France: Police assault leaves protesting worker in coma

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A 39-year-old French telecommunications worker is in a coma as a result of a brutal beating by riot police last Saturday evening. Cyril Ferez was attacked during the mass demonstration against the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" (CPE), which permits companies to sack young workers without cause during the first two years of employment. More than a million workers and students marched against the measure last Saturday, including 350,000 in Paris.

Ferez was assaulted by the police while demonstrating at the Place de la Nation, the end-point of Saturday's protest march in Paris.

Ferez, a member of the Sud-PTT union, is in critical condition. He is at the neurological unit of Paris's Henri-Mondor de Créteil Hospital, suffering what the hospital described as "severe cranial trauma and intra-cerebral traumatic lesions." Union official Bernard Allaire told Reuters, "His situation is worse than alarming. No one is allowed to see him except his immediate family."

Witnesses report that the worker sustained the injuries after riot police (*gardes-mobiles*) charged a section of the demonstration at the Place de la Nation. They say Ferez was stomped on the head by the police. Onlookers have also reported that police refused to call for medical assistance, even as the injured man lay prostrate on the ground for 20 minutes. Other demonstrators appealed to firefighters in the area, who drove Ferez to the hospital.

Ferez's condition is a tragic testimony to the ruthless policy of the Gaullist government and the French ruling elite as a whole, which are determined to impose the CPE as a major step in the destruction of all forms of job protection and basic social benefits. On Monday, French business leaders demanded that Prime Minister Dominique Villepin carry through on his pledge to impose the CPE, despite massive popular opposition and the growing wave of protest. Their statements followed a meeting between the prime minister and twenty four of the country's most powerful corporate executives.

One of those summoned by Villepin for the meeting at his office said, "There was a feeling among many of the participants that if the law is withdrawn you can kiss good-bye to reform for the next ten years. It would send a terrible signal."

Elie Cohen, a member of the Council of Economic Analysis, a panel of economists that advises the prime minister, said, "This is no longer just about the CPE, it is about the ability to reform France."

Villepin has signalled his readiness to step up police violence against striking students and protesting workers by refusing to issue a statement of concern or even acknowledge the vicious attack on Ferez.

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the trade unions are working assiduously to contain the movement in opposition to the CPE and prevent it from becoming a political struggle to bring down the Gaullist government. At a meeting between student protest leaders and trade union officials held Monday evening, the three largest unions—the Communist Party-linked General Confederation of Labour, the Socialist Party-influenced French Democratic Confederation of Labour, and Workers Power—rejected an appeal from the students that they call a general strike for Thursday, March 23, when the next national student protest is to be held in Paris. Instead, the unions have called for another national "day of action" on March 28, giving the government time to prepare further manoeuvres and provocations, while the union leaders and parties of the official "left" work to wear down and demoralise the opposition movement.

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Cyril Ferez lives in Torcy, just outside of Paris. He is an employee of Orange, a telecommunications company. His union, SUD-PTT (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy-Postal Office and Telecommunications Union), has collected witness statements and photographs of the incident. It claims they present "an absolutely overwhelming case against the police."

The statement released by the union reads: "After the demonstration against the CPE, Cyril was present in Place de la Nation. He had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and was violently trampled by the police. They did not 'judge it useful' to get medical assistance. Today, Cyril, a SUD-PTT member, is between life and death.

"All the demonstrators and passers-by saw the incident. The attitude of the police is getting more and more threatening and more provocative with each demonstration. The risk of things going too far and accidents happening is increasing. In the provinces, as in Paris, police charges are getting more frequent, as are arrests. Cyril, who is in no way a hooligan [*casseur*], found himself on the ground and was trampled shamelessly in a police charge. As if that wasn't enough, the police refused to call for medical assistance. Cyril was left for at least 20 minutes without assistance."

Sandra Demarq, a member of the Sud-PTT's federal council, witnessed the police assault. "We saw clashes with the police and suddenly there was a huge charge on the square," she told Europe 1 Radio. "Then they left and there we saw somebody on the ground. We saw a PTT member on the ground, his face badly cut, his eyes protruding, and his nose bloodied. He was lying on his side, he barely moved, he spoke with difficulty. There were *gardes-mobiles* there, they didn't lift a finger. Two young students went for help and got the firemen."

There has been no official response from the Villepin government on the incident. A spokesperson told *Le Figaro* that Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy "will not speak as he will not have all the information yet."

The telecommunication worker's hospitalisation has focussed attention on the violent methods used by French riot police against demonstrators at the anti-CPE demonstrations. At least 17 people were injured by the police at last Saturday's demonstration in Paris, and another 18 at the student protest on March 16. Riot police fired tear gas, used water cannons, and baton-charged sections of demonstrations in Paris, Marseille, Bordeaux, Rennes and Lille.

It was only a matter of time before these tactics resulted in a serious and possibly fatal injury. Responsibility for the violence ultimately rests with the government of Villepin and President Jacques Chirac. The police attack on Ferez reveals the French state's attitude towards those workers and youth resisting the destruction of the social gains won by the working class in the post-war period.

Authorities released a statement following Saturday's demonstration providing the numbers of injured demonstrators, but claimed that none were seriously injured. Ferez's hospitalisation was only officially confirmed on Monday. The police then told the media that the injured worker was in an "advanced state of inebriation" when taken to hospital. They did not explain how this assessment was made of a man with life-threatening head injuries.

The SUD-PTT statement denounced this allegation. "Once again, in order to excuse themselves, the police have chosen to slander the victim, saying that this accident was caused by his inebriated state," the union declared. "While an inquiry by the ITS [police internal inquiry unit] is still ongoing, the only piece of information 'leaked' to the press is this... As always, the cops think they can do what they like and don't hesitate to slander their victim in order to excuse themselves."

According to the BBC, a paramedic of the CRS riot police is claiming that Ferez said he was beaten by other demonstrators. The SUD-PTT has accused the police of launching a cover-up.

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