

France: state of emergency escalates attacks on the rights of youth and workers

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The imposition of a state of emergency by the French government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin gives the minister of the interior Nicolas Sarkozy the right to impose police-state conditions wherever he sees fit.

Many commentators have noted the bitter irony contained in the fact that the legal framework for the state of emergency, the law of April 3, 1955, was enacted as part of French imperialism's attempt to crush the legitimate aspirations of the Algerian people for national liberation from colonial rule. The reactivation of this law, 50 years later in metropolitan France, is an insult to the children and grandchildren and relatives of those exploited, brutalised, tortured and killed by the colonial regime during Algeria's war of national liberation. Many now live in France's council estates, ghettos of poverty, where the youth revolt and its repression have taken place.

Similarly, the 1955 law is being used to crush the aspirations of the youth for access to high-quality education and the perspective of decent secure jobs with all the rights and life opportunities that go with them.

Here is where the second insult was levelled against the youth, more hurtful in some ways than all of Sarkozy's invective about "scum" and "gangrene." Villepin, in his genteel and aristocratic tones, having explained the implications and the application of the state of emergency, then laid out his social programme, which he claims is designed to alleviate the injustice, discrimination, alienation and sense of abandonment of the youth on the suburban council estates.

He proposed apprenticeships at 14 for pupils in difficulty, thus lowering compulsory education by two years. Gérard Aschiéri, general secretary of the principal trade union federation in education, the FSU

(Federation of Unified Trade Unions), commented: "I'm horrified. It's appalling. Far from improving the situation, this is going to push the youth even further into job insecurity, distance them from all possibility of real qualifications and jobs.... The government wants to accentuate social selection and condemn definitively to exclusion the youth who are most in difficulty."

Another measure will increase to 100,000—from the present pitiful 30,000—the number of grants "for the deserving"—*au mérite*. The minuscule scope of this proposal is clear when one considers that nearly 5 million people live in the suburban estates for the poor. The success of the "deserving" few will not solve the problems of the many. On the same scale is the proposal to establish 10 extra boarding residences "of educational achievement for the most promising and motivated pupils."

Villepin has pledged that every person under 25, whether seeking a job or not, living in one of the 750 "sensitive zones" will receive an "in-depth interview" at an unemployment office and "a specific solution" will be offered to them in three months (training, work experience, contracts). He made no proposal to drop legislation penalising those who do not accept the low-wage jobs on offer by withdrawing their welfare benefits.

Another insult is the plan to create 5,000 posts for "pedagogical assistants" or auxiliaries. These would not be trained teachers but students who would, for minimal wages, conditions and rights, "help pupils with learning difficulties." Villepin announced no plan to stop the reduction in teaching posts that has been continuing for three years nor the suppression of the "surveillants." These are students who, since the 1930s, have been able to pay their way through university—with a proper contract, seven-year job

security, holiday and sick-leave rights and earned seniority—by helping with organisational tasks in secondary schools.

An extra 100 million euros have been allocated to the 14,000 voluntary associations and NGOs that operate in the working class estates and alleviate the most crying needs of the population. This is merely to restore the cuts the government has been imposing since it came into office. Villepin has pledged to increase the funding of the “Agency for Urban Renovation” by 25 percent.

Even the increased policing of the neighbourhoods is to be done on the cheap with “contracts to help to get work—*contrats d’aide à l’emploi*”—six-month, low-wage contracts with no future.

Of course, Villepin signalled no intention of halting the assault on public services as the government presses on with wholesale privatisation of the gas and electricity utilities, the motorways and telecommunications. Nor does he intend to restore workers’ rights eliminated by the destruction of the guarantees in the labour code, the loss of which deprives these very youth of stable employment.

Even as the ministers and National Assembly deputies were considering the state of emergency, which has been approved by the opposition Socialist Party, the unions were in discussion with the employers’ associations, principally the MEDEF, about the 14 billion euro deficit in the unemployment fund, run jointly by the Socialist Party-aligned trade union body the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) and the MEDEF. The fund is made up of contributions taken from workers’ wages and from the employers. Central government funding has dwindled from 30 percent to 10 percent over the past 20 years.

In 2002, the trade unions and the employers agreed to raise workers’ contributions, deducted from their pay, and diminish the duration of unemployment benefits based on average earnings and not subjected to means testing. The MEDEF, the main force behind the government’s social policies, is arguing for further attacks on the rights of the unemployed while demanding untrammelled freedom to fire workers. The unions have no intention of waging a serious struggle against these attacks. Villepin made no reference to this question, which has a brutal effect on the inhabitants of the estates, where the youth revolt has been most explosive.

The property destruction caused by the desperate revolt of the impoverished youth pales into insignificance next to the vast and politically conscious destruction of social conditions that is being wrought by the financial and political elites.



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