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FRANCE LOSING ITS TASTE FOR PROTEST?

Gilles Delafon

In more than one respect, the Air France pilots' strike that ended Wednesday was a very French affair. The selfishness and irresponsibility on display during the dispute were almost caricatures of the ills besetting French society. But the new determination that the government showed, refusing to give way to powerful transport workers, gives ground for hope that things might be looking up.

For 10 days, a cohort of highly privileged employees, blinded by a single-minded desire to hang on to their advantages, showed no compunction in running a deliberate campaign of sabotage against the national carrier. In the middle of the run-up to the World Cup (for which Air France is the official carrier), the company's planes were grounded.

Stubborn and arrogant, the pilots refused to take shares in Air France in return for a 15 percent salary cut, which management said was essential if the state-owned company was going to break a nine-year run of losses. And many people here saw management's point: It is hard to be competitive in today's "open sky" world when you are paying your pilots up to \$200,000 a year - 40 percent more on average than your rivals at Lufthansa, the German carrier, and 19 percent more than British Airways.

Not that the pilots, resplendent in their uniforms as they went in and out of negotiations, seemed to care about that. What did it matter to them that they make up only 7 percent of Air France's 45,000 employees, most of whom had already accepted heavy sacrifices? What do they care about a strike costing the company \$310 million - the equivalent of this year's projected profits?

And it is this that is most astonishing - the very French way in which so many employees find it impossible to identify with their companies. As if their personal fate were not closely linked to their firm's destiny.

Six years ago, Lufthansa had to go through just the same sort of restructuring; it carried out its reforms without a single strike-day lost. But in France - the proud birthplace of anarcho-syndicalism - protest and dispute have become a religion that sets employers and employees head to head, instead of side by side.

Our intellectual elite has never been able to forge a different path. "Class struggle, dividing the French up once and for all, became such an ideology, so worshiped, that it completely blinkered the intelligentsia," French economist Francois de Closets wrote recently. "Only now are we coming to realize how far we have been set back by this obsession, by these prejudices that weighed a lot more heavily on the people than on the bourgeoisie."

And in France, a country which always insists it is "different" from others, the pilots want to be different too. Cabin crew realized a long time ago that the boom in air travel has made their job a lot more ordinary than it used to be. Tall blondes with seductive smiles have given way to workaday waitresses doing their best not to spill Coca Cola in your lap. The pilots should get used to the fact that they are not much more than glorified bus drivers any more.

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At the same time, the conflict served as a reminder of the ambiguity of the company's status, still in state hands. Air France's last president, the socialist Christian Blanc, had plans to privatize the company. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, also a socialist, is against that, and eased Mr. Blanc out of his post after he won last year's elections.

For the time being, Mr. Jospin prefers a timid "opening to outside capital" - a partial privatization - to a full-scale sell-off, however inevitable such a sale is in the longer term. Could this be in deference to Jean Claude Gayssot, the Communist Minister of Transport in Jospin's coalition Cabinet? Believe it or not, in the early days of the strike Mr. Gayssot appeared ready to give in to the pilots' demands. But Jospin and his ever-pragmatic finance minister, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, gave him a good talking to, and refused to make any concessions.

In the end, the pilots agreed to "help make Air France more competitive." They accepted a seven-year salary freeze if the "shares-for-wage cut" swap was made voluntary.

But what stands out from this whole affair is how little public support the strikers enjoyed in a country so quick to back anybody who protests. Perhaps the French have begun to understand that jumping to the defense of other peoples' individual interests does not serve the general good.

* Gilles Delafon, an editor at the Paris weekly Le Journal du Dimanche, is co-author of a forthcoming book (Editions Plom) on the Franco-American relationship seen through the prism of the relationship between presidents Jacques Chirac and Bill Clinton.

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