

France: National student protest held against government attack on young workers

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Hundreds of thousands of students and young workers staged demonstrations across France yesterday against the Gaullist government's CPE (First Job Contract) workplace reform. Organisers of the protests estimated that 500,000 students took part—twice the number who participated in the last mass protest held on March 7. The growing mass movement has provoked a serious crisis for the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin.

The *Contrat de première embauche* legislation allows employers to fire workers under the age of 26 without cause during their first two years of employment. The government has argued that the reform is necessary to reduce France's youth unemployment rate of 23 percent. In many of the country's most deprived areas the rate is as high as 40-50 percent. In reality, however, the CPE is part of a raft of measures that are aimed at strengthening the international competitiveness of French capitalism by downgrading the social position of the working class. The CPE is only one of several pieces of recently drafted legislation attacking workers' conditions.

Yesterday's largest demonstration was held in Paris, where about 120,000 marched through the city centre. Riot police fired teargas at one section of the demonstration after a number of youth allegedly threw stones and tried to break through barricades. Other clashes were reported in the northern suburb of Raincy and at the Sorbonne University, where last Saturday police violently removed 300 protestors.

Police also fired tear gas yesterday at one hundred students in Rennes after they invaded the town hall and hung a banner outside which declared, "All France joined against the CPE." Most demonstrations, held throughout France's cities and regional centres, were peaceful. About 15,000 youth demonstrated in both

Marseilles and Bordeaux, and large protests were also seen in Grenoble, Limoges, and Le Havre.

According to protest organisers, two-thirds of all French universities and three-quarters of Parisian high schools were affected by the day of action. Many non-students also attended the demonstrations, including pensioners, schoolteachers, and other workers. A national day of action against the CPE organised by students and the trade unions will be held on Saturday and more than one million people are expected to attend.

The government's workplace measure is opposed by a large majority of the French people. According to a recent opinion poll the student demonstrations are supported by 68 percent. The anti-CPE movement has provided a focal point for ordinary French people's opposition to the government and its right-wing, pro-business agenda. Opinion polls have shown that support for Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin has plummeted in recent weeks. His personal approval rating now stands at just 35 percent.

Many of the placards and slogans witnessed at yesterday's demonstrations called on Villepin to resign and for the government to be thrown out. "We got [former prime minister] Balladur, we got Raffarin, we'll have Villepin," one placard declared. Other banners expressed the students' understanding of what the CPE really meant: "Catastrophe for the workers" (*Catastrophe Pour le Employés*), "Contract for slaves" (*Contrat Pour Esclaves*), "How to lose the elections" (*Comment Perdre les Elections*). Some students wore plastic rubbish bags over their bodies as a symbolic protest against making young workers disposable.

A number of protestors referred to the government's provocative and authoritarian response to last year's youth disturbances in the suburbs of Paris. "Who's the

scum?” one banner carried in Le Havre read. “Who are the hooligans? Out, out, with this government.” Students from every strata of French society were represented at the demonstrations, including immigrant and black youth from the suburbs of Paris affected by last year’s riots. The participation of these young people in the anti-CPE movement refuted the Villepin government’s claim that its workplace reforms are designed to assist unemployed youth in impoverished areas.

High-school and university student union banners were prominent at the demonstration in Paris. Representatives of the main trade unions, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and FO (Workers’ Power) were also present, despite the unions’ refusal to call a one-day strike in solidarity with the student protests. The unions’ perspective, like that of the official French “left,” is to prevent the emergence of a broad-based independent movement of the working class and youth against the government’s entire right-wing agenda. The anti-CPE movement is instead being channelled into the 2007 presidential and parliamentary election campaign of the Plural Left—Socialist Party, Communist Party, and Greens.

Despite this, the youth and worker protests have thrown Villepin’s government into a severe crisis. The government is determined to continue its right-wing agenda, despite the mass opposition. Leading figures of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party, including President Jacques Chirac, have lined up behind the CPE. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, Villepin’s bitter rival for the UMP presidential nomination has also expressed his support for the reform.

In a March 15 editorial, “France’s youth on trial,” the *Financial Times* noted that the credibility of the entire government was on the line. “This issue ropes the three centre-right leaders [Chirac, Villepin, and Sarkozy] together like climbers on a mountain: if one slips the others will too.”

Prime Minister Villepin yesterday declared his intention to hold talks with different organisations, but has refused to compromise on the central aspects of the CPE legislation. He is meeting with heads of universities today, and will later talk with trade union chiefs. “I am open to dialogue, within the framework of the legislation, to improve the CPE,” he said yesterday.

“It’s true that I wanted to move quickly. Now we have to explain and convince. I will carry it through to the end because I believe in this measure.”

Sarkozy and his allies in the government have issued some carefully guarded criticisms of the way in which the CPE legislation was implemented and have called for more negotiation. Some ministers have suggested offering a twice-yearly review of the law. Elements within the government clearly fear that unless some token concessions are made the movement against the CPE could quickly spiral out of control. As yesterday’s *Libération* editorial noted, Sarkozy “fears that the inflexibility of his rival could lead to the worst, to a dangerous radicalisation.”



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