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## French workers at odds with bosses

 By **Robert Plummer**

Business reporter, BBC News, Lille

### Lille's rush-hour commuters have the familiar hunted look of hard-pressed employees the world over as they scurry to and from their jobs.

Adding to their burdens, political party workers assail them with election campaign leaflets in the street outside Lille-Flandres railway station as the second round of France's presidential election looms.

Among the crowd is a plain-clothes policeman, thick-set and greying in a black leather jacket, who looks as though he has stepped straight out of a French crime thriller.

Seeing me snapping away with a camera, he warns that taking photographs of the public without their consent could contravene France's strict privacy laws.

Under what is known as "the right to the image", people have been entitled since 2003 to go to court to block the use of such pictures, although it remains unclear to what extent this applies if they are taken in public places.

It's hard to imagine how world-renowned professional photographers such as Robert Doisneau could have operated if the same strictures had existed in 1950s Paris.

Still, it serves as a reminder of the French appetite for regulating areas of economic activity that tend to be more of a free-for-all in Anglo-Saxon countries.

The policeman refuses to be drawn on whether he will be voting for Nicolas Sarkozy or Segolene Royal on 6 May.

But he does offer his gloomy view on the state of the French economy: "France is in a mess. It'll take four or five years to sort it out."

### Confrontation

If analysts at the World Economic Forum (WEF) are to be believed, those French commuters are heading for workplaces full of simmering tensions.



Campaign workers are targeting commuters' votes

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The WEF's latest Global Competitiveness Report puts France in 18th place out of 125 countries surveyed.

That leaves it trailing behind the US and Japan, not to mention other big European Union economies such as Germany and the UK.

But in the category of "co-operation in labour-employer relations" - that is, how workers get on with their bosses - France comes bottom of the league, in 125th place.

Whereas countries such as Denmark and Singapore score highly for their "generally co-operative" relations, France is seen by the WEF as having the most confrontational workplace environment in the world.



French commuters are heading for unhappy workplaces

That helps to explain why the first round of the French presidential election featured so many figures from the far-left, representing groups including the Revolutionary Communist League and the Workers' Struggle party.

Those rejected candidates now stare forlornly from old campaign posters on the streets of Lille - but their ideas remain very much a part of French business culture.

"The class conflict view of things is very traditional in France," says economist Fabien Postel-Vinay. "Trade unions have been given a lot of bargaining power and they push this idea that there is a conflict of interest between employers and employees."

### 'Two-tier' system

Pay and conditions in France are covered by a highly-centralised system of collective bargaining.

The proportion of the workforce that actually belongs to a trade union is less than 10%.

However, thanks to a government decree dating from 1966, five big union confederations bargain on behalf of 95% of workers.

The unions themselves, of course, would prefer to have more members.

"It's a big problem for us, and that's why we have a big programme of unionisation," says Catherine Meyza, of the CGT union's Lille branch.

"We're strong in the public sector above all, but in other areas, such as people who work in shops or department stores, we're trying to establish ourselves."



Posters of defeated candidates linger on the streets of Lille

Whether they are in a union or not, the collective bargaining system works very well for those who actually have jobs. But for the 8.4% of the population who do not

- a figure that rises to 22% among the under-25s - it helps to keep them out of work.

"It's a two-tier labour market with a high level of employment protection and very little turnover," says Mr Postel-Vinay.

### Reforms defeated

The law limiting the maximum working week to 35 hours, in force since February 2000, was intended to reduce unemployment, which then stood at more than 12%.

Although the jobless rate has indeed come down since then, few would attribute that to the 35-hour week, which has added another layer of social protection at a time when other developed economies have been deregulating.

Paradoxically, some surveys suggest that as French workers' job security has increased, their feelings of insecurity have actually been magnified.

"When there is a very high level of employment protection, the risk of losing your job may be very low, but the cost of losing your job is very high," Mr Postel-Vinay explains, pointing out that once you have lost a job it may be very tricky to find another.

#### FRANCE'S ECONOMY

World's sixth-largest economy  
EU's biggest producer of agricultural products  
World's biggest wine producer  
**GDP:** 1,779bn euros (\$2,233bn) (2006)  
**Growth:** 2.1% (2006)  
**Inflation:** 1.9% (2006)  
**Trade deficit:** 29.2bn euros (\$39bn) (2006)

Source: Reuters

In their determination to fend off any threat to their lifestyle, fractious French workers have faced down previous governments' attempts at economic reform.

In 1995, strikes and demonstrations forced Prime Minister Alain Juppe to abandon changes to the pension system and other austerity measures imposed in the run-up to European monetary union.

Last year, it was the turn of Dominique de Villepin's government to suffer humiliation, after protesting unions scuppered a law that would have allowed employers to sack anyone under 26 within the first two years of their employment.

### Flexibility scorned

Young people arguably have the most to gain from any radical shake-up in the system. But instead, they seem to be demanding their own stake in the existing system, which Mr Postel-Vinay describes as "sclerotic" and "less and less sustainable".

In the first round, 34% of under-25s voted for Ms Royal, who favours state-subsidised jobs for young people, as against 19% for Mr Sarkozy.

"When French young people are asked what type of job they would like, they typically want public-sector jobs, because they feel they are more secure, although they are harder to get," says Mr Postel-Vinay.

"Young people would benefit from more flexibility, but I'm not sure that they are aware of that."

Back at Lille-Flandres station, 19-year-old Celine, who is studying English, says she would like to be an art teacher when she leaves college - exactly the kind of secure

public-sector job that Mr Postel-Vinay was describing.

"But I don't expect to get that straight away," she says.  
 "These days, if you have a job, you stick to it. There's no room for young people."

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