

France: Students mobilise against destruction of working conditions for youth

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Organisations representing French university and high school students (*lycéens*) have called for a week of mass meetings and mobilisations all over France, starting January 30, in preparation for a national demonstration February 7 against the proposed First Job Contract (CPE—*Contrat première embauche*). Prime Minister Dominique De Villepin's project, supposedly a response to the youth disturbances that rocked the country for three weeks last October and November, will give employers the right to sack young workers without justification during the first two years after being taken on.

The bill setting up the CPE has been brought forward a fortnight ahead of its scheduled parliamentary date to pre-empt the feared mass movement of opposition to it by university and high school students and workers. The bill will come before the National Assembly on January 31. The student body will be broken up nationally February 4 to March 6 as staggered two-week holiday breaks occur on different dates in different regions, by the end of which time the government would hope to have dispatched the legislation.

The FIDL (Independent and Democratic Federation of High School Students), one of the two major high school unions, commented: "The *lycée* students are well aware that the government was counting on the school holidays to avoid this opposition movement. That's why the high school students will be mobilising before February 4."

The CPE, which would apply to job seekers under 26 years old in businesses employing over 20 people, begins with a two-year "consolidation period" during which the contract can be broken without justification and, therefore, without appeal or redress. The contract is open-ended—that is, it has no expiry date—but employers will, of course, tend to avoid having to keep workers in their employ under the limited protection of the existing labour legislation.

The government has been encouraged in its present attacks on work rights by the lack of organised opposition from the trade unions to the Contract for New Hires (CNE—*Contrat nouvelles embauches*) bill, passed in parliament last August with similar provisions to those of the CPE for newly hired workers in businesses with payrolls of fewer than 20. Bernard Thibault of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, France's largest trade union) has admitted: "We did not manage to prevent the

CNE because we could not build a follow-on of the unified day of action on October 4" (*Le Monde*, January 17). Many saw the CNE as an open door to a complete revision of labour legislation that checks the unfettered exploitation of workers by their bosses and that enables the trade unions to maintain a certain peace in industrial relations.

Alongside the CPE and the CNE, the government is proposing the Short-term Contract for Seniors, workers over 57, and a scheme whereby retirees can work for low wages without loss of pension payment, both of which deny stability of employment. The measures include many cash incentives to employers, among them exemptions from social security contributions that have been calculated as representing a 20-billion-euros-a-year bonanza for employers.

Indeed, the big business association MEDEF (Movement of French Enterprises) has called for such contracts to be the general rule and pushes ever more stridently for the *contrat unique*, which would do away with protection against wrongful or unjustified dismissal and leave workers with little redress against sacking. Laurence Parisot, the MEDEF leader, has referred to the Labour Code as "*fatras*"—i.e., rubbish.

People taken on under these newly proposed contracts will be subject to the whims of management and unable to aspire to any but the legal minimum regarding wages and working conditions or to challenge work rates, dangerous conditions or even the non-payment of extra hours, so fragile would their tenure be.

The left Magistrates' Union states that the CPE "is not in conformity with the fundamental principles affirmed in convention 158 of the ILO [International Labour Organisation], regarding both the requirement of a reasonable trial period and justification for sacking.... The very principle of a permanent contract and the logic of job protection that underlies it are clearly in the government's sights." It is a continuation of the dismantling of the framework for collective bargaining that began with the previous Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) and the law on the 35-hour week, and accelerated with the subsequent Gaullist government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

The protest movement against the CPE emerges at a time of other workers' mobilisations organised separately against a

ruling elite resolute in its assault on the living standards of the working class. A scheduled demonstration on January 31 in front of the National Assembly called by the CGT against the government's social policies will be joined by students. Their campaign against the CPE has been endorsed by the CGT's Thibault, who spoke at the congress of the UNL (National Union of High School Students) last Saturday to enthusiastic applause.

Some 60 per cent of teachers and education workers in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, one of the most affected by last autumn's youth disturbances, went on strike last Thursday against Villepin's proposal to take pupils with learning difficulties from full-time education and put them into apprenticeships and the planned loss of resources for many schools with the redefining of Zones of Education Priority (ZEP). The strikers demanded extra resources to be able to deal with growing problems of violence in schools.

Government workers and civil servants are staging a one-day strike and demonstration February 2 against the erosion of the purchasing power of their salaries and job cuts, and for the defence of public services.

The refusal of the trade unions to mobilise workers in a political struggle against the pro-capitalist programme of the French political elite, and to limit action to one day and sectional protests designed to put pressure on the government, is in line with "responsible trade unionism" that has allowed left and right governments to press ahead with free-market measures favourable to big business.

Recent examples of this include the stifling by the CGT and the FSU (Federation of Unitary Unions, the main federation of workers in education) of the massive strike movement and street mobilisations in defence of pensions in 2003, and the abandoning by the CGT of the SNCM (National Corsica-Mediterranean Company) ferry workers' strike in Marseilles against sackings and privatisation by reducing the massive national strike mobilisations of October 4, in the middle of the dispute, to a one-day protest.

Both the CPE and the CNE are purportedly designed to help diminish France's chronic rate of unemployment: 10 percent overall and more than 23 percent for people under 26. Companies, according to the government and its big business supporters, will be more willing to take on workers if they can fire them at will. The government claims that as the CPE is a "permanent contract" (CDI) it is an advance on the string of short-term contracts most young workers have to endure. In fact, under present law, for the duration of the contract, the worker is protected by the Labour Code and does enjoy short-term stability, whereas the CPE and CNE worker can be sacked without justification at two weeks' notice.

L'Expansion magazine, qualifying employees under the age of 30 as young workers, asserts that this category had an unemployment rate of 18.1 percent and rising. One in five actually working could only find temporary employment. In

2003, only 58 percent of young people had been in permanent jobs over the previous four quarters, in comparison with 77 percent for the whole working population. In that same period, 28 percent of those young people in work had experienced a period of idleness, as against 17 percent for the whole. Workers over 50 also have a very high unemployment rate.

For unqualified young workers, 20 percent had never worked and 25 percent had alternated work and unemployment over the previous year. Forty percent of young unemployed workers in 2003 were still unemployed a year later.

While 21 percent of all graduates with diplomas involving four years of post secondary studies are still seeking employment nine months after completing their courses, on the average it takes from 8 to 11 years for a young worker to obtain a permanent job, to be able to have access to credit and to plan for a family with any degree of security. Seventy percent of youth start out with a short-term contract or temporary employment.

The CPE and CNE proposals are only the latest in a line of assaults on the labour code and employees' rights, including many cheap labour youth schemes and temporary contracts, carried out by left and right governments over the last two decades, including the present Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) government elected in 2002. Already, large cuts have been made in unemployment benefits, and recent discussions between unions and employers (the "social partners") envisage the further impoverishment of the unemployed.

The purpose of these measures is to remove all obstacles to the cheapening of labour costs by making ever-greater inroads into workers' rights and protections in order to increase the profitability and competitiveness of big business and to make France more attractive to investors.



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