

France: Mass movement against “First Job Contract” in danger

Trade unions meet with prime minister

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Leading French trade unions held discussions yesterday with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin over the Gaullist government’s “First Job Contract” (CPE) legislation, which permits employers to sack young workers without cause in their first two years of employment. In the face of growing student protests against the attack on young workers’ conditions, the trade unions are stepping up their efforts to isolate the mass movement by working out a compromise deal with the government that would leave intact the essential elements of the CPE legislation.

Five unions—the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), FO (Workers Power) and two management unions, the CFTC and the CFE-CGC—met with Villepin at the Matignon, the prime minister’s official residence. The one-hour discussion followed the trade unions’ earlier retreat from the position that they would not meet with Villepin unless the government announced the withdrawal of the CPE.

The unions have since attempted to present their meeting with Villepin as a vehicle through which further pressure could be placed on the government to withdraw the CPE. The government, however, has repeatedly stated that it will not rescind the law. Its call for negotiations is based on the potential revision of certain aspects of the CPE, such as the length of the “trial period” within which workers can be freely dismissed. That the unions agreed to meet with the prime minister in these circumstances indicates their ultimate aim—the isolation and suppression of the student-led mass movement.

The entire French “left”—the trade unions, the Socialist Party, and the Stalinist Communist Party—has reacted with alarm to the eruption of the anti-CPE demonstrations and the mass opposition to the government. These organisations are doing everything in their power to prevent the protest movement from developing into an open confrontation with the Villepin government and its right-wing programme. Every effort is being made to prevent the mass movement from developing an independent character. Organisers have made the CPE the sole issue at the mass demonstrations and have sought to restrict the role of rallies to that of pressuring the government into rescinding the legislation.

The political perspective of the student union leaders is no different to that of the trade union heads. Bruno Julliard, leader of UNEF (*l’Union Nationale des étudiants de France*), the largest

university student organisation, has well-known and close ties to the Socialist Party. While they are generally less open about their political affiliations than are the trade union leaders, many of the senior student leaders have close connections with the social democrats and Stalinists. Student union leaders met with 12 trade unions yesterday morning, ahead of the Villepin talks. According to *Nouvel Observateur*, the student and trade union heads afterwards said that the prime minister should have held talks with all of their organisations together, rather than the five trade unions as had been arranged.

Villepin’s meeting with the unions ended without an agreement, and the trade union leaders expressed their disappointment. “The country is in a situation of violence and we came here to show responsibility,” François Chérèque, head of the CFDT, said. “The prime minister should make a gesture on his part: withdraw the CPE. We tried to explain the situation and I get the feeling he didn’t understand.”

Villepin described the discussion as “important.” “It’s a first step,” he declared. “Together we must find constructive solutions.” He proposed another meeting with the unions next week.

Speaking in Brussels, where he was attending a summit meeting of the European Union, President Jacques Chirac declared that he had “complete confidence in the trade union, professional and youth organisations to carry out a responsible and reasonable social dialogue.”

Chirac’s confidence in the unions’ willingness to accept a deal was matched by his determination that the CPE would not be withdrawn. “When a law has been passed by parliament, in accordance with the spirit and rules of our institutions, it must be implemented,” he declared. “I don’t agree with a democracy which is run by ultimatums.”

The president also played up the violence witnessed at Thursday’s student demonstrations in Paris and other cities that resulted in 630 arrests and dozens of injuries. A total of 1,420 arrests have been made in connection with the anti-CPE movement. Chirac declared that he had instructed the government for the “hooligans” (*casseurs*) “to be prosecuted and punished with necessary severity.”

Violent incidents occurring at the anti-CPE protests have been seized upon by the government and the right-wing media to

discredit the movement and justify further police repression. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday declared that “the nature of the anti-CPE demonstrations is changing,” and said he had asked police to prepare special squads to arrest “hooligans” from among the demonstrators’ ranks.

Chirac and Sarkozy’s comments represent an ominous threat of stepped-up police repression. Riot police have already targeted demonstrators with tear gas, water cannon and baton charges. Youth at Thursday’s protest in Paris were shot with police paint guns to mark them as targets. Cyril Ferez, a 39-year-old telecommunications worker and father of a six-year-old boy, remains in a coma after riot police reportedly hit him on the head with their truncheons before stomping on him.

Speaking with reporters in Brussels, Chirac was asked how his European Union colleagues had responded to the unrest. The president replied that they had “given their support.”

The entire European ruling elite has lined up behind Chirac and Villepin over the CPE struggle. European governments, both conservative and social-democratic, are fully aware of the international significance of what is developing in France and fear similar mass movements developing in opposition to their own right-wing reforms.

“France is the coal miner’s canary of modern European society,” William Pfaff commented in the *International Herald Tribune* on March 22. “[T]he current unrest in France signals wider popular resistance in Europe to the most important element in the new model of market economics, its undermining of the place of the employee in the corporate order, deliberately rendering the life of the employee precarious.”

The nervousness of Chirac’s European colleagues in the face of the anti-CPE movement demonstrates the international character of the student and worker protests. The French ruling elite, like its equivalents internationally, has been driven by the processes of capitalist globalisation to impose ruthless free-market reforms, including privatisations, cuts to social services and welfare spending, and attacks on workers’ wages and conditions.

These measures have been advanced by successive social-democratic and Gaullist governments in the face of determined and often militant opposition from within the working class. The struggle over the “First Job Contract” legislation marks the continuation and deepening of a series of struggles seen in France in the past decade against the political establishment’s efforts to dismantle the social gains conceded to the working class in the postwar period.

In 1995, a mass strike movement erupted against Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé’s attacks on social programmes and public sector workers’ pensions, health benefits and conditions. At the peak of the three-week struggle, an estimated 2.3 million workers participated in more than 250 demonstrations across the country.

Large sections of the working class then resisted the free-market reforms of Juppé’s successor, the Socialist Party’s Lionel Jospin, who launched a series of privatisations and social spending cuts. Jospin earned such hostility from sections of workers during his term as prime minister between 1997 and 2002 that he finished third in the 2002 presidential election with just 15.9 percent of the vote, behind Chirac and National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen.

In 2003, French workers again protested in the millions against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin’s attacks on pensions and the public education system.

In all these cases—despite no lack of militancy and determination to fight on the part of ordinary workers—the mass movements were betrayed and ultimately suppressed after the trade unions stitched up deals with the different governments. The fundamental demands raised in each struggle went unsatisfied and, with the initiative handed to the right wing, further attacks on the social position of the working class were prepared.

The French working class lacked the critical element required to advance its interests—an independent socialist leadership. The primary lesson that workers and youth must draw from the failures of previous struggles is the utter bankruptcy of all the old nationalist and reformist bureaucracies and the necessity of fighting for a new perspective.

The Villepin government must be brought down, but replacing it with the “left” face of the French political establishment, the Socialist and Communist parties, will not resolve anything. The source of the Villepin government’s attacks on the working class and youth is the historic failure of the capitalist system itself, and only on the basis of an international mass movement of the working class can these attacks be defeated.

Such a movement would strive for the complete reorganisation of social and economic life, placing the economy’s “commanding heights” under democratic and public ownership, organised on an international and rational basis to provide secure employment and decent living standards for all. The working class of Europe must unite against the capitalist policies of the European Union on the basis of its own programme: the Socialist United States of Europe.

This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its daily Internet publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*. The building of a section of the ICFI in France is now an urgent task.



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