

# The French presidential elections and the death of social dialogue

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/04/france-presidential-elections-death-of-social-dialogue/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/04/france-presidential-elections-death-of-social-dialogue/)

04/04/2017

What role do trade unions have to play in the French presidential election? As [Nick Parsons](#) writes, when François Hollande won the last presidential election in 2012, he promised to establish a 'social dialogue' under which actors such as trade unions would be consulted over government policy. But the failure of this strategy, underlined by the extensive protests held over a new labour law in 2016, may leave trade unions resigned to oppositional mobilisation or increasing marginalisation from French political life, regardless of which candidate wins the upcoming election.



## Protest against the bill proposed by Myriam El Khomri to reform the French labour law. [Clément Gruin](#) (CC-BY-SA 4.0)

As France gears up for two rounds of voting in the presidential election on 23 April and 7 May, the voices of French trade unions are notable by their absence. While it has not been uncommon for French unions to remain silent during election campaigns, this time round, their silence speaks volumes about the recent past and possible future of social dialogue in France, and even in the EU.

Although they have been highly politicised since their origins in the nineteenth century, French unions have, over the last three decades, generally abstained from giving advice to their members and supporters about how to vote in elections, in line with what has often been seen as a fictitious independence of unions from parties. In 2012, however, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) leader, Bernard Thibault, explicitly called for voters to back the Socialist candidate, François Hollande, while the Democratic French Confederation of Labour (CFDT), the United Federation of Unions (FSU) and *Solidaires* all called for voters to 'beat Sarkozy' in a hardly-veiled call in support of Hollande.

This change of attitude is explained by Hollande's promises of a 'renewal of social democracy'. After years of being side-lined under Sarkozy, and still smarting from defeat in their opposition to his pension reforms in 2010, unions were offered greater influence in policy-making as Hollande sought to turn social dialogue into a 'method' of

governance. Social policy, in particular, would be delivered following consultation with the social partners – the representatives of wage-earners and employers – who would sign national collective agreements that would be implemented by further collective bargaining at lower levels or transposed into law. Dealing with the effects of the 2008 financial crisis would therefore be achieved through social compromise and consensus in the interests of fairness and justice for all. What could possibly go wrong?

### **Social democracy à la Hollande**

The centrepiece of Hollande's strategy was a plan to hold annual 'social conferences', called to discuss the main lines of government policy with the social partners. In 2012 and 2013, these seemed to be a success, with unions appreciating the government's openness to discussion. However, in 2014, the CGT, FSU, *Solidaires* and *Force Ouvrière* (Workers' Strength) all walked out of the conference, criticising the government for a lack of true dialogue, and for the general orientation of its policies. In a radical versus reformist split amongst the unions, the CFDT, UNSA, CFTC and CGC-CFE remained willing to engage in discussion with the socialist government. The 2015 social conference – the last to be held – was boycotted by the CGT and *Solidaires* amid accusations that the trade union voice was not being heard and that the government was merely doing the bidding of the employers' lobby.

Tensions between the unions and the government rose from March 2014 on, when Manuel Valls replaced Jean-Marc Ayrault as Prime Minister, signalling a refocusing of government strategy. In 2012, Hollande came to power arguing that the global economic crisis was the result of a failure of a globalised, unregulated financial capitalism, for which the bankers should be held responsible, and for which EU prescriptions for fiscal consolidation, enshrined in the Fiscal Compact, were not the answer. By 2014, however, in the face of persistently high unemployment, deficits and debts, the analysis changed to one which saw the problems of the French economy rooted in rigidities that fuelled a lack of competitiveness, in line with constant European Commission exhortations and recommendations whenever France submitted its National Reform Programme at the European Semester.

The first response was the 2014 'Responsibility Pact' involving reduced taxes and social charges to total €50m for companies in exchange for unquantified promises of job creation, training and investment. In the end, only the CFDT, and the right-leaning CFTC, as well as the managerial union CGC-CFE, signed the Pact with employer organisations. Further legislation, aimed at deregulating labour markets was anathema to unions and ensured that consensus over policy could not be reached, despite the continuing support for government action from reformist unions such as the CFDT.

The highpoint of these tensions was a series of mass one-day demonstrations against a new [Labour Law](#) that punctuated 2016, and which at times descended into violence. With the CGT in the vanguard of the movement, the main focus of anger was a proposal to allow for more flexible working time and reduced overtime payments through local agreements that could derogate from higher level, industry, agreements. Although demonstrations continued until 15 September, their scale was much reduced, as the law was finally passed in the French National Assembly on 20 July 2016 when the government resorted to Article 49.3, a legislative device that enables the executive to push legislation through parliament without a vote. Social dialogue as a means of gaining consensus over reform was effectively a dead duck.

### **The death of social dialogue**

There are many ways to explain the failure of Hollande's experiment in social dialogue in France, several of which are related to notions of French exceptionalism. A state which remains, relatively speaking, strong and centralised, is able to push through legislation using the constitutional tools at its disposal, such as the aforementioned Article 49.3. Whilst this may give rise to popular discontent channelled into street protest by the mobilisation capacity of the unions, the state is also able to take advantage of ideological divisions in a highly politicised and fragmented union movement. Thus, the government was able to legitimise the passing of the Labour Law through the support of reformist unions and effectively marginalise the more radical unions from the political process.

For French unions the future is bleak. None of the candidates in the 2017 presidential elections has made social dialogue a part of their programme. While Marine Le Pen has promised a return to a retirement age of sixty and to repeal the Labour Law, discussions with trade unions over social policy will hardly figure high on her agenda, and much of her nationalist rhetoric will presumably continue to arouse anger amongst trade unionists. The other frontrunner, and according to current opinion polls, likely winner of the election, Emmanuel Macron has promised more of what the trade unions protested against under Hollande – meeting EU deficit reduction targets, a smaller state and more liberalisation and deregulation.

Meanwhile, the rest of the left, including the Socialist Party, has been split by Macron's emergence into warring factions, none of which are strong enough to mount a credible opposition around which trade unions can coalesce. Indeed, given that trade unions themselves cannot deliver the votes of their members and supporters to any particular candidate, they are unable to impose themselves on the political debate. Post-election, the choice is one of oppositional mobilisation of the sort seen in 2016, or increasing marginalisation from French political life. Given the difficulties of sustaining protest movements over time, the second outcome seems more likely. Either way, the prospects for social dialogue and social democracy are not good.

The failure of Hollande's experiment in social democracy also has implications beyond France's borders at a time when the European Commission has announced its own plans to reinvigorate the social dialogue at both European and national levels to address the concerns of workers and stall the wave of Euroscepticism currently plaguing the EU. Ultimately, Hollande's 'method' could not secure trade union compliance to precisely the programme pushed by the European Commission and Council through the Country Specific Recommendations emerging from the European Semester.

This framing of policy in terms of reducing deficits and improving competitiveness through reductions in social expenditure, labour market flexibility and shifting taxation from companies to consumption, with, in the background, the threat of the excessive deficit procedure, reduces the margin for manoeuvre for governments and for discussion through the social dialogue. In the light of these constraints, without a change in macroeconomic policy orientations at the European level, the reinvigoration of social dialogue at national and European levels, and the contribution of this to a re-legitimisation of the European project, is a tall order.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

---

## About the author

### **Nick Parsons** – Cardiff University

Nick Parsons is Reader in French in the School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, and is a specialist in French and European industrial relations and social policy. He is the author of *French Industrial Relations in the New World Economy* (Routledge 2005) as well as more recent book chapters and articles on European social and labour market policies, 'bossnappings' in France and relations between left parties and trade unions in France. He is currently conducting research into the social dialogue in France and the articulation between the French and EU levels of the social dialogue.



-