

France: riot police attack student protesters at the Sorbonne

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French riot police on Saturday forcibly removed students who were occupying the Sorbonne to protest the Gaullist government's bill gutting job protection for newly employed workers. Under orders from Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, the police stormed the occupied building and ejected some 300 student protesters.

Camera crews inside the building recorded the riot police, wielding batons and firing tear gas canisters, smashing their way through doors and flimsy barricades of piled-up chairs. The building was cleared in less than fifteen minutes.

The Sorbonne occupation was part of nationwide student actions being carried out against the government's CPE (First Job Contract) measure. The new law will impose a two-year trial period for newly employed young workers, during which time employers will be allowed to sack the workers without cause. The bill was rushed through the National Assembly and passed on March 8. The day before, nearly 1 million youth and workers across France demonstrated against the institutionalised job insecurity represented by the CPE.

Since then, student strikes have spread from ten to 45 of France's 88 universities. University teachers have also begun a strike movement. Mass meetings involving thousands of students have been held at various universities to approve indefinite strike action. Four thousand packed a stadium in Toulouse in the largest of the meetings.

University and high school students' organisations have called for national strikes and demonstrations on Tuesday and Thursday of this week, and on Saturday there will be a national day of protest, sponsored by all of the trade union federations alongside the student organizations.

The violent break-up of the Sorbonne occupation underscored the government's fear that this centre of the student and worker uprising of May-June 1968 might once again become the focus of mass opposition. In 1968, following battles between students and police at the Sorbonne, 10 million workers struck in alliance with the students and occupied their workplaces, prompting then-president Charles De Gaulle to temporarily flee the country.

The current struggle against the CPE is developing to the point of throwing into question the survival of the centre-right government of Villepin and President Jacques Chirac. *Libération* commented that Villepin "is on a tightrope."

Patrick Devedjian, a close collaborator of Nicolas Sarkozy, the interior minister and chief rival of Villepin for the nomination of the Gaullist Union for a People's Movement (UMP) in the next presidential election, told the media, "The government is indisputably in difficulty. We must close ranks."

By dispatching riot police to disperse the Sorbonne occupation, the Gaullist regime sought to send a signal that it was determined to defeat the developing mass movement of youth and workers. This action was followed Sunday night by a prime time television interview in which Villepin rebuffed the students' demands and reaffirmed the government's intention of imposing the terms of the CPE contract, thereby abolishing for the first two years of employment all legal protections against wrongful dismissal.

When Claire Chazal, the interviewer, asked whether this would enable an employer to sack a pregnant worker to deprive her of statutory paid maternity leave, Villepin replied with an obvious falsehood, declaring that CPE workers would be protected by the entire framework of legal protection against unfair dismissal.

The prime minister announced that he would initiate negotiations among the “social partners”—i.e., the employers and the unions, as well as employment ministers Jean-Louis Borloo and Gérard Larcher. They were to discuss providing “tutors” to help young workers in their first two years of employment and assist sacked CPE workers in finding another job. This was clearly a political olive branch to the unions, aimed at enlisting their aid in containing and eventually dissipating the mass opposition.

A prominent figure in the “left” of the Socialist Party, Arnaud Montbourg, as much as acknowledged the political calculations behind the proposed talks, declaring, “After lighting the blaze with his excesses... Mr. Villepin is calling on the unions to rescue him by acting as a fire-fighter.”

Officials of the main union federations quickly agreed to participate in such talks. Gérard Aschiéri of the FSU, the main education union, called Villepin’s guarantees “hot air,” but said he would join the negotiations, as did Bernard Thibault of the Communist Party-linked General Confederation of Labour (CGT).



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