

Fight vs. CPE requires independent political struggle by French workers

World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
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The following statement addresses demonstrations being held February 7 throughout France by high school and university students' organisations against the First Job Contract (CPE) presentation going through the National Assembly. The statement is being distributed by supporters of the World Socialist Web Site at the protests.

The high school and university students' struggle against the First Job Contract (CPE) and its two-year "consolidation period"—during which workers can be sacked without justification—is a fight against cheap labour and the destruction of all work rights. It brings the youth up against the central policy of the Chirac-Villepin-Sarkozy government: reducing the living standards of the entire working class. It is a political fight against the government and the big business interests it serves.

The youth disturbances of October and November were the product of more than 20 years of growing unemployment and job insecurity. Young people are the hardest hit, in particular the children of immigrants. The disturbances reflected the deep alienation from the parties of both the right and the left and anger at racial discrimination and police harassment. They demonstrated the crying need for a new political perspective for the youth.

The CPE, the proposals to take pupils out of the education system at 14, to remove ZEP (special needs schools in Zones of Educational Priority) funding from many schools, and to step up police repression, which Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin offers as a response to the events of October and November, is an intensification of these attacks. It will do nothing to reduce the 23 percent youth unemployment rate, or the average of 8 to 11 years it takes to get permanent employment.

The state of emergency and the anti-terror laws that were largely supported by the Socialist Party, giving virtually unlimited powers to the police, are the only answer the political elites have for the social crisis engendered by the capitalist profit system.

The government has been encouraged in its attacks on work rights by the lack of opposition from the trade unions to the Contract for New Hires (CNE—*Contrat nouvelles embauches*) bill, passed in parliament last August. The bill, covering newly

hired workers in businesses with payrolls of fewer than 20, has similar provisions to those of the CPE.

Aware of discontent over the role of the union, 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 of October 4." More than a million workers on that day attended mass demonstrations against privatisations as well as the CNE and other anti-labour bills.

The mass protest occurred in the midst of the three-week SNCM (National Corsica-Mediterranean Company) ferry worker's strike on these very issues. The CGT deliberately kept the strike isolated and then wound it up, claiming it was not possible to fight the law.

On March 8 of last year, tens of thousands of high school students demonstrated against Education Minister Francois Fillon's education law. Two days later, the students joined the general strike and demonstrations of workers from the private and the public sectors called by the trade unions against the dismantling of the 35-hour week and the decline in workers' purchasing power.

The government offered the trade unions salary negotiations, and the unions called off the mobilisation and abandoned the *lycéens*, who had placed great hopes in unifying their movement with that of the workers.

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.

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 combine low wages with pensions. Cash incentives for participation in these schemes add up to an annual 20-billion-euro bonanza for employers. The big business organisation MEDEF (Movement of Enterprises of France) wants the CPE and CNE to be the rule for all workers: the *contrat unique*.

The purpose of these measures is to remove all obstacles to slashing labour costs in order to increase the profitability and

competitiveness of big business and make France more attractive to investors. Both Chirac and Plural Left Prime Minister Jospin were a party to the “Lisbon process” in 2000, whereby the governments of the European Union pledged to make their economies competitive with that of the United States by reducing the cost of labour and social services and benefits, notably pensions. Now, with the arrival on the scene of India and China as trade rivals, the race to the bottom is on.

The Socialist Party and the Communist Party are participating in the movement against the CPE in order to conceal their record of defending the interests of French capitalism in government and gain credibility for the establishment of a Plural Left Mark II. The LCR (Revolutionary Communist League), instead of exposing the cheap manoeuvre, hails the unity of the left and trade unions as an effective barrier against the attacks of the government. The LCR gave uncritical support to the union bureaucracy’s manoeuvres in the SNCM Marseilles ferry dispute.

The defeat of the Treaty for a European Constitution in the French and Dutch referendums last year was a rejection by the working class of the offensive being mounted across Europe on behalf of the European and transnational corporations. But none of the political parties and organisations that campaigned for a “no” vote (the LCR, the CP, a minority of Greens, a minority of the Socialist Party, ATTAC, the Copernicus Foundation) actually opposed Europe’s capitalist governments and the employers.

Instead, they said they were fighting “neo-liberalism” or “the Anglo-Saxon model”—a cut-throat confrontational import. They claimed that it is possible to have another kind of capitalism, the French or European model based on social partnership and class collaboration in return for social reforms, with themselves acting as mediators between workers and management. To this end, they sided with Laurent Fabius, leader of the Socialist Party “no” vote campaign, who has since rejoined the “yes” majority in the SP.

The claim that the capitalist governments organised in the European Union can be pressured into defending workers’ rights, living standards and social services is false. They are beholden to big capital—above all, the major transnational corporations and the financial oligarchy that demands of governments of every political hue that they slash labour costs and drive up exploitation.

The oligarchy will not tolerate an island of social reformism and welfare state measures in Europe that it sees as a deduction from its profits and that sets an unacceptable obstacle to the global reduction in the living standards of the working class. To attract international investment and for Europe’s corporations to remain globally competitive, Europe’s welfare provisions must be demolished and every aspect of life must be subordinated to the imperatives of the market.

As has been demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan, the struggle for control of the world’s resources and markets

ultimately takes place by mobilising the military might of the state in new colonial wars of conquest. This is not the “Anglo-Saxon” model. It is the face of modern capitalism in Europe and all over the world.

The previous Socialist Party prime minister, Lionel Jospin, when he was asked if he would act to prevent mass sackings at Michelin, replied that it was not possible to oppose the laws of the market. This policy contributed greatly to the rejection by the working class of the parties of the Plural Left in the 2002 election that brought Chirac and the Gaullist government to power.

The entire left bears responsibility for the Chirac government’s attacks: it called for a vote for him in the run-off against the fascist Le Pen. The LCR and Lutte Ouvrière rejected the *World Socialist Web Site*’s call for an active boycott of the ballot and the development of a movement of the working class independent of the political elites and based on a socialist perspective.

The refusal of the trade unions to mobilise workers in a political struggle against the French political elite, limiting action to one-day and sectional protests designed to put pressure on the government, flows from their nationalist and class collaborationist perspective, which has allowed left and right governments to press ahead with “free market” measures favourable to big business.

Youth and workers must build their own socialist party to pursue a political struggle against big business and its representatives—to demand the repeal of all anti-labour legislation, the right to decent and properly funded education, the scrapping of cheap labour schemes, and the use of the wealth of society to provide good living conditions and social services for all. To this end, they must seek to unite with the youth and workers of Europe and the rest of the world.

Only by fighting for its own independent political interests as a united international force can the working class break the grip of capitalism over the planet and free the productive forces so as to satisfy the needs of humanity, rather than the enrichment of a small layer of super-rich multimillionaires. We invite youth and workers to become regular readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and take part in the building of a French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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