

French companies have newfound freedom ... to fire

PARIS — The announcements came in a steady drumbeat. Around 1,300 job cuts at France's biggest automaker. At least 2,500 at France's largest supermarket chain. Over 200 sought at a major clothing retailer. And thousands more are on the way.

Just weeks after France's labor overhaul went into effect, companies are readily taking advantage of new rules that make it easier to hire and fire. But the other changes, those designed to help cushion the blow like retraining programs, haven't been put into place yet, leaving workers vulnerable to a coming wave of downsizing.

The changes to the country's voluminous labor code are part of a broad push by President Emmanuel Macron to revive growth and steer France toward a Scandinavian-style economic model known as "flexible security." But the initial imbalance between employers' rights and workers' protections means the economic picture could get worse before it gets better.

Unemployment, persistently stuck at more than 9 percent for nearly a decade, could rise in the coming months. Unions, already dubious of the overhaul, may grow impatient if the government doesn't follow through on its promises to workers.

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