

# Mass student protests in France: trade unions come to Villepin's rescue

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24 March 2006

Yesterday afternoon leaders of the five French trade union federations met and issued a statement that they were accepting Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's invitation to talks on the CPE on the government's terms, dropping their demand that de Villepin withdraw the new law prescribing inferior conditions for young workers, the "First Job Contract," known by its French acronym CPE.

The decision taken by the leaders of the five union groups (CGT—General Confederation of Labour, CFDT—French Democratic Confederation of Labour, FO—Workers Power, and two management unions, the CFTC and the CFE-CGC), came as 200,000 to 300,000 students marched through Paris and every major town demanding the withdrawal of the CPE.

Wide sections of industry are expected to respond to strike calls for next Tuesday's day of action against the legislation, and public opinion is overwhelming behind the struggle of the youth. An opinion poll published yesterday put at 66 percent those in favour of the withdrawal of the CPE.

In his letter sent yesterday morning to trade union and student organisation, Villepin made no statement that he would withdraw the CPE. He merely said that he proposed to discuss "without any preconditions (*a priori*) the worries and questions which have been expressed these last weeks about the First Job Contract." This formulation is patently worthless: the premier has been adamant that he will not change the main provisions of CPE: a contract for workers under 26 which stipulates that employers can fire an employee regardless of cause for two years. Only two days ago he declared that these features could not be withdrawn, suspended or fundamentally changed.

The CPE follows a similar contract, the CNE (New Hire Contract), for workers of any age in firms of less

than 20 workers, which the unions made no attempt to oppose. Both these contracts are steps toward the destruction of any employment protection for all workers and render null and void labour legislation which has maintained a certain minimum conditions for French workers since the Second World War.

The determination of the trade union leaders to isolate the students was already highlighted by their refusal on Monday to accede to the students' request, after the massive 1.5 million-strong protests of March 18, that they join them in a nationwide strike yesterday. The trade union leaders put off the day of action to March 28, hoping that the movement would be worn down and then buried by the holiday period starting in the Paris region nine days later.

Bruno Jullard, the leader of the main university student organisation, declared, "We continue to insist that there is a precondition before we meet, that is the withdrawal of the CPE." However, Bernard Thibault, leader of the largest union confederation, the Stalinist-dominated CGT, told the media: "The essential thing is that the government has a dialogue with all the organisations involved in this movement: we have insisted that procedures be there enabling everyone to be heard."

François Chérèque, secretary of the Socialist Party-aligned CFDT, said: "We are going to meet the prime minister and explain to him face to face why we are asking him to withdraw it."

Why a group of trade union bureaucrats would be more persuasive than 1.5 million people on the street and 66 percent of the public, he did not explain. The trade unions are following the line of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, who have pleaded for Villepin to act responsibly. The Socialist Party ex-prime minister and leader of the left campaign against

the European referendum, Laurence Fabius, yesterday appealed to President Jacques Chirac and right-wing UMP party leader and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy to make Villepin see reason.

Instead of seeking to strengthen the movement of the youth and workers against the CPE and turning it into a campaign to force the entire government to resign, the union leaders are lending their services to Villepin in order to prop up this reactionary Gaullist government, just as they have in previous periods of crisis when the mass of the working class and youth have taken to the streets to defend themselves from attacks on their basic rights and needs.

Yesterday's demonstrations mobilised tens of thousands of university and high school students throughout France against the CPE.

The student unions called on students to converge on Paris for a centralised demonstration. From all over the provinces trainloads of students streamed into Paris and made for the rallying point, the Place d'Italie, which filled up throughout the morning until the march moved off towards les Invalides at 2.30 p.m. and swelled to 23,000. A large delegation came from Lyon, where the SNCF (national railway company) had offered cheap €50 return tickets to Paris while warning against attempts to invade the trains and get free rides.

Three thousand police were deployed in Paris and were involved in running battles with some 200 to 300 youth in the Invalides Esplanade at the end of the march. Cars were torched and a shop set on fire. According to press reports, the police were given "firm and clear orders" to arrest people suspected of acts of violence and other incidents.

A WSWs reporting team in Paris observed the near absence of adult workers: just a small delegation of teachers behind FSU (Federation of Unitary Unions—the main education workers' federation) banners and some other trade union flags. But as in Amiens, where some 3,000 youth marched, the students were virtually abandoned by the trade unions. Towards the head of the Amiens march a student brandished a single CGT flag and further back was a flag of the FO. The head of the march held a long banner inscribed with: "Withdraw the CPE—Against insecure employment—For real jobs."

The great majority of the youth displayed no union or political affiliation and had clearly come spontaneously with their high school and university groups or just

with friends. There were no political slogans—just the insistent demand for the withdrawal of the CPE.

It is significant that none of the so-called far-left parties—the LCR (League Communiste Révolutionnaire), LO (Lutte Ouvrière—Workers Fight) or the PT (Parti des Travailleurs—Workers Party) has called for the resignation of the government. They have restricted themselves to the call for the withdrawal of the CPE, thus giving the government and the trade union bureaucracies room for manoeuvre in frustrating the anti-CPE movement.

The youth and workers can place no trust in these organisations which defend the interests of French capitalism as it acts to maintain its competitiveness against its rivals in the globalised world economy. They need to develop a perspective which unites the world working class against the profit system.

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