

Decrees Governing France's Bakeries Prompt a Wider Debate on Work Rules

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PARIS — Stéphane Cazenave, a baker in Saint-Paul-lès-Dax in southwestern France, was awarded a prize last year for best traditional baguette, in a contest organized by the confederation of French bakers. Back home, business was good, and Mr. Cazenave kept his bakery open seven days a week.

Now he is in the news again, but for a different reason: Keeping his store open violated a local decree stating that all shops selling bread must be closed one day a week.

The issue is stereotypically French, but it also plays into a serious debate about whether the country can change its work rules and make other adjustments to counter high unemployment and a morose economy. Shop hours are also part of a bill being debated in Parliament addressing red tape, closed professions and traditions like shuttering stores on Sundays.

"I am angry because in France, people are being prevented from working," Mr. Cazenave, 42, said Tuesday. "We are companies. All we are asking to do is do business, create wealth, and in France, we are blocked by absurd laws and decrees."

Mr. Cazenave said he employed 22 people and respected all labor regulations, including the required two days off per week for his employees. But he ran afoul of a local decree from 1999 stipulating that shops selling bread must close for at least 24 hours every week. Mr. Cazenave's case will be brought before an administrative court, and he could be subject to fines.

Mr. Cazenave said he opened the shop more than three years ago. "I've been open seven days a week since the beginning, knowing very well that I had this sword hanging over my head," he said.

He said he was now closing his shop one day a week, hoping it would please the authorities. But closing one day a week could cost him up to 250,000 euros a year, he said, forcing him to fire several employees.

The rule is not a national law, but a majority of French regions have similar decrees, which are a result of negotiations within professions. In this case, its roots are in rules started in the early 20th century to protect bakers from being overworked and abused.

Bakers these days say the rules protect them from the competition of larger stores and chains.

"If there are no decrees like this, only the larger businesses can organize themselves to open seven days a week, and the smaller ones will be forced to," said Jean-Louis Mack, the director of legal affairs at the National Confederation of Bakers and Pastry Chefs. "How are we going to attract young people like this? 'Come join our profession; you will work nonstop, 24/7?'"

Bakeries, or boulangeries, are still prevalent in France, with an average of one bakery for every 1,800 inhabitants, according to the confederation. (The legal standard in France for recognition as a boulangerie is that the bread must be kneaded and baked on the premises.) Their ability to survive against supermarkets and chain stores is partly because the large stores, too, must close one day a week — or at least shut their bread aisle.

Philippe Godard, the head of communications for the Federation of Baking and Pastry Companies, an organization that represents industries or chains that sell bread, said the rules were now being used to eliminate competition. But he said bakers were hurting themselves by refusing to open seven days a week, especially since many also sell sandwiches and soft drinks, and such rules don't apply to fast-food chains.

"We are calling this a futile fight, a fight from the Middle Ages," Mr. Godard said.

Hand in hand with the debate over protecting small, traditional neighborhood bakeries is the one going on about opening retail stores on Sunday, a discussion that has stirred France for several years.

The bill being debated in Parliament, pushed by the centrist economy minister, Emmanuel Macron, would let shops do business in major tourist areas on Sundays and would also authorize stores in other locations to be open for as many as 12 Sundays a year.

Mr. Mack said the choice was a societal one.

"You hear politicians complaining that city centers are emptying themselves of small shops," he said. "But it is precisely these kinds of measures that risk accelerating that trend."