

Reforming unemployment insurance in France today: not a good idea according to OECD indicators

By [Eric Heyer](#)

Six months following the signing of a national industry-wide agreement on unemployment benefits between the social partners, with new rules that normally are to apply until 2016, the French government, which wants to go further in reforming the labour market, is evoking the possibility [of once again reforming the unemployment insurance system](#) by reducing the level of benefits and the period they are paid.

It is far from clear that reforming the unemployment insurance system is in keeping with the idea that any reform must improve the “quality of life” of our citizens. This is, in any case, what is indicated by the latest publication of the OECD.

In Chapter 3 of the 2014 edition of the OECD’s [Employment Outlook](#), the international organization has implemented the recommendations of the 2009 [Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report](#) by evaluating the quality of employment in the OECD countries. This new indicator supplements conventional measures of the quantity of work and should eventually lead to transforming the content of public policy by imposing new assessment criteria on the public authorities.

The OECD constructs an indicator on the quality of employment on the basis of three factors: the quality of wages, the security of the job market, and the quality of the working environment. According to the OECD, this last dimension is relatively mediocre in France: the high level of professional requirements and insufficient resources to accomplish tasks

leads to a high level of on-the-job stress for French employees. As for wages, a review of both their level and distribution places France close to the average of the OECD countries. Finally, while the quality of work in the country is close to average in the developed countries, this is, according to the OECD, due mainly to a high level of job security in France, due to both the extent of social security ... and the generosity of unemployment insurance.

The proposals for reforming unemployment insurance would therefore tend to deteriorate rather than improve the “quality of life” for the French, and would thus miss their target from that perspective. But would they lead to improving the quantity of work?

There is some food for thought on this subject in Chapter 1 of the Report, in which the OECD indicates that the structural unemployment rate – *i. e.* the unemployment rate depending on the impact of rigidities that prevent the labour market from functioning properly – has not increased since the onset of the crisis in France, just as is the case in many other developed countries: for the OECD, the sharp increase in unemployment seen since 2008 has a mainly cyclical component that cannot be combated by reforming unemployment insurance.

As a consequence, given the current situation of the French economy, reforming unemployment insurance along the lines suggested by the government will, if the OECD analysis is to be believed, undermine the quality of employment – and in particular the quality of life of the unemployed – without reducing the level of unemployment!