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France

The left of work against left of "benefits": Goodbye Croizat!

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“The left must defend work and not be the left of social benefits and minimums.”” The statement by Fabien Roussel, secretary general of the French Communist Party (PCF) and the party’s presidential candidate this year, at the opening of the party-sponsored “Fête de l’Humanité” in early September 2022 was not an improvization.

By focusing political and media attention on a polemic between the “left of work” and the “left of benefits”, the leadership of the PCF is pursuing an immediate goal. Having had to agree to join the NUPES alliance of left parties, dominated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise* to save its parliamentary existence, it wants to close the parenthesis by pushing division into a union it considers contradictory with its interests as an apparatus.

“Ridding workers of the uncertainty of tomorrow”

The process is not new, the theme chosen, on the other hand, marks a break that is not anecdotal. It is indeed the very foundations of Social Security, of which the PCF claims to be the vigilant guardian, that Fabien Roussel attacks.

The 1945 ordinance, of which Ambroise Croizat, PCF Minister of Labour in Charles de Gaulle’s government, was the architect, stated in its preamble:

Social security is the guarantee given to everyone that in all circumstances they will have the necessary means to ensure their subsistence and that of their family, in decent conditions. [...] It responds to the concern to rid workers of the uncertainty of tomorrow [...].

The particular balance of forces existing in the aftermath of the Second World War made it possible to impose on employers, in addition to the direct wage, compulsory payment of “social contributions,” the so-called “socialized” part of the wage. These social contributions make it possible to finance replacement income (retirement pensions, daily sickness allowances) or family allowances. At the time social security did not take into account “risk” unemployment, which was almost non-existent. This was, subsequently, the role of ASSEDIC, which became part of “Pôle emploi.”

A rear-guard fight

The bosses and politicians of the dominant classes had to accept it but have always fought the drain on their profits to finance “out of work” situations. For them, it was nothing more than an encouragement to the natural “laziness” of the “lower classes.”

“Social assistance,” a “cancer of our society”” according to Wauquiez, Le Pen or Zemmour, or the “crazy amount of dough” that the allowances cost according to Macron are only the latest avatars of this fight. The aim is threefold:

- to massively reduce the costs of social protection (which makes it possible to increase profits);
- to force employees with no other choice to accept any job for any salary;
- to divide employees among themselves (those who “work hard” against the “assisted”).

Roussel followed suit, pretending to “listen” to those who “talk about social assistance by telling us that they work and that they [the beneficiaries of minimum social benefits] do not work.”

Macron is launching a new counter-reform of unemployment benefits, by modulating benefits according to the level of employment. This is the moment chosen by Roussel to affirm “the subject is not to increase the social minima but to get out of the social minima”. These words will, rightly, be perceived as a betrayal by the unemployed and those who defend their rights and as support by the government. Gabriel Attal, Minister of Public Accounts, present at the Fête de l'Humanité, made no mistake and immediately approved Roussel's remarks.

Whatever he says, once engaged in this path, it will be difficult for Fabien Roussel to stop on the way and not to “hear” the same people explain to him about the woman next door who is also on assistance and “has children to claim benefits” or the neighbour on the floor above is a “shirker who is always taking sick leave, so as not to go to work and receive the daily allowances”.

Unemployment, pensions, family allowances, daily allowances, these are all the social rights acquired by employees that are called into question by the denunciation of “those who live on allowances.”

Substitute income or full employment: the absurd dilemma

In an attempt to justify his capitulation to neoliberal ideology, Roussel tried to oppose to it the demand for an “end to unemployment”: “I am fighting for a society that sets itself the horizon of guaranteeing a job, a training, a wage to each of its fellow citizens.”

If the "horizon" is indeed that of a society that ends unemployment, that is to say, in other words, a society that breaks with capitalism, the whole question is what strategy and what slogans are put forward to achieve it.

It is striking that, from this point of view, Roussel says nothing about the central demand to lead the struggle in this direction: for everyone to work less, in other words the sharing of work among all, which makes it possible both to give everyone a job and a dignified wage, to massively reduce constrained working time, and to give everyone the time necessary for leisure, social relations, personal development, participation in the life of the city.

In an article in *Le Monde*, Roussel admits, as if with regret:

Of course, as a transitional measure [we stress], employees need protection, support and I will be at their side to denounce all the attacks of the government against them, with this reform of unemployment insurance or the project of compulsory work in exchange for unemployment benefit.

But it is precisely because we are today in a society where there is mass unemployment and precariousness that we

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must act, not by denouncing replacement incomes in the name of full employment, but by demanding their extension:

- not the RSA (unemployment benefit), but the maintenance of the wage;
- pensions which, from the age of 60, ensure the extension of the best years of the wage;
- family allowances for the first child;
- a study allowance equal to the minimum wage for all students;
- the abolition of days of absence and full compensation for illness.

It is not social rights that produce mistrust and hostility among employees, it is on the contrary the fact that these rights are not for everyone and are increasingly restricted, giving the feeling that aid is "for others and never for me." It is also the fact that the popular classes are increasingly called upon to contribute instead of employers to finance social protection: reduction or abolition of so-called "employer" contributions, replaced by unfair taxes (CSG VAT and so on).

There is an urgent need to debate with PCF activists and sympathizers on the disastrous effects of the orientation defended by Fabien Roussel. It will not win him voters or activists, but it creates additional obstacles to the necessary mobilizations.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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