

France: Hundreds of thousands protest against the CPE

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Between 200,000 and 400,000 youth and workers took to the streets on Tuesday, February 7, in 187 demonstrations in the main cities of France to protest against the First Job Contract (CPE—*Contrat de première embauche*). Figures given by the Ministry of the Interior indicated that students and youth made up just under half of the numbers on the protests, which were called jointly by the high school and university students unions and all the main trade unions. They were supported by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party (PCF) and the radical left parties.

Taking place in the winter holiday period for schools in the Paris and Bordeaux regions—where the demonstrations were nevertheless quite large, with some 40,000 in Paris and 8,000 in Bordeaux—the turnout was judged significant by the student and trade union leaderships.

The proposed CPE legislation for workers under the age of 26, being debated in the National Assembly as the street protests took place, gives employers the right to sack young workers at will and without justification for the first two years of a work contract. Employers would also be relieved of making contributions to social benefits.

The student and trade union leaders are due to meet on Wednesday at the national offices of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour—closely connected to the Communist Party) to discuss further action.

The legislation has been presented by Gaullist Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin as a means to free up the labour market and encourage employers to hire young workers, as well as reduce the 23 percent unemployment rate for this age group. Demonstrators on Tuesday's marches, however, made clear what they thought of the CPE, with placards and banners reading: "CPE: Contract for Slavery," "First Exclusion Contract," "We Refuse to be a Sacrificial Generation," "CPE: Disposable Youth" (showing a young worker being dumped in a trash bin) and, referring to the October/November youth revolt last year, "Cocktail for Riots."

Opinion polls published on the day of the mobilisations showed that 60 percent of the French people think that the CPE will reduce job security for young people and that 67 percent believe that the students were justified in their protest. One poll found that 56 percent of 15- to 29-year-olds opposed the contract.

The student unions and trade unions organising the protest had agreed that the only demand to be raised on the demonstrations was for the withdrawal of the CPE. The teams of WSWs supporters in Paris and Amiens, who distributed the WSWs

editorial board statement "Fight vs. CPE requires independent political struggle by French workers", noted that this restriction was strictly observed. Deafening music blaring from loudspeakers mounted on trade union vans prevented meaningful discussion and reflected a fear that broadening and politicising the issues facing the working class and youth would take the movement out the control of the left parties and trade union bureaucracies.

In Paris, where it is estimated that two thirds of the demonstrators were students and youth, the march was headed by the Socialist Party, Communist Party and the trade union delegations. In Amiens, where the youth accounted for perhaps a third of the 3,000 marchers and led the march, it was the Socialist Party and the trade union line which dominated. There were no political slogans or chants, only the single issue of the CPE.

The main contingents on the trade union sections of the marches tended to be older workers concerned not only for the future of their children and grandchildren but also their own situation: the second largest category of the unemployed in France is workers over 50. They have been hit by the harsh reductions in unemployment and retirement benefits imposed since 2002 by the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) government of President Jacques Chirac. For them the administration is proposing the "CDD Seniors"—short-term contracts for workers over age 57, and a low-wage-combined-with-pension contract for retirees.

However, these schemes were not raised on the demonstrations. Nor was the New Hire Contract (CNE—*Contrat nouvelle embauche*) mentioned, which was passed last August without a fight from the unions or the left parties. Designed for small businesses employing less than 20 staff (4 million workers—29 percent of the French workforce) it was the template for the CPE. Laurence Parisot, chairman of the big business organisation MEDEF (Movement of Enterprises of France), has criticised its friends in government for not implementing a *contrat unique*—extending the provisions of the CPE to all French workers. She told the press on Tuesday, "We have some reservations. It's never good to treat young workers in a separate category."

The CPE is part of ongoing legislation called the "Law for Equal Opportunities." This includes the de facto reduction of the compulsory school leaving age from 16 to 14 with the establishment of apprenticeships at age 14. There is also the "Contract for Parental Responsibility," which would deprive parents of benefits if their children were absent too often from school.

A noticeable feature of the Paris demonstration was the presence of leaders of the Socialist Party, such as national secretary François Hollande; Laurent Fabius, former prime minister and minister in the Plural Left government of Socialist Lionel Jospin (1997-2002); and free-market finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Also present was Jack Lang, former minister of culture and of education, marching with Marie-Georges Buffet of the PCF, minister of sport in Jospin's government; and Olivier Bessancenot, spokesman of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and presidential candidate for 2007.

Socialist Party leaders have been unwelcome on workers' demonstrations opposing the Chirac government since their defeat in the 2002 presidential elections. SP candidate Lionel Jospin gained only 16.18 percent of the popular vote and was beaten into third place by the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. As recently as last October 4, when a million-strong national mobilisation took place against the government's policies, Socialist Party leaders felt they could not risk demonstrating with workers on the streets of Paris.

The main force enabling the former ministers and leaders of the Plural Left government to now brave the streets has been the LCR, aided and abetted by Lutte Ouvrière (LO). In order to maintain a left posture, the LCR declined attendance at Wednesday's meeting on the 2007 elections of former Plural Left partners—the SP, the PCF and the Greens. However, the LCR has worked to give them street credibility. Calling for the “unity of the left” against government policies, the LCR has signed a series of joint appeals with them on specific issues. The anti-CPE campaign is just the latest. It is only under the protection of the Communist Party and trade union bureaucracies, supported by the LCR, that the likes of Hollande, Fabius and Strauss-Kahn can join workers on the protests.

Prime Minister de Villepin has shown the true face of France's ruling elites. Having imposed the CNE by decree in the summer, he is threatening to suppress parliamentary debate by using article 49-3 of the constitution, which permits the government to bypass the National Assembly. He justifies his intransigence by noting that France's European rivals are already applying such work contracts, pointing to Austria, Germany, Holland and Spain.

The acceptance by the political establishment of authoritarian forms of rule and police-state measures—such as the state of emergency imposed by presidential decree November 8 during the youth disturbances, and the antiterrorism law, adopted December 23 unopposed by the SP—is a sign of how they are preparing to force workers to accept the destruction of their living standards and rights. They aim to dismantle the welfare state in order to maintain French and European capitalism's competitive edge in the global market.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed students on the Paris and Amiens demonstrations, a number of whom were already acquainted with the WSW. They were unanimous in the opinion that actions limited to the CPE and involving only sections of the working class were insufficient, but felt it was important to express their anger through the protest.

Romain, an Amiens engineering student, was sceptical as to the effect of the CPE on unemployment. “The CPE will just encourage the free market in the interests of the shareholders,” he said. “The reduction in unemployment from 10 percent to 9.5 percent announced recently by Villepin was not due to the creation of jobs but due only to the retirement of workers.”

Florie, studying economics and sociology at a Paris high school, recognised that fighting the CPE as a single issue was not enough, “No way!” she said. She wanted the pressure from the streets to force the government to resign. Asked whether another Plural Left government would answer the needs and aspirations of the youth, she said, “Better. It would be better I think.” She agreed with the dropping of national, ethnic and religious barriers and unifying workers and the youth against the profit system and for socialist equality. “That is good, it's what must be done, more justice.”

Mathieu from the Paris Jussieu University had no faith in the Plural Left as an alternative: “They didn't do much when they were in.” But he did not know how the aspirations of the youth could be attained.

Mathieu and Caroline, studying literature at Amiens University, said that the students were discontented. Mass meetings had been well attended, posters were everywhere and that afternoon students and teachers were on strike. “De Villepin wants to force the law through anyway,” said Mathieu, “But I hope our mobilisation will be successful all the same.”

They both agreed that “the left or the right adds up to the same thing. They have to make savings everywhere, so they cut back on jobs.” Mathieu, who hopes to be a teacher, added, “For employment, the problem is the employers' contributions. My father's a boss; he doesn't take on labour because of that.”

Jérémie, accompanied by his friend Méline, both law students at Amiens University, felt that the CPE meant a deterioration. “It's a first step to the suppression of all work rights,” he said. “Young people are deprived of secure jobs, yet their unemployment rate is well above the national average. They say it benefits the youth when it benefits the bosses.”

He continued: “We saw the riots in October and November—two months after they're hitting us with the CPE, it's a provocation!” On the Equal Opportunities Law he commented, “It sounds fine but the measures benefit the upper classes and the bosses. We are all under 26 but we're also adults, and we've got plans, so why should we be singled out?”



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