

40-DAY STRIKE AGAINST THE RADICAL RIGHT

Strikes by journalists are not forgotten in French media history. The longest strike in history lasted 7 weeks in 1968 by ORTF employees. The strike at Radio France in 2015 lasted 27 days. Now JDD staff have ended their 40-day strike, which began on 22 June 2023, in protest at the appointment of a new editor-in-chief.



LOU PHILY *

“Geoffroy Lejeune will take up his new post today in an empty newsroom.”

Fith these words, the staff of JDD Magazine, the Sunday edition of the French weekly JDD (Le Journal du Dimanche), announced the end of a 40-day strike that began on 22 June in protest at the appointment of a new editor-in-chief, Geoffroy Lejeune. Lejeune, a 34-year-old journalist, was previously editor-in-chief of the far-right magazine Valeurs Actuelles. Under Lejeune’s leadership, the magazine published an article in 2020 depicting a black French MP, Danièle Obono, as a slave, and was subsequently found guilty of public racial insults in November 2022.

FAR-RIGHT JOURNALISTS

The struggle of the JDD journalists has begun to show that in the history of France, such incidents have been a futile endeavour. In recent years, many media outlets controlled by billionaires have hired famous journalists or personalities who support and publish far-right ideologies.

The first incident in 2016 and the current one have little in common. Journalists at the i-Télé television channel went on strike for a month to protest against the hiring of Jean-Marc Morandini, a close friend of Vincent Bolloré, the main shareholder of the Canal+ media group, of which they are a subsidiary. Morandini, at 20 the youngest TV presenter in France,



was given a suspended prison sentence for bribing minors. The same businessman, Bolloré, has now bought JDD.

To preserve the integrity of the editorial office, the striking journalists demanded the dismissal of the famous TV presenter and guarantees of editorial independence by appointing one of Vincent Bolloré's two close friends as editor-in-chief and the other as director. The management did not accept the journalists' proposal. As a result, more than 30 journalists quit their jobs. In 2021, i-Télé television was fined 200,000 euros for hate speech and received a warning from the CSA (an organisation that regulates the media) for giving more airtime to the far-right Rassemblement National party during the 2021 regional elections.

Vincent Bolloré has used his wealth to dominate media and advertising companies. Bolloré, a 71-year-old French businessman who Forbes predicts will be worth \$10 billion by 2023, was born into the bourgeoisie in Brittany in north-west France. At the age of 23, he was appointed vice-president of the Edmond de Rothschild Group, a financial institution. Together with his brother, Michel-Yves Bolloré, he took the helm of the family's multinational business, known as the Bolloré Group, which is active in many sectors of the economy.

Bolloré has used his wealth to control several media and advertising companies, and in 2012 became the main shareholder in Vivendi, the French mass media conglomer-

ate that owns the Canal+ media group, known for its often politically provocative programming.

In 2015, a documentary about tax evasion in France was pulled from Canal+ to protect the interests of the Bolloré group. One of the channel's most famous programmes was 'Les Guignols de l'info'. After 30 years, it was surprisingly cancelled in 2018.

It was said that Bolloré had no tolerance for political parodies. But for years, Bolloré, a businessman who has followed similar paths to take control of the media industry, has been known to fire journalists or executives he dislikes and replace them with his or his sons' old friends. With such appointments, he has gradually moved the media he patronises to the political right and conservative side.

He also took over the Europe 1 radio station. He then transferred Pascal Praud, a journalist known for his defence of far-right ideologies. Praud, who defended the ideology of the "theory of great change", which is believed to have been instrumental in the rise of the far right in Europe and especially in France, has now taken his place at his side. In June 2023, he also bought Paris Match magazine. However, the shady nature of this purchase is still under investigation. It is alleged that Bolloré interfered with the publication before buying it. The magazine's former editor-in-chief was sacked in 2022, shortly after he objected to a cover story about a traditionalist cardinal. ▶



PHOTO: THOMAS SAMSON / AFP



Vincent Bolloré

► FLAWED FRONT PAGE

The staff of JDD stood together to oppose the takeover of the magazine by the investor Bolloré. On each day of the 40-day strike, a vote was held among the staff. Each ballot received more than 95 per cent of the votes. The only thing they were able to negotiate with their new boss was the announcement of the resignation of 60 other journalists who refused to accept the editorial management appointed by him and who did not leave their colleagues who were determined to quit their jobs.

Emmanuel Poupard, general secretary of the SNJ, France's first journalists' union, expressed his support: "We must recognise the historic mobilisation of journalists to defend their identity and pluralism".

In the end, Bolloré won. The editorial offices of the magazine emptied. Only two journalists remained. A few days after the end of the strike, the new editor officially took over. With less than a week to go, he had the difficult task of preparing the new issue of JDD, which was to be published on Sunday 6 August. He recruited well-known media personalities such as Pascal Praud and former far-right journalists from Valeurs actuelles.

The new team's first magazine hit the shelves with a big mistake on the front page. A march for Enzo, who was killed in France last July, was confused with Enzo, who died in a car accident in January. The similarity of the names caused a major scandal for the new editorial team. Most sponsors withdrew their advertisements and abandoned the magazine.

"With the new editor-in-chief, the magazine that once gave a voice to all politicians is now openly becoming a propaganda tool for the far right," warned Emmanuel Poupard, general secretary of the SNJ: "JDD is now being compared to France Soir, famous for its post-war conspiracy theories. Once upon a time, the JDD had a non-partisan editorial approach".

BOYCOTT BY POLITICIANS

Sabrina Agresti-Roubache, deputy minister for urban development, was the first political guest immediately after the strike. After Agresti-Roubache was reprimanded by the Prime Minister for her behaviour, members of the government were warned not to give interviews to the JDD, France Info reported. Other politicians, such as Socialist Party leader Olivier Faure and Green

Party leader Marine Tondelier, have also announced a boycott of the magazine.

This is not the first time that Bolloré has had problems with the media. It has filed numerous lawsuits against journalists investigating the activities of its companies. In 2016, Mediapart, one of France's independent magazines, published an article about the illegal activities of the Bolloré group in Cameroon. Following this report, the magazine was sued for defamation. However, Mediapart was cleared of all charges in 2019, 2021 and 2022. The court ruled that Bolloré was wrong and stressed that the information uncovered by journalists is an important issue in the public interest and in the defence of freedom of the press.

BOLLORÉ EXPLOITS LEGAL LOOPHOLE

Press organisations in France are calling for legislative changes to guarantee press freedom and media independence. Emmanuel Poupard recalled that a 2016 law is in force to prevent the silencing of the press and said, "We have said from the beginning that this law is not enough. Parliament must recognise the seriousness of the situation and take urgent action. Successive governments have ignored the problem. Bolloré is taking advantage of this vacuum".

According to economist Julia Cagé, nine billionaire businessmen own 80 per cent of the mainstream media in France. Cagé says that while the media sector needs new investors, the fact that it is made up of billionaires is a big problem because these billionaires have multiple interests to defend.

Parliament is expected to debate a bill in the coming days that would require "the appointment of a new editor-in-chief to be approved by a majority of working journalists". The bill is backed by the SNJ journalists' union. "If the bosses don't threaten journalists with losing their jobs by saying that the loss of state subsidies would mean bankruptcy, it would be useful," Poupard said.

But the bill would be a first step in mobilising against the businessmen's games with the fragile independence of the French media. The unionist adds: "Taking up this issue is a courageous step. Our voices have not been heard on this issue since 2016." ■

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