

France: Hundreds of youth arrested following anti-government protests

Rick Kelly, Antoine Lerougetel
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A total of 272 people in France were arrested Thursday night following massive student demonstrations against the government's attacks on young workers' conditions. At least 18 protestors and a number of police were injured in clashes. Most of the arrests and injuries followed the protest in Paris, where 120,000 high school and university students rallied against the CPE (*Contrat de première embauche*), which permits employers to sack young workers without justification during their first two years of employment.

Police arrested 187 young people in the capital after a small number of masked protestors threw stones and other missiles at the police. Riot police used tear gas and water cannons against a section of the demonstration. A kiosk and a number of vehicles were set alight in the clashes, and some shops were reportedly damaged. Other standoffs between demonstrators and police occurred at the Sorbonne and in a number of suburban areas.

Police sources told *Nouvel Observateur* that several of those arrested were young members of different neo-fascist groups, including the Front National de la Jeunesse (FNJ), the youth movement of Jean Marie Le Pen's *Front National*. The leader of the FNJ, Alexandre Ayroutet, was among those detained. The fascists attacked groups of students during Thursday's demonstration and were later involved in riots.

The situation remains tense in a number of universities. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters attempting to interview students at the Sorbonne (University of Paris) yesterday were barred entry by riot police. Scores of officers, many carrying tear gas launchers, sealed off the campus and only permitted entry to staff. Along just one small section of the perimeter on Rue des Ecoles, there were seven large

police vans and 20 other police vehicles. Three-metre-high metal barriers were set up at least one entry point. Classes at the university have been suspended since Monday, following ongoing clashes between students and police.

Representatives of the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin denounced the violent clashes. "I want to express my indignation about the absolutely intolerable violent behaviour seen yesterday evening," government spokesman Jean-Francois Copé declared. "What happened yesterday evening is unacceptable." Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy blamed "a few hundred delinquents who came to fight...extreme left, extreme right, hooligans, and louts from a number of neighbourhoods."

Opposition to the government's CPE legislation has continued to mount. An opinion poll published yesterday in *Le Parisien* found that 68 percent want the government to withdraw the measure, up from 55 percent a week ago. Just 27 percent expressed support for the CPE. Despite the opposition, the government has insisted that the legislation will not be rescinded. Villepin and other ministers have merely promised further dialogue with students and the trade unions.

"The government is ready for dialogue and I hope this will start as quickly as possible," President Jacques Chirac said yesterday. "[The CPE] brings opportunities and new guarantees for young people in difficulty."

A national day of action against the government is being held Saturday, with demonstrations of students, youth, and workers across the country. More than a million people are expected to participate.

World Socialist Web Site reporters yesterday spoke with students outside the Jussieu campus of the University of Paris. Students have gone on strike and have blockaded the campus entrance. Academic staff

have also gone on strike in solidarity with the students' anti-CPE protest.

Audrey, an English student, hopes to become a teacher. "I'm not in an organisation or union, I'm just a student," she said. "I hope that the CPE will be withdrawn—I think we'll achieve that. But the problem is that we don't only want to get rid of the CPE, because beyond this measure is the entire equality of opportunity law which contains unacceptable things—apprenticeships at 14, night work at 15—these all represent a regression which cannot be allowed.

"We must make people realise that we are not just fighting the CPE. We have a range of demands. There are also the issues of the number of posts being offered teaching graduates, the demands of the research students and workers, and we also want the release of the university and high school students who were arrested last year in the fight against [former education minister] Fillon's education reforms."

The WSWS asked if she thought the anti-CPE movement should aim to remove the government. "Yes, but for what other government?" she replied. "That's the question, but I don't have an answer. Villepin is making it a personal issue. If he resigns, that might solve the problem, but only in the very short term, because the person who replaces him won't be any better. I'm talking about politicians in general today. In my opinion, they are all more or less the same."

Audrey was critical of the role of the trade unions. "In Jussieu, we've been organised for three weeks now, and we've closed the university down, but the trade unions have shown little interest. They've expressed their support and then waited for us—if we hadn't got going, the trade unions would have done nothing."

Hicham, another student from the university, also spoke with the WSWS. "The CPE will soon affect me, as I will soon be exposed as a job seeker. With the CPE, the boss can fire you at any moment without giving a reason. To get a flat or to take out a loan, you have to be an established employee.

"The main cause of last year's riots in the suburbs was job discrimination, and the CPE is making the situation worse. Even if the government bans discrimination at the interview level, people will later be able to be sacked at any time. If, for example,

businesses were obliged to take on a quota of immigrants, this wouldn't prevent the employer from later sacking them."

The WSWS asked Hicham what the anti-CPE protests would produce. "The government will re-jig the CPE—a bit of dressing up to hide its real effects," he replied. "But if the demonstrations continue, the CPE can be got rid of. The law affects everybody—all workers, even those with permanent jobs. In the future, there will be sackings and these workers will be looking for jobs, they'll be faced with the same kind of problem. So we need a general movement to oppose the government and fight this issue. The problems we're facing now prove that the capitalist system is unworkable. The right-wing government is not capable of satisfying both the boss and the worker. A general movement to mobilise the workers in France and elsewhere is also necessary. The CPE will be copied in other countries. An international movement will be necessary to stop this work contract."



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