

France: Students and workers prepare mobilisation against government's "First Job Contract"

WSWS correspondents
27 March 2006

Mass protests and strikes are planned throughout France tomorrow in opposition to the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" legislation, which permits companies to dismiss young workers without cause during their first two years of employment. Public sector workers have delivered strike notices in 71 cities and towns, and 135 demonstrations will be held against the attack on young workers' conditions.

Transport workers, including those on the national rail network and the Paris Metro, will strike. Teachers, postal workers, public servants, banking workers, employees of Agence France Presse and public television networks will also stop work. Other affected companies include Total (oil company), Air France and France Telecom.

The anti-CPE movement has continued to gather momentum despite the efforts of the trade unions to negotiate a deal with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. 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—discussed the CPE with Villepin on Friday.

The failure to reach agreement has seen various trade union leaders issue statements that they will not meet Villepin again until the government announces the withdrawal of the CPE. The unions' response is driven by the fear of losing control over the increasingly militant youth-led movement, which enjoys the overwhelming support of ordinary working people.

"When you have a country where the youth are as mobilised to contest a reform with such radicalism one would expect a prime minister to take measure of the urgency of the situation," Bernard Thibault, head of the

Stalinist-dominated CGT, declared.

"The discussion proposed by the prime minister on the trial period of two years and the lack of any cause for the sacking is vain," the union bureaucrat continued. "One is taking away a founding aspect of the CPE—that's just like admitting that the CPE doesn't have its place in French legislation. He must withdraw the CPE and rediscuss the CNE."

Thibault's sudden discovery of the CNE (New Employment Contract) highlights the duplicity of his latest "hardline" posture. The CNE, passed by the Villepin government last year, allows companies with less than 20 employees to sack any worker within their first two years of employment. The legislation, which was the direct precursor for the CPE, was passed without any serious opposition from the trade unions. Now, however, sensing the determination of French workers to beat back the government's right-wing program, the CGT head claims the CNE must be "rediscussed."

The student unions have also hardened their position. On Friday the trade unions who met with the prime minister arranged a meeting between the student union heads and the government. Earlier that day, leaders of the main high school and university students' organisations (UNEF, Cé, FIDL, UNL) signed a joint statement with eight trade unions declaring that they "are aware of the gravity of the situation in which the country is immersed" and that "the assembled unions ask the prime minister to receive today the joint union committee they have formed."

Last Saturday, however, the four student unions delivered Villepin a letter explaining that they were refusing to meet with him until he promised to

withdraw the CPE.

“[T]he opposition movement is not weakening,” *Le Figaro* reported yesterday. “On the contrary. In a sign of radicalisation the National Student Coordination composed of the representatives of the mobilised universities called this Sunday for the resignation of the government. The approximately 300 delegates who met over two days in Aix-en-Provence called for all the major motorways and railways to be blocked on Thursday, and, if the legislation has still not been withdrawn, for a general strike with the workers on April 4.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with university and high school students at last Thursday’s 100,000-strong demonstration in Paris.

Gabriel, a final-year high school student specialising in science, said that his school had shut down for two days in protest against the government. “Villepin is arrogant,” he declared. “He thinks he’s right but then there are the youth. They say ‘no’—they refuse insecure jobs and refuse to work for nothing. My impression is that the youth are being sacrificed so others can get ever-more wealthy. The CPE won’t be the final reform—they’ll always want something more.”

The WSWS asked Gabriel about last year’s youth revolt in the suburbs. “This is more political,” he replied. “The riots in the suburbs were more a social question, youth fed up to the teeth.... At the moment there’s a political crisis in France. People don’t know which way to vote—left or right—you get the idea that it’s the same thing.

“There used to be social rights that had been won. Workers had many rights but today they want to make workers flexible. You can see it’s a free-market system—it’s getting more and more like the American system. Now, the rich countries like France despise the poor countries, the third world countries. They get rich off their debts and off their workers. That’s got to stop.”

Julien, a student at St. Denis University, said, “I work as an administrative assistant in a *collège* [for 11- to 15-year-olds] in order to finance my studies. All the young people who work with me are on insecure short-term contracts and they earn just 300 to 400 euros a month. That’s far too little for living in Paris.

“Villepin is just a reactionary,” Julien continued. “He has an archaic nineteenth-century conception of France;

that is, workers must pipe down and the bosses should be all powerful.... The youth and the students must understand that the CPE is just one element of Villepin’s anti-social program—it’s not just a reform against youth, it’s against the working class. Capitalism is getting more and more brutal.”

The WSWS asked about the police beating of 39-year-old worker Cyril Ferez, who remains in a coma. “It’s a disgrace—quite simply shameful. The police come and beat and trample on a trade union member, and so we can see that Villepin is an ultra-reactionary. The police are really just there to defend capital and the power of the elites, not the people.”

Julien was also critical of the trade unions, which had refused to call a strike to coincide with the national student day of action. “It’s another scandal—the trade union bureaucrats just want to keep their cosy positions.”



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