

France: A million protest against government attack on job security for young workers

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Close to one million students and workers demonstrated March 7 in 160 protests throughout France against the CPE (First Job Contract) provision being implemented by the Gaullist government. Twice as many people participated as in a mobilization held February 7 to protest the measure.

The CPE gives employers the right to sack workers without cause for the first two years of their employment. It covers workers under 26, and is part of a package of measures contained in the so-called Equal Opportunities Law. Other provisions reduce the statutory school leaving age to 14 for failing pupils and withdraw benefits from parents of absentee school children. According to opinion polls, 65 percent of the French people support the demonstrations against the CPE.

The mobilisation was endorsed by all of the student unions and trade unions, and supported by the main parents' federation, the Federation of Pupils' Parents Councils, and by the official left parties as well as the so-called "far left" parties. In addition to student strikes at universities and high schools, sections of workers responded to strike notices issued by the unions—the FSU (Federation of Unitary Unions), the Socialist Party-orientated Force Ouvrière (Workers Power), and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which is allied to the Communist Party.

Several radio stations went off the air, flights were cancelled at several airports, and up to 30 per cent of teachers struck. In some cities urban transport was disrupted.

Despite the scale of the protests, the Equal Opportunities Law was passed on its second reading in the National Assembly March 9 and the government has said CPE contracts will start to be signed by mid-April.

Throughout the holiday period between the mobilization of February 7 and day of action on March 7, high school and university students carried out strikes and demonstrations. Despite this, and despite the increase in the number of demonstrators in this week's protests, the official demands that were raised were scaled back from the earlier action.

The February 7 demonstrations featured the demand for the repeal of CNE (New-Hire Contract) alongside the demand for the withdrawal of the CPE. The CNE, which came into force last summer, with virtually no organised opposition from the unions, also provides a two-year trial period during which bosses can fire workers without cause. It covers workers in firms employing fewer than 19 people, a sector that accounts for 3.5 million workers nationally. On March 7, there were virtually no banners or placards demanding the repeal of the CNE.

In Paris, the Socialist Party was more in evidence at this week's demonstration than on February 7, as was its youth movement the MJS (Young Socialist Movement). In Amiens, the Communist Party, through the CGT and the Young Communists, played the leading role. At the head of the Amiens demonstration of some 3,500, a group of youth brandished CGT flags.

The anxiety and anger of the youth against the government are matched by the determination of the Socialist Party, Communist Party and trade union bureaucracies to limit the opposition movement to the single issue of the CPE.

On March 9, a joint meeting of university and high school students' organisations with all the main union federations issued a declaration calling for another national day of protest against the CPE on March 18. The students had told the meeting they were calling a national strike for Thursday, March 16 at the

universities and the high schools, and proposed that the unions call a national strike along with them. However, no trade union body is calling its members out with the students on March 16.

This underscores the determination of the unions and the Socialist and Communist parties to prevent the protests broadening into a mass movement against the government and its programme of social reaction and attacks on democratic rights.



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