



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**France: Developments in
working life 2023**

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Eurofound reference number: WPEF24045

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Introduction

The year 2023 marks the end of the catch-up effect of the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, with GDP rising by just 0.9% in volume terms after growth of 2.6% in 2022 (INSEE, 2024c). This slowdown is reflected in the unemployment curve, which is beginning to reverse: after a historically low level of 7.1% in the first quarter of 2023 (unseen since 1982), the unemployment rate reached 7.5% at the end of the year (INSEE, 2023b). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) employment rate rises slightly from 68.6% to 68.8% between the first quarter of 2023 and the first quarter of 2024. The ILO activity rate rises from 73.9 to 74.5 over the same period (INSEE, 2023b).

Household consumption slows sharply in 2023, rising by 0.8% (in volume terms) after a 3.1% increase in 2022, which was still mainly due to a post-health crisis rebound. As an annual average, consumer prices slows slightly in 2023 from 5.2% in 2022 to 4.9%. The purchasing power of disposable income increases by 0.8% in 2023. This increase, measured for all households, includes the effect of population growth. At the individual level, purchasing power per consumption unit increases by 0.3% (INSEE, 2023a).

France has 9.1 million poor people if the poverty threshold is set at 60% of the median standard of living, according to INSEE's provisional data for 2021 (the latest year available). In 2021, the poverty rate is 14.5%, compared to 13.6% in 2020). At its lowest point, the rate was 12.4% in 2004 (INSEE, 2023c).

According to the National Observatory on Fuel Poverty (Observatoire de la précarité énergétique, 2023), 24% of French people say they suffered from the cold for at least 24 hours during the winter of 2022-2023. Of these, 42% said the reason was financial. 79% of French people said they had turned down the heating at home to avoid high bills (+10 points).

Against this backdrop of economic stagnation, inflation and rising poverty, the pension reform definitively adopted in March 2023 has created a rift between the government and the French people as a whole, with 80% opposed to this reform imposed by the executive and denounced by a united trade union front, which is rare in a country where trade union pluralism often leads to division. The political cost of this reform will be paid in 2024, with the far right scoring unprecedentedly high results in the legislative elections of June-July 2024.

Political context

There were no elections at the national level in 2023, resulting in political stability at the head of state with Emmanuel Macron as president. The government has been led, since 16 May 2022, by Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne. She was replaced at the beginning of 2024 by Gabriel Attal. However, the year was notable for its political developments, including significant discussions surrounding pension reform, which was passed in March 2023 without a vote by the Parliament. In December, the immigration bill was passed by the Parliament with the support of the conservative *Parti Républicain* and the far-right *Rassemblement National*. Due to the government's lack of an absolute majority in the National Assembly, it has been compelled to negotiate with external political groups throughout the year in order to pass legislation.

Actors and institutions

Social partners

The year was marked by the formation of a trade union front, made up of all five confederations, to oppose the pension reform. Despite the pluralism of the French trade unions and the differences between these confederations, it is remarkable that the trade union front did not fall apart until the reform was finally adopted.

According to the unions, their opposition to pension reform has led to a significant increase in membership of their organisations (Les Échos, 2023a). For instance, on 31 December 2023, France's leading trade union confederation, the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT), had 634,278 members, a net increase of 3.61% compared with 2022, i.e. 22,073 more members (CFDT, 2024). At the end of May 2023, the second largest confederation, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) boasted that 30,000 people had joined and requested contact since 1 January 2023 (CGT, 2023a). This could be the start of a reversal in the downward trend in the number of workers affiliated to a trade union, as figures published by the Ministry of Labour (DARES, 2023a) show that the erosion in the number of workers affiliated to a trade union has continued since 2013. In 2019, 10.3% of employees indicated that they belonged to a trade union organisation, representing a 0.9-point decline from 2013. In 2019, this proportion decreased, in comparison to 2013, by 1.4 points in the civil service (to 18.4%) and by 0.9 points in the private sector (to 7.8%).

Moreover, on the institutional side, major changes at the top of the two main union confederations occurred in 2023, with the surprise election of Sophie Binet as head of the CGT on 31 March, in the midst of the fight against the pension reform. She was elected by the Congress which, after a night of debates, was unable to decide between the two female candidates who had put themselves forward, one supported by the former general secretary of the CGT, the other by federations opposed to the former leadership. In the absence of majority, the members of the congress finally elected Sophie Binet, at the beginning of the morning, instead of one of the two contenders. At 41, she is the first woman in the history of the CGT to hold the post of General Secretary. Laurent Berger, who had led the -CFDT since November 2012, handed over to his number two, Marylise Léon, who was unanimously elected by the CFDT national executive committee on 21 June as planned.

On the employers' side, the main organisation, the MEDEF, has changed its leadership, with Patrick Martin taking over from Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux who was elected on 6 July.

Social dialogue bodies or frameworks

The French Ministry of Labour has published some worrying data on the erosion of employee representation in companies (DARES, 2024a). In 2022, 36.2% of companies with 10 or more employees in the non-agricultural private sector were covered by at least one employee representation body, such as a social and economic committee (CSE). This proportion of companies covered by at least one staff representation body has fallen by almost 8 percentage points compared with 2018, which corresponds to the first year of the reform of employee representation bodies introduced by the "Macron" regulations in 2017. Companies with at least one employee representative body employ 76.7% of the workforce.

Other working life related institutions

No relevant changes in 2023.

Developments in collective bargaining

Changes to the collective bargaining structures and frameworks

The collective bargaining system remained stable during the year, with only one twist concerning collective bargaining on wages at the branch level. In order to avoid a situation where the agreed minimum wage in a branch is permanently lower than the legal minimum wage (SMIC) – a situation that affected 60 branches in October 2023 considered as “not in compliance” (Les Échos, 2024b) – the government issued a decree aimed at speeding up the extension of collective agreements to all workers and companies in a branch (Government, 2023a). With this decree, issued in application of the ‘Purchasing Power’ law of 16 August 2022 (Parliament, 2022a), the government has committed itself to renewing agreements within a maximum of two months, instead of six months or even a year in some cases. By reducing the duration of the procedure, the government aims to prevent too many sectors from having their agreed minimum wage fall permanently below the level of the SMIC, especially during periods of inflation when the SMIC is revalued once or twice during the year.

In addition, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne decided in October 2023 to set up a High Council on Remuneration, Employment and Productivity (Les Échos, 2023c). It will have to work on the ‘link between productivity, value creation and wages’ and ‘support the review of classifications and prevent the downward spiral of pay scales’. The High Council must also monitor ‘the determinants and evolution of wages, in particular the evolution of real wages and wage bargaining’ as well as ‘classifications’ (Ministère du Travail, 2024). This body, which brings together all the representative social partners, government representatives and experts, was set up in March 2024 (Les Échos, 2024a).

Collective bargaining in the platform economy

Following the agreement signed on 20 April between the organisations representing self-employed workers and platforms in the sector, self-employed delivery workers using a two- or three-wheeled vehicle, motorised or otherwise, and working through a digital platform, will have to be covered by a minimum income guarantee of €11.75 per hour worked. The agreement also defines the guarantees surrounding the deactivation of their account by the platforms. It was approved on 30 August by the Autorité des relations sociales des plateformes d’emploi (ARPE), which is the public authority responsible for labour relations in the digital platform sector covering deliveries and private passenger cars with driver. The minimum wage entered into force on 30 November. It follows on from a first agreement signed in January for private passenger cars with driver, which fixed a minimum income of €7.65 per journey.

Future developments

On 21 November, the government sent the social partners a policy paper “on the New Deal for Working Life” (Ministère du Travail, 2023b), inviting them to commence negotiations on three subjects: the universal working time account, employment of workers aged over 50 (with a view to increasing the employment rate of this demographic) and career paths (for adapting to the green, digital and demographic transitions). The Ministry of Employment says that the aim is for cross-industry agreements to be reached by 15 March 2024. The universal working time account will enable each member of the workforce to benefit, throughout their career, from a mechanism

allowing them to accrue leave or rest time, and to subsequently use this time to help manage their career and private life.

Data on collective bargaining

The statistics on collective bargaining activity published in December 2023 refer to 2022 (Ministère du Travail, 2023c). The Ministry of Labour notes that 2022 was a year of very strong momentum in collective bargaining, particularly on wages. There was an 83% increase in collective bargaining activity on pay, with 691 agreements and endorsements across all occupations. The report highlights ‘an unprecedented level of sectoral-level agreements’, up by more than 40% on the previous year, with 1,495 agreements concluded. The volume of company-level agreements – 88,570 agreements – also reached unprecedented levels, with an increase of more than 15% and 17% in companies with fewer than 50 employees.

At cross-industry level, only one national inter-industry agreement (ANI) was signed in 2022, reaffirming the social partners' commitment to an ‘ambitious system of parity adapted to the challenges of a world of work undergoing profound change’ (Social partners, 2022). But the year 2023 has been more active, with the signing of five national cross-industry agreements on the sharing of value within the company (see below) (Social partners, 2023a), the ecological transition and social dialogue (see box 1 below) (Social partners, 2023b), the reform of occupational accident and disease insurance (Social partners, 2023c), supplementary pensions (Social partners, 2023d), and unemployment insurance (Social partners, 2023e).

Agreement coverage remains remarkably high and stable, thanks to the almost systematic use of the extension procedure for collective agreements. These statistics have not been published recently (Ministère de l’Economie et des Finances, 2017), but the latest data from the ILO indicate a conventional coverage rate of 98% in 2018 (ILO, 2024), and everything suggests that it will still be at this level in 2023.

In a study published in June 2023 (DARES, 2023d), DARES pointed out that in 2021, 17.8% of companies with 10 or more employees in the private sector (excluding companies in the agricultural sector) were engaged in collective bargaining, 1.2 points more than in 2020. They employ 63.0% of the employees in this field. 82.6% of negotiations resulted in an agreement or amendment, up 1.4 points over one year. The propensity to negotiate is high in companies with union delegates (81.7% in 2021) and is rising among those with only elected representatives (25.2%). Salary issues are still the most frequently discussed, by 10.6% of companies. Working conditions come in second place (6.5%), ahead of working time, driven by the regulation of teleworking following its development during the crisis. Of the companies that have not opened negotiations, 47.7% say that they apply a branch agreement directly, and 40.8% say that they have no staff representative to start negotiations.

Box 1: social dialogue and environmental issues

On national-level, social partners have concluded their negotiations concerning a national cross-industry agreement on the theme of ecological transition and social dialogue (Social partners, 2023b). This text, which is not binding, provides some examples and good practices for applying the legal framework covering ecological transition. The agreement comprises five chapters: 1/ identifying methods of leverage for change within the framework of an informed social dialogue around ecological transition; 2/ enabling social dialogue to address environmental issues at company

level; 3/ incorporating environmental issues into collective bargaining; 4/ addressing environmental issues within territorial and sectoral social dialogue spaces; 5/ dealing with employment and skills-related issues as part of the process of implementing the ecological transition. What good practices are suggested here? One example is that of including a regular review of environmental policy on the agenda of works council ('Economic and Social Committee' – ESC) meetings at companies with more than 50 employees, and setting up further ESC subcommittees, with their own budget, to deal with environmental matters. A concrete example of this, as suggested by the text, is having “green clauses” to mitigate the consequences of environmental and climate-related changes, e.g. by providing for adaptations to organisational arrangements and working conditions or including environmental criteria in profit-sharing agreements.

In addition, on sectoral-level, social partners of the pharmaceutical industry have signed an agreement (Social partners, Pharmaceutical industry, 2023), with a view to meeting the sector's decarbonisation commitments. Companies will be required to produce a review of their business's carbon footprint within 12 months, and subsequently to put in place an action plan. Companies with more than 300 employees will have to set up an environmental committee that will be responsible for 'examining the environmental impact of the company's strategic decisions or its environmental strategy'.

Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism

The Banque de France points out that the minimum wage has protected the purchasing power of the lowest paid workers as it is indexed to inflation (Banque de France, 2023). Since the end of 2021, it has been regularly adjusted in line with cumulative inflation. In addition, the minimum wage in many sectors has been revised relatively quickly in 2022 through sectoral-level agreement, following the increase in the SMIC. However, while the SMIC increases by 6.6% year-on-year at the beginning of 2023, the average increase in sectoral agreed minimum wages were slightly less than 5%. This partial adjustment on sectoral-level to the increase in the SMIC or inflation is explained by heterogeneous increases depending on the sectoral or wage level. As a result, the lowest minimum rates above the minimum wage increased less on average.

At company level, negotiated pay rises average 4.4% in 2023, compared with 2.8% in 2022 and 1.4% in 2021. Pay rises are more sustainable in industry and construction than in services, particularly in sectors where recruitment difficulties are greater. Negotiated pay rises are not evenly spread: a quarter of agreements include higher rises for relatively low paid workers. Finally, a third of company pay agreements include the payment of a value-sharing bonus (VSP) – on average around €900 – which provides a one-off additional boost to total pay in 2023.

According to DARES, the average nominal collectively agreed wage has again sharply increased with + 3.9% in 2023 (DARES, 2024b), in comparison to + 4.5% in 2022 (DARES, 2023c). In average from 2012 to 2021, the average nominal collectively agreed wage increased of 1.65% per year.

To increase workers' purchase power, in February, all social partners (with the exception of the CGT trade union) have signed a national cross-industry agreement on “value-sharing” (Social partners, 2023a), which is intended to give employees a larger share of the fruits of their company's financial performance. There are already several profit-sharing instruments in existence in France that apply to companies with at least 50 employees, such as ownership interest [*participation*] (which is compulsory and pays out a bonus based on the company's profits) and profit-sharing schemes

[*intéressement*] (which are optional and involve paying bonuses linked to the company's results or its non-financial performance). The new agreement, which will have to be transposed by a law, provides for an obligation requiring companies with between 11 and 49 employees to put in place one of these instruments, from 1 January 2025 onwards. Furthermore, when companies with at least 50 employees make extraordinary profits in France, they would then be obliged to either negotiate the automatic payment of a *participation* or *intéressement* [see above] supplement, or to commence discussions regarding an alternative value-sharing mechanism.

Collective bargaining and inflation

In France, wages are negotiated or set at several levels. At national level, the legal minimum wage (SMIC) sets a minimum wage for all employees. At industry level, minimum wages are negotiated for each type of job, and play a particularly important role for the smallest companies. Finally, at company level, collective agreements on actual wages may be signed between union representatives and employers, particularly in large companies. At all three levels, pay negotiations generally follow an annual timetable.

Inflation-linked clauses are prohibited in collective agreements. Some collective agreements provide for review clauses in the event of an automatic increase in the minimum wage, so that negotiations can be initiated on agreed minimum wages on sectoral level to ensure that they remain above the level of the SMIC.

In general, pay negotiations are based on known inflation rather than inflation forecasts. One of the reasons for this is that negotiations take place on an annual basis and not over two or three years as in other countries.

For branch or company wage negotiations, negotiators generally refer to the INSEE index (INSEE, 2024a). The consumer price index (CPI), which measures the average change in the price of goods consumed by households, is the main instrument used to measure inflation. The HICP index is only produced by INSEE for international comparisons, but is not used as a reference by negotiators.

Given the annual nature of pay bargaining, adjustments were made fairly quickly overall, with the social partners sometimes anticipating negotiations, rather at company level, by starting pay negotiations without waiting for the bargaining cycle to open, in order to compensate without waiting for the drop in purchasing power suffered by employees. At branch level, the process is always a little longer, between the opening of negotiations, the signing of an agreement and its extension to all employees and companies in the sector, which inevitably takes several months.

Developments in governmental responses to inflation

To offset the impact of inflation on the purchasing power, the government has gradually retreated in 2023 to actions that will have the least possible impact on the deteriorating state of public finances, after spending around €60 billion in two years (Le Monde, 2023k). Although inflation on supermarket shelves is easing, food prices remain high (up 11% year-on-year), while fuel prices began to rise again during the summer, now approaching €2 per litre, stressed *Le Monde*. A radioactive subject, impossible to ignore for the public authorities, whose objective is in principle to put an end to the voucher policy after three years of “whatever it takes” (Le Monde, 2023l).

Therefore, faced with a further rise in petrol prices over the summer, the government has abandoning the previous measure of a direct rebate on the price of fuel paid for by the State. The “fuel discount” (*remise carburant*)ⁱ at the pump ended on 31 December 2022 and has been replaced in 2023 by the “fuel allowance” (*indemnité carburant*)ⁱⁱ that apply only to the 10 million lowest-income workers who use their vehicle (car or two-wheeler) to go to work. The amount of the allowance is set at €100 euros for the whole 2023. In addition, the government authorised fuel distributors to sell fuel “at a loss” for six months from 1 December 2023, a measure that should help to reduce the price of fuel for all citizen.

The government has continued to pay for part of the rise in electricity tariffs, via the Tariff shield for energy pricesⁱⁱⁱ, but this too is due to be phased out by the end of 2024. The electricity tariff shield is calculated on the basis of a frozen regulated electricity tariff: in 2022, this system limited the increase in tariffs for customers eligible for the regulated tariff to 4% including tax. From 1 February 2023, the increase has been limited to an average of 15% incl. tax. In addition, given the fall in prices on the wholesale gas markets, the individual gas shield was not renewed on 1 July 2023, nor will it be in 2024.

On the question of wages, the government has called a social conference on low wages and careers, in October 2023 (Les Echos, 2023d), to encourage the social partners to act on the issue of low wages and to speed up sectoral-level wage negotiations as in 2022^{iv}. ‘It is the negotiations that will lead to the revision of the classification grids’ and ‘that will bring about changes in the minimum wages of branches that are still below the minimum wage’, stressed the Prime minister. The aim is to encourage employers to negotiate pay rises from October 2023 that will offset the rise in inflation in 2022-2023. As inflation returns to more normal levels, employees should be able to regain their purchasing power in 2024.

ⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Discount on the price of all fuels](#), case FR-2022-14/2344 (measures in France), COVID-19, War in Ukraine, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2023), [Fuel allowance of €100](#), case FR-2023-3/3097 (measures in France), COVID-19, War in Ukraine, Cost of Living Crisis, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Tariff shield for energy prices](#), case FR-2021-40/3105 (measures in France), War in Ukraine, Cost of Living Crisis, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

^{iv} Eurofound (2023), [Encouraging branches to raise their minimum wages](#), case FR-2022-36/2846 (measures in France), War in Ukraine, Cost of Living Crisis, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

In addition, after having facilitated the deployment of profit sharing in 2022^v, on 22 November, Parliament definitively adopted the draft law transcribing into law (Parliament, 2023f), the national cross-industry agreement of 10 February 2023 on value-sharing within the company (Social partners, 2023a), signed by all social partners (with the exception of the CGT trade union) which is intended to give employees a larger share of the fruits of their company's financial performance (see above *Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism*). On an experimental basis, for a five-year term with effect from promulgation of the law, companies with between 11 and 49 employees will be required to put in place at least one value-sharing mechanism (profit-sharing), including a new one known as a "company value-enhancement sharing scheme" [*plan de partage de la valorisation de l'entreprise*]. It also includes measures intended to simplify value-sharing mechanisms and develop employee share-ownership.

In the category of measures that do not impose any additional expenditure on the State, the government has also brought forward negotiations between distributors and suppliers in the retail sector. This acceleration of the timetable for annual negotiations, in the hope of seeing price cuts on the shelves, was proposed as part of a bill in October.

In the civil service, after a first raise of wages in 2022^{vi}, the government announced in June the aim of boosting the purchasing power of the lowest-paid employees. State and hospital civil servants earning less than €3,250 gross (i.e. around 1.8 times the minimum wage) received a purchasing power bonus of between €300 and €800 gross. In total, two million people received this bonus in October, representing half of all civil servants and two-thirds of hospital workers (Ministère de la Transformation et de la Fonction publique, 2023).

^v Eurofound (2022), [The deployment of profit-sharing](#), case FR-2022-34/2830 (measures in France), War in Ukraine, Cost of Living Crisis, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

^{vi} Eurofound (2022), [Increase in remuneration for public servants](#), case FR- 2022-27/2870 (measures in France), War in Ukraine, Cost of Living Crisis, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

Labour disputes and industrial action

The most significant industrial action took place at the beginning of the year as part of the unions' opposition to the pension reform, with strikes in sectors where the unions are well established - the public sector, oil refineries (Le Monde, 2023b), waste collection (Le Monde, 2023c), public transport, education, etc. - and around fifteen days of demonstrations across France, with peaks of between 1.3 and 3.5 million demonstrators on the streets, according to government or CGT estimates. However, the impact of inflation has also led to numerous strikes for general pay rises.

Changes to the right to strike

In order to limit disruptions to air traffic, a law on the predictability of the organisation of air navigation services in the event of industrial action was published on 29 December (Parliament, 2023d). It requires all air traffic control staff performing control, flight information and alert functions, and whose absence is likely to directly affect the operation of flights, to declare their participation individually no later than noon on the day before each strike day, on pain of disciplinary action. Previously, unions in the air traffic control sector had to give five days' notice of a strike in order to ensure a "minimum service", but strikers did not have to declare their participation individually, unlike other employees in the sector.

Data on industrial action

According to the latest available data (DARES, 2024c), in 2022, 2.4% of private sector enterprises with 10 or more employees (employing 25% of employees in this sector) experienced one or more strikes. This share is 0.8 points higher than in 2021 (DARES, 2023b). The number of individual days not worked due to strikes increased by 71% compared to the previous year, from 58 days not worked in 2021 to 99 days per 1,000 employees in 2022. The highest number of days was recorded in the transport and storage sector (414 compared to 325 in 2021). The main reason for stoppages is inter-sectoral industrial actions (66%), although internal reasons have decreased from 36% in 2021 to 20% in 2022. In 79% of companies affected by at least one strike in 2022, the demands relate to pay. This is usually the most common reason for strike action and is up 6 points on the previous year, continuing the sharp rise seen in 2021 against a backdrop of high inflation. Future data for 2023 is likely to show an increase in conflicts, driven in particular by wage demands to keep pace with inflation and strikes organised to protest against the pension reform.

Collective labour disputes in 2023

Apart from the strikes linked to the pension reform, the air traffic control sector (Le Monde, 2023q), has been affected by several strikes due to the unions' opposition to the reform of their right to strike (see above) (Le Monde, 2023n).

Wage demands in response to the sharp rise in inflation, particularly in energy and food prices, have also been a major cause of strikes. One of the most emblematic strikes was at Getlink (Le Monde, 2023r), which operates the Channel Tunnel. This unannounced strike forced the closure of the tunnel for several hours on 21 December. In the early evening, the unions announced that the tunnel would reopen, with traffic gradually resuming on 22 December. The unions were demanding a threefold increase in the €1,000 bonus promised by the management, and appear to have won

their case. The announcement of the cancellation of afternoon trains to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam from St Pancras station in London caused panic among passengers planning to return to France or Belgium for the Christmas holidays. Another dispute was that of the order pickers at the online furniture retailer Verbaudet (Le Monde, 2023g), who went on strike for more than two and a half months to demand a pay rise (Le Monde, 2023f). They obtained a general increase of 4% against the wage freeze proposed by management at the start of the mandatory annual pay negotiations. Wage disputes have affected all sectors, including the most unusual places such as the Eiffel Tower – where the unions obtained the opening of discussions to review the general economic model of the tower – and Disneyland Paris (Le Monde, 2023h).

There have also been numerous disputes in the audiovisual sector, over wages (Le Monde, 2023p), but also against reorganisation, as at France 3 (Le Monde, 2023o), France 24 (Le Monde, 2023m) and Euronews (Le Monde, 2023d), or to challenge the independence of a newspaper's editorial board by its shareholders, as at Le Journal du Dimanche (Le Monde, 2023j), where journalists went on strike for several weeks before giving in, or at the business daily Les Echos (Les Echos, 2023b).

Some experts have highlighted a recent trend since 2010 towards fewer industrial disputes (Pélisse et al 2023).

Developments in working time

Changes to legislation

There were no significant changes to working time legislation in 2023. However, in the context of the 2024 Olympic Games, a law was passed in April 2023 to allow retail establishments providing goods or services in the vicinity of Olympic and Paralympic venues to derogate from Sunday rest between 15 June and 30 September 2024 (Parliament, 2023c). The text was condemned by some trade unions but approved by the Constitutional Council.

In addition, the Supreme Court [*Cour de cassation*] has handed down several rulings setting aside French provisions in the area of paid leave because they have been deemed not to comply with EU law (Cour de Cassation, 2023b). Through the direct effect of Article 31, paragraph 2, of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, a citizen seeking justice benefits directly from the solution that complies with EU law. From now on, employees who fall ill or suffer an accident will be entitled to paid leave covering their period of absence, and in the case of an accident at work, paid leave entitlements will no longer be calculated based on the first year of sick leave only (Cour de cassation, 2023c). The decisions were highly welcomed by the trade unions, as the CGT which points out that it took seven years of litigation to obtain a conviction against the French State on the issue of paid leave and a reversal by the Court of Cassation (CGT, 2023).

Bargaining outcomes

The data on the subjects negotiated in 2023 are not yet known but will likely resemble the outcomes of the 2022 collective bargaining report published by the Ministry of Labour (Ministère du Travail, 2023c). There are no significant agreements on working hours. However, there have been a number of developments in the area of teleworking and the right to disconnect.

According to this collective bargaining report (Ministère du Travail, 2023c), teleworking remained an important bargaining issue in 2022, despite a decrease compared to 2021. Four sectors signed agreements compared to eight in 2021, and 3,400 companies compared to 4,100 in the previous year. According to the Ministry of Labour, this change could be explained by the fact that many agreements on quality of life and working conditions include now telework regulations instead of separate agreements. The report stresses that 'more and more agreements take account of special situations, in particular pregnancy, employees with family responsibilities and parents of disabled children'. The adaptation of workplaces as a means of preventing occupational exclusion, and sometimes the employment of older workers, are also included in the clauses of some agreements. Agreements are more likely to cover the conditions under which a workers can end teleworking and return to a position at the employer's workplace, particularly in cases of reduced performance, lack of autonomy, reduced motivation or psychosocial risks linked to the lack of social ties or over-connection.

With regard to the right to disconnect, the sectors have taken up this issue relatively little: only three agreements have been registered (in 2018, 2019 and 2021). Otherwise, the number of company agreements addressing this issue has been stable and rather dynamic over the last four years, with almost 400 agreements concluded in 2022. These agreements share a common basis: the conditions of the right to take time off, i.e. the way in which it can be exercised; the awareness-

raising and training initiatives undertaken or to be undertaken by the employer; the responsibilities of the various actors involved in the issue (employees, management, health and safety representatives, staff representatives, etc.); good practices in the use of tools and the risks associated with the misuse of communication tools.

Debates on duration and organisation

No significant debates in 2023.

Other important policy developments

Regulations on employment status and contracts

A law of 9 March (Parliament, 2023a) has strengthened the employer's obligation to provide an employee with information about the main features of their employment relationship such as the components of remuneration indicated separately, including overtime bonuses, as well as the frequency and terms of payment of this remuneration, and as the daily, weekly or monthly working hours or the way in which they are arranged over another reference period. A decree of 30 October (Government, 2023c) sets out how this law will be implemented. These new obligations entered into force on 1 November. The decree also sets out details of how employees working on fixed-term contracts or in temporary positions are to be informed about job vacancies involving permanent contracts within the company. The aim is to make it easier for precarious workers to find permanent employment, but the initiative must come from the employee, who must send a request for information to the employer (in the case of an employee on a fixed-term contract) or to the user company (in the case of a temporary worker).

Otherwise, since 1 January 2024, under Law no. 2022-1598 of 21 December 2022 enacting emergency measures relating to the functioning of the labour market and aimed at achieving full employment (Parliament, 2022b), an employer planning to offer a permanent contract to an employee at the end of their fixed-term or temporary agency contract, is required to notify the employee of this offer, and if it is declined, the employer must then inform the public employment service (France Travail) within one month of this rejection. Details of this mechanism were set out in a government decree (Government, 2023b), and order (Government, 2024). An employee who rejects two offers of permanent employment over a 12-month period from one, or different employers, will be denied unemployment benefit.

Policies to reduce the gender pay-gap

At the Social Conference in October, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne announced the launch of consultations with trade unions and employers' organisations to 'create a new equality index', which she described as 'an important but imperfect tool' (Liaisons sociales quotidien, 2023). The government has given itself 18 months to complete the work, which is faster than the time allowed for France to implement the European directive on pay transparency. There is widespread agreement that the results in terms of gender equality in the workplace are not good enough. 'Despite the measures taken, inequalities persist, particularly in terms of pay and career progression,' complained Élisabeth Borne. 'The new index needs to be more ambitious and more transparent. We also need to make it more reliable and monitor its application more closely,' she added.

Health and safety regulations and policies

Law no. 2023-567 of 7 July 2023 promoting psychological support for women who suffer a miscarriage (Parliament, 2023d), abolishes the three-day "period of grace", during which an employee who is on sick leave does not receive social security payments, in the case of women who suffer a spontaneous termination of pregnancy. This measure entered into force on 1 January 2024.

Moreover, as of 9 July, an employer 'is not entitled to terminate the employment contract of a female employee during the ten-week period following a spontaneous termination of her pregnancy, which is medically established to have occurred between the 14th and 21st week inclusive, of amenorrhoea'.

Also worth noting is the introduction of two days' paid leave for bereavement in the event of spontaneous termination of pregnancy in the branch of technical consultancies, engineering consultancies and consultancy firms.

A Decree no. 2023-946 of 14 October 2023 revises and supplements the occupational disease charts (Government, 2023c), by recognising, for the first time, cancers of the larynx and ovaries caused by inhaling asbestos dust. The decree sets out the conditions of eligibility for treatment plus a list of jobs likely to give rise to these pathologies. Such recognition means that the workers concerned will qualify for better compensation and support packages.

In addition, in two rulings handed down on 8 February, the French Supreme Court (Cour de cassation) went a step further in terms of compensation for employees exposed to toxic substances such as asbestos (Cour de cassation, 2023a). These employees are now entitled to compensation for non-material loss, distinct from anxiety loss, in the event of unlawful exposure to such a substance. It also accepts that employees of subcontractors may bring an action against the user company for compensation for anxiety-related harm.

Work-life balance related policies

A law aimed at strengthening the protection of families of children suffering from an illness or disability or who have been the victim of a particularly serious accident was published on 20 July (Parliament, 2023e). This law, which has been in force since 21 July, introduces protection for employees against termination of their employment contract throughout the period of their childcare leave, which is provided for by law to enable them to care for a seriously ill child. It also makes it easier for employees who are caring for a family member to switch to remote work.

. According to 2022 collective bargaining report published by the Ministry of Labour, in 2022, 15 branch agreements concern leave for family events and 18 branch agreements deal with leave linked to parenthood (maternity, adoption, paternity and sick child) and two support employees providing assistance to relatives. In addition to this range of measures designed to strengthen the balance between life and work, there are also provisions dedicated to maternity. For instance social partners have extended:

- marriage or civil partnership leave: from 5 to 8 days granted⁷;
- leave for the announcement of the onset of a disability, a chronic pathology requiring therapeutic training or cancer in a child: from 3 to 4 days granted⁸.

Access to parental leave (maternity, adoption, paternity and sick child) can be facilitated by collective agreement, particularly financially. Statutory leave for sick children does not give rise to remuneration, unless more favourable collective bargaining agreements stipulate otherwise: several

⁷ In the following sectors: professions regulated by the courts; metallurgy; quarrying and building materials industries; laundry, laundries; real estate; court commissioners and voluntary sales services.

⁸ In the following sectors: distribution and wholesale of paper and cardboard; professions regulated by the courts; beauty and cosmetics and teaching related to the beauty and perfume professions.

collective bargaining agreements now provide for paid “sick child” leave of between 1 and 3 days. Additional flexibility can be provided by splitting the leave into half-days. Without prejudice to the provisions relating to sick leave, additional paid leave of between 1 and 3 days has been introduced for children in hospital in several branches.

This range of measures designed to strengthen the balance between life and work is supplemented by specific maternity provisions. The amplitude of the working day has been reduced⁹, or teleworking facilitated¹⁰. The industry can pay also for time spent breast-feeding¹¹. Lastly, provision is made for continued pay during maternity and adoption leave, with no seniority requirement¹². Paternity leave is also covered, with no seniority requirement in certain branches.

Life-long learning and skills development

The year is marked by further adjustments to the 2018 vocational training reform.

Law no. 2022-1598 of 21 December 2022 (Parliament, 2022b), changes the provisions relating to the validation of professional experience (VAE) in three ways (Ministère du Travail, 2023a):

- Simplification of the VAE procedure: facilitating the admissibility stage of the VAE application to be submitted by the candidate, shortening courses and harmonising funding rules, in order to make VAE more attractive to candidates and achieve 100,000 courses by mid-2017 (compared with around 3,000 per year);
- Making courses more secure. The law individualises and strengthens support for candidates, making it possible to complete additional training during the course and to benefit from longer periods of absence to prepare for sessions before the jury;
- Modernising the system : a national public service in the form of a digital platform has been created. It concentrates information for users and organises the various stages in the VAE process.

In addition, on 26 June, the Ministry of Labour launched the "VAE inversée" experiment. Lasting three years (until the end of February 2026), the aim of the experiment is to incorporate into the vocational training contract measures enabling people to have their experience validated by obtaining a diploma or certification, in order to *'promote access to certification and professional integration in sectors experiencing particular recruitment difficulties'*.

Other topics

Pension reform

Despite widespread social unrest and a united trade union movement, the government has managed to pass an amending finance law for the social security system, which is designed to reform the country's retirement pension arrangements. The government used a provision of the Constitution (Article 49.3) to make this bill an issue of its responsibility, and the reform was deemed to be

⁹ In the following sectors: non-food retail outlets; metallurgy; judicial commissioners and voluntary sales services.

¹⁰ In mechanical glass manufacturing industries

¹¹ In laundries, laundries; non-food retailers; mechanical glass industries

¹² In the mechanical glass manufacturing industries; court commissioners and voluntary sales services; and travel and guide operators.

approved on 20 March. It was promulgated by the French President, after the Constitutional Council ruled that this law is not in breach of the Constitution (Conseil constitutionnel, 2023).

The main measures included in the law no. 2023-270 of 14 April 2023 on the amended social security funding for 2023 (Parliament, 2023b), are as follows:

- Starting on 1 September 2023, the legal retirement age is gradually raised from 62 to 64, at the rate of an additional three months per year, based on a person's year of birth, until it reaches 64 in 2030.
- Speeding up the timetable stipulated by the previous pension reform for extending the term of the pension contributions payable in order to qualify for a full pension. The 43 years' worth of contributions will be required with effect from 2027 (instead of year 2035), representing an increase at the rate of three months per year (instead of three months once every three years).
- The age at which contributors can take a full retirement pension (without any reduction in payments being applicable), remains at 67.
- Various measures have been introduced to adapt the arrangements for employees who have had a long career and those taking early retirement.
- Several special regimes are abolished for new recruits (e.g. those previously applicable to the RATP [Paris Transport Authority], the electricity and gas industries, etc.).
- A minimum pension is stipulated for employees who have completed a career of full-time work.
- To encourage the employment of older workers, the law provides for a "seniors index" that will require companies to evaluate their current practices in terms of retaining (and recruiting) older workers, similar to the existing gender equality legislation. But the Constitutional Council rejected this measure. The law imposes an obligation on the social partners to negotiate a national agreement on employment of older workers. If this agreement is not reached, the government has announced it will experiment a specific ('CDI senior') contract of employment, i.e. an 'older worker's permanent contract', on which lower social security contributions are payable.

This reform has been unanimously denounced by the trade unions and adopted without the support of the National Assembly, while 80% of the working population have said they are against it. The outcome embodies a malfunction of social democracy, in which social partners are marginalised by a concentration of powers within the person of the French President. As regards the way in which this reform was implemented, for Dominique Rousseau, who is a professor of constitutional law, the Constitutional Council's decision is an acknowledgement "*that ministers produced wrong estimates at the debates in Parliament, several procedures were used 'cumulatively' in order to speed up the process of passing the law and the combined use of the procedures implemented was 'unusual in nature'*" (Le Monde, 2023e). As Guillaume Duval explains (Social Europe, 2023), this reform "*will have widened the gap between the people and the elites and increased again the potential for popular resentment against the system*". "*Forcing those who lose out in the process of globalisation to work for longer will stir up social unrest that will be exploited by*" the far right, warns political scientist Bruno Palier (Le Monde, 2023a). This victory for the presidential camp merely heralds future defeats.

Commentary and outlook

A deep crisis of trust between the government and the trade unions marked 2023 in France. All the trade unions, in a rare move in France, formed a united front against the pension reform to raise the statutory retirement age from 62 years to 64 years. Despite the unpopularity of the measure, large demonstrations in cities and the lack of a majority supporting the measure in parliament, the reform was passed on 14 April. This reform was the culmination of the mistrust of the social partners, in particular the trade unions, in the government and the President of the Republic.

The year ended with another act of defiance towards the government by the unions: the three main union confederations (the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT), the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and the Workers' Force (FO)) issued a joint declaration opposing the adoption of the immigration law on 19 December, which aims at better controlling immigration and improving the process of integrating non-nationals into French society. The confederations consider that this law 'profoundly challenges the republican principles of equality and solidarity'. For them, 'priority must be given to equal rights, especially social rights, the regularisation of all undocumented workers and solidarity with migrants'. On the employers' side, the president of the Movement of the Enterprises of France (MEDEF) stressed that the economy needs massive immigration.

Between these two mobilisations, the government tried to revive social dialogue by faithfully transposing into law the national interprofessional agreement on value-sharing concluded by the social partners in February. The prime minister undertook to 'fully transpose into law all the agreements reached between the social partners to build the new "working life pact"' announced by the president. Negotiations to be held until mid-2024 must address several issues: the employment of senior citizens, the universal time-savings account, career paths, professional wear and tear, and retraining. In July 2023, she organised a conference on improving purchasing power, increasing wages, assessing the impact of social security contributions and benefits on income, and strengthening gender equality in the workplace. Finally, to tackle the pensions crisis, the government set up a National Council for Reconstruction to launch a debate on the future of France. One of the components, the Assise du Travail (the Labour Conference), produced a report to contribute to the working life pact.

For French workers, as elsewhere in Europe, the year was marked by a significant loss of purchasing power due to inflation. For its part, despite the end of the 'whatever it takes' principle (which helped to compensate for the loss of income suffered by citizens during the COVID-19 crisis), the government has maintained certain forms of aid, while at the same time urging the social partners to negotiate wages at sectoral level in order to offset the effects of inflation.

The year ended with rumours of a change of government, which were confirmed in January 2024 with the appointment of Gabriel Attal as prime minister, replacing Elisabeth Borne. The new prime minister immediately announced that he would meet 'the nation's driving forces', including the social partners, in the first days of his mandate. In parallel, Catherine Vautrin, who replaces Olivier Dussopt at the head of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Economic Inclusion, wished to meet 'the social partners (...) because the development of social dialogue is the guarantee of its sustainability'.

Time will tell whether the government's desire for reform will now be based on social dialogue or whether it will continue to be directed by government.

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WPEF24045

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