A New Cry In France: 'Let Us Work Sundays!'

Jamey Keaten, Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — When economic inequalities helped foment the French Revolution, the legendary cry from on high was, "Let them eat cake!" Now, as modern France struggles economically, the cry from below is, "Let us work!"

As France battles high unemployment, rising taxes and pinched pocketbooks, the Socialist government has said its main focus is job creation. Now, critics of a more-than-century-old law that prevents most stores from opening on Sundays say revising it would be a good step in that direction.

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault appeared to respond to that call on Monday, ordering a review of the law that labor unions and Roman Catholic faithful cherish, but that consumers — and increasingly some workers — decry.

Under French law, Sunday is a mandatory day off to help ensure rest and the quality of life, although some retailers in tourist areas or special commercial zones can get exemptions. Critics say the protections go too far, crimping modern lifestyles and putting France at a competitive disadvantage.

A sporadic debate revived last week after a court, ruling on an unfair-competition lawsuit brought by a rival hardware vendor, ordered home improvement chains Leroy Merlin and Castorama to shut 14 Paris-area stores on Sundays. It threatened fines of 120,000 euros ($162,000) on each store that violated the rules.

The stores got temporary waivers, but their employees were growling — insisting that Sunday openings give them needed extra pay and suit customers who find it hard to shop during the work week bustle.

"We want to work Sunday! Let us work!" said Gerard Fillon, spokesman for an association of employees whose name translates as Sunday's Handymen, and a Leroy Merlin employee. At one store in Gennevilliers, some employees dressed in T-shirts with "Yes Week End" written on them.

Ayrault commissioned a panel to report on the complex issue by late November.

"The government notes that Sunday rest is an essential principle in terms of protecting workers and social cohesion" while recognizing that "the existence of Sunday work is a reality," his office said in a noncommittal statement.

The current debate stems from a 2009 move by then-President Nicolas Sarkozy's center-right government that eased back curbs on Sunday store openings. The efforts faced political opposition and resulted in a mish-mash of legal waivers, special-zone exemptions and other loopholes.

Most French consumers are used to the country's Sunday rhythm: Shopping is restricted to tourist areas or owner-operated stores. Restaurants are exempt, but even supermarkets only open a half-day — with some exceptions.

France, the world's most visited country, gets 7 percent of its gross domestic product from tourism. But France ranks only third in terms of tourist spending, and French tourism boosters say that is directly attributable to Sunday store closings.

Europe is far from uniform on the issue.

Many British stores open on Sundays. In Germany — Europe's economic engine — a 57-year-old law requires stores to close at 2 p.m. on Saturday until Monday, though some exemptions apply like at train or gasoline stations. Berlin allows stores to open 10 Sundays a year.

In Spain, the Madrid area has peeled back Sunday-closing restrictions in recent years, aiming to boost job creation and commerce to help lift the country out of economic crisis. Since then, consumers regularly flock to megastores like furniture and hardware retailers on Sundays.

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