

In France, presidential frontrunner François Fillon vs the unions

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Presidential frontrunner thinks unions are ‘weak.’ He might have to eat his words.

Contents

- [Wiggle room](#)
- [Not so weak after all](#)

PARIS — French conservative presidential candidate François Fillon has put on record his belief that the country’s trade unions no longer possess the muscle to prevent his planned reforms.

The unions’ response? Go ahead and see how weak we are.

Five months ahead of France’s general election, representatives from the biggest unions told POLITICO they are preparing to meet Fillon’s challenge with a show of force against the most radical aspects of his program.

It could take the form of street protests, strikes or both either before or after the May 2017 vote, they said.

The threat of a clash with France’s famously combative unions may cool Fillon’s Thatcherite ambitions [1]. Having already scrapped controversial plans to privatize parts of the social security system, the former prime minister is now poised to make further concessions — notably on plans to slash 500,000 civil service jobs and abolish the 35-hour work week.

Formal negotiations on those issues start in January, and unions expect the candidate to have a very open mind.

“What we can say clearly is that the number of 500,000 job cuts in the civil service is totally unrealistic,” said Philippe Louis, head of the CFTC union, who will meet with a Fillon ally in January.

“When we sit down with his team, we are going to point out that in schools, in the police, in hospitals — there is just no scope to do this, given the current state of our public service.

“I believe that there will be a spirit of compromise, and that these proposals will not remain intact.”

Wiggle room

When Fillon deleted an entire section of his health program [2] from his web site in the face of public opposition, staffers explained that the platform naturally needed to be “updated” for the general election.

Plenty more “updating” looks likely from a candidate who has vowed to use executive orders to drive through his reforms — despite never having resorted to the tool during five years as prime minister under ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy. In fact, Fillon relied heavily on dialogue with the hardline CGT union to pass reforms.

Fillon has appointed conservative senator and ally Gérard Larcher as his envoy to deal with the unions.

A senior Fillon campaign adviser declined to discuss the talks. “It’s only normal for a presidential candidate to have a direct rapport with unions,” said MP Jérôme Chartier.

But the choice of Larcher, who is an advocate of social dialogue with a long history of negotiating with unions, is in itself a sign of willingness to compromise. During the primary, Larcher described dialogue with unions as being “indispensable” to reform — not exactly the same language as Fillon, who promised to be “inflexible” on his plans.

At the top of union priorities in January will be plans to reduce the number of civil servants and raise working hours, particularly for hospital staff. Representatives for nurses, teachers, police and civil servants called such plans “worrying,” “unacceptable” and “unrealistic.” They would demonstrate their unhappiness with Fillon’s plans through protests that have already been scheduled.

“We are preparing for massive mobilization in the first quarter of 2017,” said Jawad Mahjoubi, who represents civil servants in the CGT union. “Our response will be proportional to the scale of the offensive against us.”

Louis, of the more moderate CFTC union, said: “I think he [Fillon] will also be careful about avoiding a full-scale run-in.”

Not so weak after all

Fillon’s tread-carefully approach may seem surprising for a candidate who finds unions “weak.” He was likely referring to the fact that, unlike in Germany or Sweden, where unions have massive membership, in France only a small percentage of private sector workers are unionized.

However, that small percentage is empowered to make decisions on behalf of nearly all workers. And despite rules curtailing union power to disrupt daily life, they have mounted significant industrial action and demonstrations against the current Socialist government.

“The (conservative) *Républicains* party has 200,000 members, while the CFDT union has 800,000,” said Laurent Berger, chief of the reformist CFDT union, France’s largest by membership. “So let’s please stop the finger-pointing.”

Several union representatives warned that unless Fillon seriously revised his program, they would have trouble turning members away from the National Front.

If Fillon wants to reform his country, he will struggle to bypass unions entirely, particularly the CFDT, which was a crucial partner for President François Hollande when he was trying to pass a labor reform. Without the CFDT’s support, he would have faced a common front of opposition that would have made passing the bill nearly impossible.

Berger has called Fillon’s program “worrying” — an indication that he will not sign on without serious revisions.

There is another serious risk for Fillon in alienating unions: that their members will turn away from his “ultra-liberal” program and choose to embrace the statism of far-right leader Marine Le Pen.

The National Front president already enjoys widespread support among blue-collar voters. Her aggressive campaign to undermine Fillon — whom she is expected to face off against in the presidential election’s final round — focuses relentlessly on his “liberalism” and the idea that he will dismantle a cherished welfare state.

Several union representatives warned that unless Fillon seriously revised his program, they would have trouble turning members away from the National Front during the next election.

“It’s easy to see that the National Front vote is on the rise in all the sectors where workers feel abandoned by the state,” said Berger.

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P.S.

* 12/22/16, 5:21 AM CET Updated 12/22/16, 9:16 AM CET:
<http://www.politico.eu/article/francois-fillon-vs-the-unions/>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 39825), [France: François Fillon claims victory on Sunday night in the conservative party presidential primary](#).

[2] <http://www.politico.eu/pro/frances-fillon-backpedals-on-health-care-reform-proposal/>