

France: University and high school students continue anti-government protests

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23 March 2006

French university and high school students have continued to demonstrate against the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" (CPE) legislation, which allows young workers to be sacked without justification during their first two years of employment. The ongoing protests have further exacerbated the crisis facing Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's government, which has refused to rescind the CPE.

Student protests were held throughout France on Tuesday—the fourth such action in eight days. Police estimated that 40,000 high school and university students took part in the rallies. Between 5,000 and 15,000 youth marched across the Left Bank in Paris. Demonstrators again clashed with police and 37 young people were reportedly arrested.

The national high school students' union UNL (*Union Nationale Lycéenne*) reported that one out of every four high schools in France have been blockaded by striking students. More than half of France's universities remain on strike, and at least 15 have been shut down by student blockades and academic strikes.

A national student strike is being staged today, and about 100,000 young people are expected to march through Paris. Predominantly public-sector unions agreed to a day of "demonstrations, strikes and work stoppages" next Tuesday. Workers in the energy sector—Gaz de France and Electricite de France—have filed a strike notice, as have railway and Paris's metro workers. Eight trade unions connected with Air France have also announced a 24-hour strike. It remains unclear how many workers in the private sector will participate in what the *Financial Times* has described as a "partial national strike."

Despite the protests and the overwhelming opposition to the CPE among the French population, the government has refused to back down. "With this law, there are three things which are impossible," Villepin told fellow

members of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party on Tuesday. "The first is its withdrawal, because that would be like saying that we capitulate to the logic of ultimatums and preconditions. This our constituency obviously does not want, and they would not forgive us for it. The second is its suspension, because quite simply, that is contrary to our constitution. And the third thing that is impossible is the distortion of our law, because to lose the balance of the project would be to deprive it of any chance of success."

Villepin had earlier posed for the media alongside unemployed youth in Poissy, west of Paris. "The law is well-crafted," he declared, before adding that critics could "sit around a table" with the government to discuss "improvements" to the legislation. According to the *New York Times*, within the UMP, "there was a growing consensus that [the CPE] must be amended to make it more palatable to opponents."

There have been suggestions that the existing two-year "trial period" within which young workers can be freely dismissed may be reduced to one year. Villepin told his colleagues, "Social partners [i.e. the trade unions and business] have the complete freedom to reduce this period in those sectors where it could be most relevant."

Any such compromise would leave unaltered the central thrust of the CPE legislation and would pave the way for further attacks on the employment conditions not just of young people, but on those of all French workers. The government's determination to gut the living conditions of the entire working class is driven by the French ruling class' need to remain competitive against rivals in the US, Europe, and Asia.

The role being played by France's "left"—the trade unions, Socialist and Communist parties—indicates what is at stake. These organisations, which form a critical component of the political establishment, are doing everything they can to stabilise the government and

isolate the anti-CPE movement. The students' and workers' struggle against the Villepin government will remain in danger so long as the movement remains under the political domination of these forces. (See: "France: Political issues in the fight against the government's 'First Job Contract'")

In response to the mass demonstrations, the Socialist and Communist parties have called on the government to calm the situation. "Instead of recognising the obvious and heeding the message of hundreds of thousands of French people, [Villepin] is choosing a trial of strength," the Stalinist French Communist Party declared in a statement issued on Tuesday. "It is a totally irresponsible choice."

"We are worried about where all of this is heading," Arnaud Montebourg, Socialist parliamentarian and prominent "left," stated. "The situation is now blocked. It's an explosive situation where the political institutions are discredited."

UMP deputies walked out of the parliament on Tuesday after they objected to a speech by Jean-Marc Ayrault, the Socialist leader in the National Assembly. "The entire country has plunged into a test of power, which can become very serious," Ayrault declared. "Moved by egoism, Dominique de Villepin is imprisoning France in his personal destiny. He does not give a tinker's damn that France is breaking apart."

"The role of the government is not to fan the flames of crises," Laurent Fabius, the Socialist deputy who led the 'No' campaign in last year's referendum on the European Union constitution, added yesterday. "It is to calm them down. The wise thing to do is withdraw [the CPE]." He called on President Jacques Chirac and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy to intervene, describing them as "determining factors in this business."

Sarkozy has suggested that the CPE legislation be trialled for six months. "I am showing solidarity [with Villepin] while being different," he told *Paris Match* in an interview released yesterday. "I have no intention of displaying that difference more when things are not going well, rather than when things are going well." He denied an earlier *Le Parisien* report that he would resign unless Villepin made a "significant gesture" towards the trade unions.

Sarkozy and Villepin are rivals for the UMP presidential nomination in next year's election, and several of Sarkozy's allies have criticised the prime minister for not getting the trade unions on board before pushing the CPE through parliament. The Interior Minister, however, has

been one of the most strident advocates of free-market reform within the government, and together with President Jacques Chirac has lined up squarely behind the CPE.

In his interview with *Paris Match*, Sarkozy warned that there was a danger that the student demonstrations would "awaken agitation in the suburbs, which remain extremely tense". This referred to last year's revolt by largely unemployed Arab and black youth in Paris's impoverished suburbs. Sarkozy oversaw the ensuing police crackdown and three-month state of emergency. His caution that things could again erupt underscores the volatile state of social relations in France.

Further evidence has meanwhile emerged implicating riot police in the vicious assault of 39-year-old Cyril Ferez, who was attacked while demonstrating in Paris last Saturday. Ferez, a telecommunications worker, received serious head injuries and remains in a coma. Initial witness reports indicated that after police repeatedly hit the worker with truncheons and stomped on his head they refused to call for medical assistance for 20 minutes.

Belgian photographer Bruno Stevens told the AFP yesterday that he was at the Place de la Nation and saw police chase a man. "Five or six caught up with him and immediately struck him with truncheons without restraint, despite the fact that the fleeing man never adopted a threatening attitude towards them." He witnessed "an extremely violent blow to the head, on the right eye-level," and further blows "on the ground."

Thomas Coex, an AFP photographer who was at the scene, later informed one of the police that there was a seriously injured man needing medical assistance. "I am not here for that, get out of my way, I have other things to do," the officer replied.

According to Reuters, the public prosecutor's office said that "there was no evidence police were to blame for the man's injuries."



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