

An anxious France faces 'the elephant'

By Katrin Bennhold

PARIS: As if they were running for office, French business and labor unions are campaigning unusually hard in this presidential election.

Hardly a day goes by without a chief executive officer urging less state intervention. The country's main employer federation, which normally stays out of politics, published its own economic platform.

Meanwhile, strikes and labor protests have mushroomed as union leaders vow to protect France's welfare state from globalization.

While the main presidential candidates have become consumed in an emotional debate about national identity and law and order, it may be that the real debate over France's future is being drawn in boardrooms and on the factory floors.

"The main issue facing France today is how we deal with globalization," said Nicolas Baverez, a political commentator and author. "Will we embrace globalization or will we keep pretending it doesn't exist for another five years?"

The g-word is the elephant in the room in a campaign where all con-

tenders claim to represent change but none is pressing for it.

The alternatives have become increasingly blurred, as the Gaullist candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, turned more protectionist in recent weeks and his Socialist rival, Ségolène Royal, more

nationalist. Sarkozy, Royal, and their centrist challenger, François Bayrou, have all pledged to protect Airbus workers from job cuts. They have all vowed to fight "speculative" capitalism and sending jobs out of the country. And all called for a lower euro to keep up production and jobs.

Less than three weeks before the first round vote on April 22, the gap between the two front runners has narrowed in polls. In addition, the leader of the far-right National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who places fourth, appears to be closing in on Bayrou.

According to the latest poll by the CSA institute, Sarkozy is backed by 26 percent of voters, compared to 24.5 percent for Royal. Le Pen is given 15 percent, his highest level since January, while Bayrou has not recovered from his decline below 20 percent, coming in at 19.5 percent. But a large number of voters say they have not firmly made up their minds.

The economic issues that dominated political rallies in the beginning of the year have given way to a grab-bag of noneconomic issues, highlighting the



Pascal Pavan/Agence France-Presse

Facing job losses, Airbus employees in France plan another strike Tuesday.

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