

France: Unions appeal to President Chirac to resolve “First Job Contract” crisis

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In the aftermath of Tuesday’s strikes and demonstrations in France, the trade unions are redoubling their efforts to end the mass movement against the “First Job Contract” (CPE) and stabilise the administration of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. The CPE legislation, which allows young workers to be sacked without cause during a two-year period, has become a focal point for opposition to the government’s right-wing programme by French workers and youth.

Twelve leading trade union and student organisations agreed yesterday to stage another day of strikes and demonstrations against the CPE next Tuesday, April 4. The national day of action is likely to draw a massive response; last Tuesday’s anti-CPE rallies attracted more than 2 million striking students and workers. In their joint statement, however, the unions stressed that the sole purpose of the action is to pressure Chirac and Villepin to negotiate a deal with them.

“It is urgent that the highest authorities of the state should take stock of the situation and respond to this demand [of withdrawing the CPE and opening negotiations] without ambiguity,” the unions’ statement declared. “To avoid the country slipping into a profound crisis, the government must resolve to do so. The joint group asks the President of the Republic to use his constitutional prerogatives in order for the CPE to be withdrawn.”

The joint statement was issued the day after the leaders of five trade 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—issued a similar appeal to Chirac. The five unions last week held discussions with Villepin, but were unable to reach an agreement.

“We ask you, Mr. President to appreciate how much the present crisis is a source of exasperation and tension in the country,” they declared. “Attached to republican and democratic values, we solemnly call on you, pursuant to article 10 of the constitution, to ask parliament for another deliberation on the equal opportunities law, excluding in particular Article 8 concerning the First Job Contract. For the five trade union confederations, this is the necessary and indispensable condition for the rapid opening of the social dialogue which we

wish to participate in and which is completely stalled at this time.”

This appeal to the president again demonstrates the treacherous role being played by the trade unions in the anti-CPE struggle. From the beginning, the unions have striven to prevent the movement from taking on an independent character, aimed at bringing down the government and forcing new elections. This is despite the overwhelming opposition to the government. According to the latest opinion poll published by *Le Parisien*, Villepin has a 29 percent approval rating.

The trade unions are now attempting to sow the illusion that Chirac can be an independent arbiter in the struggle and act to defend workers’ conditions. Chirac has in fact made several public statements indicating his full support for Villepin and the CPE.

At a press conference held yesterday by the 12 trade union and student organisations, the *World Socialist Web Site* asked delegates why they refused to call for an indefinite general strike aimed at bringing down the government. Annick Coupé, of the Solidaires union—which is widely regarded as among the most militant of France’s trade unions—replied: “I think that the demand of the *Intersyndicale* [group of the 12 unions] since the beginning has been the withdrawal of the CPE, and we think that if we achieve the withdrawal of the CPE, then we can open up a new social context, a new dynamic of mobilisation on all of the issues preoccupying workers. That is our responsibility as trade unions.” None of the other trade union heads or student leaders addressed the WSW’s question.

Coupé’s reply, and the silence of the other union leaders, underscores their attempt to obscure the fundamental political issues at stake in the struggle against the government’s attack on workers’ conditions. The relentless attack on the social position of the working class in France and other advanced capitalist countries is ultimately driven by the crisis of global capitalism. The demand of French students and youth for secure jobs is incompatible with a social system based on the subordination of human need to the accumulation of private wealth and profit.

Even if Villepin and Chirac modify certain aspects of the CPE, or are forced to withdraw it altogether, the government would rapidly enact other measures against the working class.

This is why the anti-CPE movement cannot be advanced apart from the struggle to bring down the Chirac-Villepin administration and replace it with a socialist government that genuinely represents the interests of workers and youth. This in turn depends on the development of a new perspective and new party of the working class, independent of the bankrupt bureaucracies of the trade unions and Socialist and Communist parties. (See: “Fight vs. ‘First Job Contract’ raises need for new working class leadership”)

These organisations have done everything in their power to prevent the anti-CPE movement from slipping out of their control and taking on an independent character. Before Tuesday’s national strikes, the CGT union—which is controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party—issued an internal memo to its membership that stated: “We must be vigilant so that on the demonstrations, slogans concentrate on the CPE, issues of job insecurity, employment, wages, without spilling over into political questions.”

The “left” face of the political establishment hopes that France’s Constitutional Court, which is adjudicating the legality of the CPE, strikes down the legislation, thereby allowing the government to redraw its labour “reforms.” Bruno Julliard, the leader of the main university student organisation UNEF (*l’Union Nationale des étudiants de France*), who is closely aligned with Socialist Party, told the Associated Press that such a ruling could allow the anti-CPE movement to be wound up. “Everyone would know that it would also be a rejection of the government, so it could be a way out of the crisis,” he declared.

The government has made use of the breathing space afforded it by its “left” opponents to cultivate racial divisions between the youth and prepare further police repression. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has played a prominent role in this regard. In a speech issued Monday, Sarkozy issued a number of thinly veiled criticisms of Villepin’s failure to pass the CPE with trade union support. Sarkozy and Villepin are rivals for the presidential nomination of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) in next year’s election. As the *Financial Times* noted, however, “[Sarkozy] cannot be too aggressive, as he is a leading supporter of ‘rupture,’ or a break with France’s over-protective social model.”

In an interview with *Le Parisien* published yesterday, the interior minister made a direct appeal to supporters of the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. “Stop going towards this dead end of the National Front, come back to the republican parties, we have woken up and decided to start talking about the subjects that concern you,” he declared. He also called for greater immigration controls and a crackdown on drug users.

Sarkozy’s attack on immigrants was directly related to the anti-CPE movement. The government has attempted to pit “privileged” university and high school students against unemployed black and Arab youth from the country’s most impoverished regions. Numerous media reports, however, have

reported overwhelming support for the students among immigrant and unemployed youth. Students and youth from the Parisian suburbs affected by last year’s riots have marched alongside others at the anti-CPE demonstrations.

The government, together with the French and international media, has seized upon isolated incidents of violence seen at the anti-CPE demonstrations. While the overwhelming majority of demonstrators peacefully protested against the government, small groups of so-called *casseurs* (hooligans, literally “breakers”) assaulted students, robbed people of their wallets and mobile phones, and clashed with riot police. The disproportionate focus on these incidents is driven by the attempt to discredit the rallies and divide French youth.

Towards the end of Tuesday’s mass demonstration in Paris, Sarkozy visited riot police at the Place de la République, and congratulated those who had clashed with dozens of *casseurs* and demonstrators. About 200 officers were invited back to the Interior Ministry for drinks. “I’m proud of you, really proud,” Sarkozy declared. “Mission accomplished.” He had earlier instructed police to “arrest as many thugs, that means delinquents, as you can.” Police arrested 787 people, including 488 in Paris; 46 people were reported injured.

There can be no doubt that police provocation and infiltration of the *casseurs* is playing a significant role in the violence. Police in the suburbs of Paris and other deprived areas work very closely with criminal elements and have networks of informants, agents, and provocateurs. It should also be noted that the worst incident of violence yet seen at the demonstrations was committed by riot police. On March 18, 39-year-old telecommunications worker Cyril Ferez was brutally assaulted by police, who witnesses saw beat him with truncheons and stomp on his head.

The government yesterday announced that police will be sent in to break up ongoing high school blockades that have been organised against the CPE. According to one high school union, a quarter of all high schools have been closed down by student protests. The minister of education yesterday instructed school principals to end the blockades, using the police if necessary.



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