

France: Fight vs. “First Job Contract” raises need for new working class leadership

World Socialist Web Site editorial board
28 March 2006

The following statement is being distributed by supporters of the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International at mass demonstrations being held across France on the March 28 Day of Action against the Gaullist government’s “First Job Contract” (CPE). We urge readers and supporters to download this statement, which is also posted as a pdf file, and distribute it as widely as possible.

Tuesday’s day of action against the Gaullist government’s “First Job Contract” (CPE) brings into sharp relief the collision between the needs of young people and workers and the interests of the French ruling elite. The strikes and demonstrations are over the most fundamental of social questions: the right to a secure job.

This social right is under attack not only in France, but throughout Europe. All governments, whether they be Labour (Britain), Socialist Party (Spain), conservative (France, Italy) or a coalition of right and “left” (Germany), are seeking to destroy legal protections achieved by the working class and dismantle the system of social benefits established in the post-World War Two period.

The universal character of this attack makes clear that it is the product not of a single politician (French Prime Minister de Villepin), a single party (the Gaullists), or even a single government. It is the response of the ruling elites and all of the bourgeois parties, left as well as right, to a global crisis of the capitalist system—an economic system that they all defend.

The aim of the CPE is not fundamentally different from that of the Hartz IV laws, introduced by the previous Social Democratic and Green coalition government in Germany. It is in line with the social “reforms” insisted upon by the European Union commission, the European Central Bank, and big business internationally.

Simply put: the continued subordination of human needs to private profit and the accumulation of personal wealth—whether in France, Britain, Japan or the USA—means the destruction of the living standards and basic rights of the working class.

This is why the struggle of students, youth and workers in France raises the need to build a new, revolutionary leadership—one that will fight for the unification of the working class across Europe and internationally on the basis of socialist policies and the struggle for the working class to take political power.

The precondition for a successful defence of the workers’ and students’ interests is the understanding that the old organisations—the trade unions, the Socialist Party, the Communist

Party—cannot and will not conduct the necessary struggle against the capitalist system. None of these organisations have even raised the demand for the bringing down of the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and President Jacques Chirac. Instead, they are pleading with the government to make some kind of cosmetic concession to the mass opposition to the CPE, while they work to exhaust and demoralise the anti-government mobilisation.

The students’ determination to defeat the CPE remains undisminished, as was made clear by the statement issued Sunday by the National Student Coordination meeting in Aix-en-Provence, which demanded the government’s resignation and vowed to block roads and train tracks on Thursday if Villepin did not give in.

The role of the Socialist Party in opposing such a struggle and working to end the protests was shown in the response of Bruno Julliard, the president of the main student organisation, UNEF. Julliard, who is associated with the Socialist Party, in an interview with Europe 1 Radio said, “What we want is to see an end to this mobilisation, we want a discussion. I will ask to see the prime minister.”

Julliard’s remark echoed the statements of leading trade union, Socialist Party and Communist Party officials. “We are worried about where all of this is heading,” the prominent “left” Socialist Party parliamentarian Arnaud Montebourg declared. “The situation is now blocked. It’s an explosive situation where the political institutions are discredited.”

“The country is in a situation of violence and we came here to show responsibility,” François Chérèque, head of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), said after Friday’s meeting between Villepin and the unions. French Communist Party National Secretary Marie-George Buffet called on Villepin to “show some responsibility” and to “place himself at the service of France.”

All of these forces are working to betray the mass movement and lead it to defeat—just as they did in the strike wave of 1995 and the protests against the Gaullist regime’s pension and education “reforms” in 2003.

They are being aided by the so-called “far left” organisations. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT) adapt their language to the militant moods of workers and youth, while they work to subordinate the movement against the CPE to the trade union

bureaucracy, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. Whatever their differences among themselves, their common denominator is their prostration before the labour bureaucracies. In all their publications, one does not find any serious criticisms of the treacherous role of the unions or the official left parties.

It must never be forgotten that in 2002 these organisations campaigned for the reelection of Chirac as president, telling workers and youth that this veteran right-wing representative of French capital was the embodiment of democracy and the only alternative to the neo-fascist National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who had defeated the incumbent Socialist Party prime minister, Lionel Jospin, in the first round of the election. The trade unions, the Communist Party and the Socialist Party share political responsibility for the reactionary policies that Chirac has pursued.

Meanwhile, the government refuses to withdraw the CPE and carries out the policy of the iron fist in the velvet glove. It professes its readiness to discuss and listen to reason, even as it steps up police provocations and violent attacks on students and youth. Demonstrators have been attacked by riot police with tear gas, water cannon, and baton charges. Already, more than 1,400 have been arrested. Cyril Ferez, a 39-year-old telecommunications worker, remains in a coma after being brutally assaulted by the police.

In the background, right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy is waiting for his chance. He is orchestrating the police repression of the movement, while at the same time attacking Villepin for a lack of “dialogue” with the trade unions. As press reports have revealed, it was Sarkozy who personally ordered the violent eviction of the Sorbonne University by the CRS riot police on March 11.

Over the course of 70 years, beginning with the defeat of the general strike of 1936 at the hands of the Popular Front government, continuing in the betrayal of the general strike movement of May-June 1968, and again in more recent years, French workers and youth have come up against the decisive question of revolutionary leadership and the need to elaborate a socialist programme—in opposition to the capitalist programmes of the bourgeois parties—that articulates their needs and interests.

This question cannot be evaded. Not even the most militant and widespread mass movement will solve it automatically. It must be tackled consciously through the building of a new leadership that bases itself on the lessons of the great historical experiences of the workers’ movement not only in France, but internationally. Only such a leadership can lay the foundations for a mass socialist party of the working class.

Even the bringing down of the Chirac-Villepin government would only pose the questions of revolutionary leadership and perspective more sharply. A government of the official left parties would pursue policies not essentially different from those of the current regime—as was already seen in the record of the Plural Left government of Jospin.

Jean-Marc Ayrault, the leader of France’s parliamentary Socialist Party faction, indicated the further rightward movement of the official “left” parties when he told the *Financial Times* that France needed a new leader like Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair. Ayrault’s model has not only joined the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, but has carried out unprecedented attacks on

social conditions and democratic rights within Britain.

At the centre of an independent political perspective must be the international unity of the working class. In the epoch of global capitalism, none of the issues raised by the CPE can be resolved simply within the borders of the French nation state. Nor can there be a return to the social reformist policies of the 1960s and 1970s, when it was possible for the working class to win concessions within the framework of the national state. Today, the working class in France and everywhere else is confronted with transnational corporations that relentlessly downsize and shift jobs from the advanced industrialised countries to impoverished areas where labour is far cheaper.

The struggle against the global attack on workers’ rights and living standards requires the development of an international mass movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective. Such a movement must unite workers of all nationalities, races and religions and support the right of workers to live and work in any country they choose, with full and equal legal rights.

It must indefatigably defend democratic and social rights and oppose imperialist war, beginning with the demand for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

It must champion the placing of the major financial, industrial and commercial enterprises under democratic and public ownership, so that economic life is no longer subordinated to the accumulation of corporate profit and personal wealth, but rather is organised on an international and rational basis to eliminate poverty and 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.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is a crucial instrument for building an international socialist movement of the working class. It provides a socialist analysis and orientation on world events on a daily basis.

The WSWS is the Internet publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which has defended and developed the Marxist programme and heritage of the Trotskyist movement over many decades. We invite youth and workers to read the WSWS and support the building of a section of the International Committee in France.



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