

Titan boss Maurice Taylor says it's a hard job getting the French to work

A row with Maurice Taylor, the US tycoon behind Titan tyres, shows how employment and tax laws in France keep the idle in business



Working lunch: the boss of the US tyre firm Titan has accused the French of taking long breaks and being unproductive Photo: Getty Images

By Anne-Elisabeth Moutet

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If Maurice “Morrie the Grizz” Taylor didn’t exist, François Hollande’s embattled socialist government would have tried to invent him. Just when the government’s bluff was being called over France’s unrealistic growth predictions by the EU (finance minister Pierre Moscovici kept promising 0.8 per cent for 2013 until Tuesday, when incontrovertible European figures forced Hollande to admit that it will be much closer to zero), here comes the textbook Ugly American from Illinois, boss of the Titan tyre firm, thwarted in his dastardly aim to lay off French workers from an ailing tyre factory he was hoping to acquire, now spitting venomous slurs at the entire French working population.

Cue, on all news channels, the perfect Two Minutes’ Hate (more like two days so far) in which everyone — union reps, party leaders, the commentariat — bemoans in touching unison the gall of this unreconstructed, boo-hiss Anglo-Saxon Reaganite, who, in a letter to Arnaud Montebourg, the minister for industrial renewal, asked: “Titan is the one with the money and the talent to produce tyres. What does the crazy union have? It has the French government.” Taylor added: “The French workforce gets paid high wages but only works three hours. They get one hour for breaks and lunch, talk for three and work for three. I told this to the French union workers to their faces. They told me that’s the French way!”

The letter was leaked within hours to a business daily. Montebourg, a former militant barrister whose grandstanding habit had been curtailed for a couple of months after he insulted Lakshmi Mittal for wanting to close loss-making steel furnaces in Lorraine, grabbed the opportunity to get back into the limelight. He claimed in an open response to Taylor that “the entire French population had been grievously insulted”, and listed the many American industrial investors who managed to make do with France’s 35-hour week and strict labour laws.

Morrie the Grizz has in fact given a free-spending, high-taxing government the perfect moment to bury more bad news. Intent on reversing Nicolas Sarkozy’s reforms, Hollande has already rescinded the very timid pensions change in which retirement age had been pushed, with exceptions, from 60 to 62. Ditto for a mild attempt to curtail the comforts of a Socialist-voting public sector that employs a quarter of the labour force: to fight chronic absenteeism, Sarkozy had instituted a day without pay before civil servants would be paid for sick days. Civil service minister Marylise Lebranchu announced yesterday that it was reversed, in an interview with the newspaper that had published Maurice Taylor’s letter.

Consider that two of the best-selling books in the past decade were *Bonjour paresse* (“Hello, Laziness”) by Corinne Maier, employed by the largely state-owned utility EDF, in which she rolled out a number of clever strategies to do the least work at the office, and *Absolument dé-bor-dée!* (“Li-ter-al-ly Snowed Under!”) by Zoé Shepard, a civil servant who vividly described her experiences in the Aquitaine administration of “how to work 35 hours in the month”, from sick day competitions to misappropriation of expenses.

These books sold well because they rang a familiar bell. The French are used to long queues at one counter at the Post Office while three more people behind closed desks carry on private conversations. And don’t try to call someone for business between 12.45 and 2.30pm in Paris. Every time the notion of opening up Sunday trading is mooted, an alliance of family associations and unions kills off the attempt with pieties about “the family day”, no matter that Sunday sales sometimes exceed half the week’s takings in stores (like Ikea) that, with staff support, brave the law and pay the fines. As for the 25 mandatory days of paid annual vacation, no one, Left or Right, has suggested that they should be reduced.

Yet once you get them into the workplace, the French can be efficient, competent and hard-working: 2011 OECD productivity figures show them coming first in Europe at \$57.70 per working hour, ahead of the Germans at \$55.80, and of the British at \$47.20. No wonder: labour is expensive (payroll levies amount to 65 per cent of total salary outlay) and stringent employment laws make it difficult and costly to fire anyone. A French boss will wait to breaking point before he will hire anyone – and in the meantime that production will have been automated to quasi-Japanese standards with the best robots extant: machines, unlike people, are not subject to employment taxes. The losers are the young, the over-50s, and anyone who’s had the mischance to fall off the protected ship of the full-time employed. Structural unemployment, even in boom years, has very rarely fallen below 8 per cent. It exceeds 11 per cent today, and almost all of those claiming the dole would have welcomed the opportunity to work for Morrie the Grizz.