

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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## France in a Lather as President Takes a Swipe at Cushy Benefits

### At Famed Spa, Massage Therapists Refuse to Take Reforms Lying Down

BY DAVID GAUTHIER-VILLARS

**AIX-LES-BAINS, France**—Since 1860, when Napoleon III appropriated this ancient Roman spa at the foot of the Alps for his empire, the National Baths of Aix-les-Bains have been a symbol of France's cushy health-care system.

On a recent morning, Jacqueline Surmont and her husband, Guy, a 77-year-old retired construction worker, headed for their daily mud wrap. The spa's rheumatism cures, thermal baths and 13-minute deep-tissue massage all are covered by France's national health-insurance system. Transportation and lodging are, too.

"They take good care of us here," said Ms. Surmont, a frail 76-year-old with dyed red hair.

These days, however, Aix-les-Bains is in hot water. Vowing to trim the fat in France's bloated public sector, President Nicolas Sarkozy has announced 23,000 civil-service job cuts. That includes half the spa's 165 state-employed physiotherapists.

"Of course we went on strike," said Martine Claret, a 52-year-old physiotherapist who has worked at the spa since 1979 and doubles as a union representative. She held up a banner used during a recent protest.

"Yesterday: Indispensable; Today: Undesirable."

Unlike most French leaders, who have cowered before France's six-million-strong army of state-sector workers, Mr. Sarkozy is taking them on. He



Martine Claret

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says the salaries and pensions of teachers, postal workers, bus drivers, television anchors, tax police and many others weigh like a ton on public finances—even though many of the jobs are obsolete.

France has the same number of passport-control officers it had 15 years ago, even though border controls for travelers within most of the European Union have been abolished, Mr. Sarkozy scoffed in a recent speech. There are 721 French diplomats in the former colony of Senegal, which has a population of about 12.5 million, and only 271 in India. "How is that normal?" the French president asked in another speech.

### Collective Angst

Mr. Sarkozy's belt-tightening has left France in a state of collective angst. Protests are being staged across the country as people fret that the quality of their public services will suffer. In the town of Carhaix, in the Brittany region, residents have rallied against a plan to shut down the state-run hospital's surgery and maternity units.

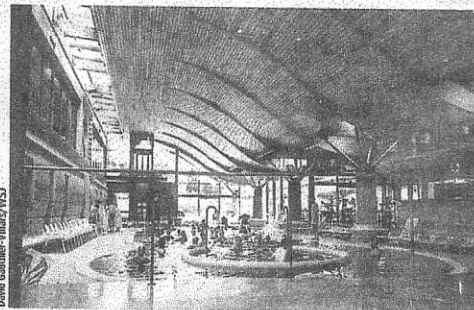
"The government has no right to turn our region into a

wasteland with no health care," the town's mayor, Christian Troadec, said in an interview.

Teachers and parents took to the streets several times in recent months to protest a plan to cut 11,000 teaching jobs this year. The government says there are fewer children to teach today in France than there were a decade ago. Opponents say students will be deprived of important subjects such as Greek and Latin.

France's 7,000 state-employed forest workers recently joined the fray, staging a walkout to contest job cuts and government pressure to increase wood production. "This business culture defies the rules of nature," grumbled René Montagnon of France's largest forest workers' union.

At Aix-les-Bains, all the physiotherapists are paid to work full time all year, even though the resort fills up mainly in summer. In an attempt to keep them busy throughout the year, the spa redeploys many to the reception desk or the cloakroom. The decline in business has been so bad for the therapists' morale, says Ms. Claret, that 27 are currently on sick leave, most of them for depression.



Patients go through their morning routine in sulfur-rich waters at the Thermes Nationaux d'Aix-les-Bains, a French state-run spa.

Protesting the planned job cuts at Aix-les-Bains has become a matter of national pride. In the late 19th century, the spa was a fashionable haunt for the European aristocracy, including Napoleon III's wife Eugénie and Britain's Queen Victoria.

The Thermes Nationaux became a French household name in 1947 when "La Sécurité Sociale," France's national health-care insurance system, agreed to foot the bill for spa treatments if patients had doctors' prescriptions.

By the mid-1960s, the establishment was treating more than 50,000 patients a year. "The spa was the pride of the city," says Aix-les-Bains Mayor Dominique Dord. "Our economy revolved around it."

Over the past two decades, however, the Baths' fortunes have been on a slippery slope. In the 1990s, the spa's reputation was tarnished by an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease. At the same time, newer, privately owned centers began luring patients away.

In 2000, even though it was

losing patients, the Thermes Nationaux persuaded national and local governments to spend €50 million to extend the spa by building new facilities 300 yards above the main center. No proper budget plan was set up, and the money dried up fast. A cable car that was meant to connect the lower spa, where patients register, with the upper treatment area was never built.

"That is sort of annoying, considering most patients are old, limping or in wheelchairs," said Michel Palmer, head of France's union of spa doctors.

### Abusing the System

Over the years, visitors have also abused the system, essentially getting France's national health insurance to foot the bill for all-expense-paid spa vacations.

"For many people, it's like a free holiday," says Ms. Surmont, who says all her mud wraps and massages were properly prescribed by a doctor to soothe her ailing back. "Some patients go shopping in the afternoon. They're hardly in pain."

In 2007, the Thermes Nationaux logged 27,446 patients and posted a net loss of €3.53 mil-

lion, or about \$5.5 million. At the beginning of the summer season, the spa's solarium was deserted. Nearby, a sign read "Keep quiet. Silence helps heal."

Faced with the loss, France's national audit office said it was time for the state to pull out of the spa business once and for all. The government ordered the spa to cut its staff and prepare for change.

Yet because the civil-servant status of the physiotherapists protects them from being immediately dismissed, the spa has asked that 47 resign voluntarily by Dec 31 deadline. The snag: Physiotherapists have virtually no chance of finding similar jobs elsewhere, because their state diploma is valid only at the Aix-les-Bains spa.

The physiotherapists aren't taking this lying down. A 10-day strike in March left 1,700 patients stranded in their bathrobes. Now Ms. Claret says she's trying to get local business leaders to help lobby the government on the need to preserve the state-run spa.

"If it is managed like a private company, the spa risks losing its soul," says Jean-Pierre Grouzard, chairman of FFCM France's federation of spa patients. "It will be a factory."