No "blank cheque" for Macron

French trade unionist Andrée Thomas on Emmanuel Macron's planned labour reforms

In May, President Emmanuel Macron, still basking in the glory of an election win that changed the face of French politics, unveiled plans to loosen the country's strict labour laws.

He wants to make it easier for companies to hire and fire people by, for example, placing caps on severance pay granted for unfair dismissal. He is also hoping to get rid of industry-wide collective bargaining. Instead, individual companies would negotiate pay and conditions with their workers, without unions being able to impose salaries on a whole sector.

Andrée Thomas, confederal secretary of the union Force Ouvrière, believes the plans are dangerous for workers. "We are very fearful of an expanded 'Loi Travail XXL'", she says, referring to an attempt by Macron's predecessor, Francois Hollande, to liberalise laws governing workers' rights.

"We are especially concerned at how Emmanuel Macron plans to reform the *instances représentatives du personnel* – the bodies that negotiate employees' salaries. Our organisation thinks this will undermine their ability to bargain [for decent wages]".

It's in everyone's interest that Macron succeed. But we won't be writing him a blank cheque.

Macron believes the proposals will make French businesses more agile and help bring down the country's stubbornly high unemployment rate: at 9.6 percent, it's double that of the UK and Germany.

Thomas is sceptical. She says Macron hasn't yet spelled out how his proposed reforms are supposed to create new jobs, or even who his new party, La République en marche, is supposed to represent.

"Macron has been given a historic mandate to deal with the true social and economic situation in France, Europe and beyond. And his party, which won a clear majority, shares in this responsibility. But what does it

actually stand for? If Macron doesn't get to grips with the social situation in France, things will be trickier in five years' time. We could see a far-right party back in power – the Front National or another extremist movement".

The social problems she's talking about include deep inequality and social fragmentation, with isolated banlieues (poor suburbs) becoming a breeding ground for crime and radicalisation. But the poor don't just live in cities. Rural areas have seen a decline in farming revenues. Residents are often isolated due to bad public transport links and a lack of social facilities. Meanwhile, trust in established politicians is at an all-time low – as the trouncing of both the socialists (PS) and conservatives (LR) in the June legislative elections attests.

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The resentment and pessimism felt across swathes of the countryside and former industrial towns provided a fertile stomping ground for far-right leader Marine Le Pen ahead of the presidential elections. After a poor showing in the legislative elections, however, Thomas believes the Front National's influence is waning.

"I'm more than happy about that," she says. And despite Le Pen winning 34 percent of the vote in the final round, "the presidential elections still didn't constitute a vote of support for her. They were a protest vote by many workers, especially in those areas that have suffered so much – in the east, south and central parts of France.

"This is why it's so important that we get our message across to our ministers and president. The only political movement that can really face up to Macron now is the leftist front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. They'll be out on the streets with us, the trades unions, protesting against these employment reforms".

The new president has certainly not given himself an easy ride. When former socialist president Francois Hollande tried to reform labour laws, he too met with stiff resistance from unions, whose members poured out onto the streets in protests which sometimes turned violent.

But Macron has staked his reputation on pushing through reforms, which employers say are long overdue. That's why he wants to rush them through parliament quickly using a procedure known as "ordinances", which will allow him to pass difficult laws without a lengthy debate in the Assemblée Nationale.

Brussels will be watching developments closely. In a list of country-by-country recommendations published in May, the European Commission criticised France for slow growth, a lack of innovation, chronic levels of unemployment for those born outside the EU and a failure to provide young people and the unemployed with adequate training opportunities.

Thomas, too, will be keeping a close eye. She and Macron agree on many of the problems currently facing France, but not necessarily on how to tackle them.

“We know Macron is a very liberal man, so we can expect his economic proposals to be liberal too. But we are prepared to look at them on a case-by-case basis. We may need to adopt a slightly different approach when it comes to defending workers’ rights. It’s in everyone’s interest that Macron succeed. But we won’t be writing him a blank cheque”.

Interview: Hannes Alpen; write-up: Ellie Mears



Andrée Thomas
Paris

Andrée Thomas is confederal secretary for Europe and the globe at the French trade union Force Ouvrière.