and a regional newspaper covered the campaign under the title, "Cheminade: Politician or Philosopher?" At Louvières (Haute Marne), Mayor Michel Jeangeorge invited Cheminade to visit a local silverware factory, in the presence of several city council members.

On March 31, the candidate was back in Paris, where he attended the opening of the small vineyards' Viticulture Fair. The 330 exhibitors were all concerned about the insane policy of the European Union in Brussels, which, unless it radically changes, will wipe out one out of two small producers within a few years. Jacques Cheminade—the only presidential candidate to appear there—supports their demand for better protection of their labels, without restricting the export of vine stocks. His farm program, distributed at the entrance of the fair, aroused very great interest. Wherever he goes, Cheminade is making himself known as the candidate who breaks with the rules of the game and the media blackout maintained by the Paris nomenclatura.