

France at risk of Revolution

Friday, 24 April 2009

At an electricity substation on a bleak industrial estate north of Paris a masked union militant is preparing to deprive a neighbourhood of power.

His colleague is outside, dragging nervously on a roll-up cigarette while keeping a lookout for police or security guards. "Get a move on," he says. "And then let's get out of here."

A switch is pulled down, the door of the sabotaged transformer is locked and the two activists — employees of EDF, the French state electricity supplier — drive off.

In their wake hundreds of houses and a handful of businesses in Montigny-lès-Cormeilles are left without electricity for much of the morning.

It was the second time in a week that blackouts had hit the Paris region as striking gas and electricity workers adopted radical tactics to support their call for a 10 per cent pay rise and an end to outsourcing of jobs.

They are denounced as industrial saboteurs by the Government and face disciplinary action and prosecution, but say they are determined to press ahead with what they portray as a struggle against free-market forces.

After failing to prevent the partial privatisations of EDF and GDF, the gas supplier, they believe that the tide has turned in their favour because of the recession.

Redundancy plans have caused violent protests in private sector companies, left-wing students have blocked universities and unions are planning a demonstration on Labour Day. "There is a risk of revolution," Dominique de Villepin, the former prime minister, said.

For Stéphane Miliadis, a representative of the Confédération Générale du Travail union at the EDF plant in Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, near Montigny-lès-Cormeilles, it offers a golden opportunity.

"The Government is losing control," he said. "So now is the moment to push back the capitalist logic which has crept into the company."

The movement got off to a slow start. "We've been on strike for three weeks but at first no one paid any attention at all," he said. "It was only when some of the guys started cutting the electricity and gas that things got moving."

The militants armed with a map showing the substations and keys to the locks can shut down power to thousands of homes in a few minutes.

Last Thursday 66,500 EDF customers lost their electricity supply, some for several hours. In Douai, northern France, two patients in intensive care had to be moved when a hospital lost power for 40 minutes.

In the Paris region the Grand-Val shopping centre suffered the same fate. "We had to turn away customers from all 48 shops," Félix Crespo, a technical manager at the centre, said.

A bakery worker told The Times that she had been late for work "because I have an electric alarm clock and of course it didn't go off".

This week the activists sought to win public support by switching 350,000 customers from peak to off-peak tariffs — a 50 per cent saving. They also restored power to hundreds of households that were cut off by EDF because they had failed to pay their bills.

The power cuts have continued. In Montigny-lès-Cormeilles the saboteurs took action against EDF offices and several hundred homes were affected. A home-help assistant said: "I look after a 92-year-old woman and this sort of thing means she hasn't got a proper meal because there was nothing to cook it with."

History of revolt

- The revolutionary movement that shook France between 1789 and 1799 rejected the social and economic inequalities of the ancien régime, overthrew the Government and abolished the monarchy
- Popular revolt in 1848 led to the creation of the Second Republic and established the principle of the right to work
- In 1920, strikes on the railways forced the Army to drive trains to get food around the country
- The de Gaulle administration's deployment of police against student rioters in 1968 provoked a widespread revolt, ending in widescale reform of the education system
- In 2005, rioting among poor African and Arab immigrant communities prompted the Government to impose a three-month state of emergency
- In 2006, students nationwide protested against an attempt to make it easier for French companies to sack employees under the age of 26. The law was withdrawn
- “Bossnapping” has become a popular technique in French labour disputes. Striking workers take their bosses hostage until they agree to demands