

French demonstrators: “What we say is ignored, they don’t give a damn about us”

A WSWS reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with demonstrators at last Saturday’s protest in Paris against the French government’s “First Job Contract” (CPE) law, which permits employers to fire young workers at any time without justification. (See “One million protest government offensive against young workers’ conditions”)

The protest was marked by a festive mood in the streets. Many of the high school and university students at the rally had been on strike for several days—and in some cases weeks—before the national day of action. On Saturday, they were joined by trade unionists and other workers, pensioners and many families, including mothers with babies and young children.

Demonstrators expressed their determination to fight, even though most believed that the government would not give way. Underlying people’s hostility to the CPE was a general sense that the government’s economic and social reforms were creating a society that had no place for them.

Few protesters who spoke with the WSWS expected a future government of the French “left”—Socialist Party, Communist Party and Greens—to make any genuine break from the right-wing programme of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin’s Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) government. The “Plural Left” coalition government of Lionel Jospin, in power from 1997 to 2002, imposed a series of free-market reform measures, including privatisations and social spending cuts. This experience discredited the Socialist Party; many demonstrators at Saturday’s protest told the WSWS that another social-democratic government would be “less worse” (*moins pire*).

“People are afraid for the future because they’re going to be in poverty,” Ann-Claire Manhes, a high school teacher, told the WSWS. “There’s a lot of insecurity at the moment, and it’s very difficult to get pupils to work on their career orientation projects. As a teacher, I have to help the pupils make a career choice. Over the last 10 years, things have gotten steadily worse. This government has a neo-liberal programme, it’s very tough. I don’t think the government will change its position. Next week could well be very difficult.

“You’ve now got insecurity everywhere. Over the last 10 years, we’ve had a lot of difficult struggles—for example, the pensions fight that we lost [in 2003]. Then after that, there was a retreat. Education is going towards privatisation. We are hoping that in next year’s presidential election the Socialist Party is going to be more conscious that it must adapt to this pressure from below. They didn’t support us over the pensions issue and the defence of education.”

The WSWS asked Ann-Claire what she thought of the Iraq war. Despite the fact that the anti-CPE demonstrations coincided with the third anniversary of the US-led invasion, none of the trade unions or political parties at the Paris protest raised the issue of the war.

“I am conscious that it is the third anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war,” Ann-Claire said. “This war was about oil, and that is linked to neo-liberalism. That is why people should mobilise against the war and the neo-liberal offensive. The people on the streets today are the same as those who came out against the war three years ago. A movement needs to develop that joins together the different struggles.”

Astrid Fromentin said, “We like everyone else. I’m training to work with young children. I’m worried about getting a job, then where to live, how to pay my way. I don’t know if the government will give in, but we’re going to do everything we can to force this. We hope the government retreats, but we can’t say what they’ll do. I can’t say what’s needed to win, but we’re going to do what we can.”

Asked what the alternative would be if the Villepin government was forced out, Astrid answered, “That’s the big question. That has to be decided with the coming election next year. What we’re concentrating on now is the question of the CPE. If this government is forced out, of course it would be a good thing, but I can’t say if it will happen.”

Maëva Cornet, told the WWSWS, “I’m looking for a job in advertising. It’s a milieu with a lot of job insecurity. There are people wearing white masks on the demonstration [from the organisation *Génération Précaires*]^{are affected by the CPE}—they are fighting against the exploitation of people on work experience. The government said they’d do something about unremunerated work experience, but it has done nothing. The government just wants to reduce unemployment figures by making it so that young people have no job security. I did a stint of work experience for six months, receiving very little pay, and now I’m looking for a job. I don’t think the government will back down—Villepin is very stubborn. To win, we’ll have to have our May ’68.”

Bruno, a member of the Communist youth movement, was at the demonstration with his friends Marianne, Marjorie and Chris. “We are directly affected by the law,” he said. “We’ve got to win, otherwise we’re in the shit. We are ignored, what we say is ignored, they don’t give a damn about us, that’s why we’re on the street, that’s where the violence comes from. They don’t listen, even if we are on the streets. The CPE just adds to the insecurity. It means we can’t get a place to live, or credit, because we can get sacked at a moment’s notice for a two-year period. We are going to fight until they do give in, and we won’t give up before that.”

Asked whether the Socialist Party would be any better than the Villepin government, Bruno replied,

“People forget very quickly—the Jospin government wasn’t at all better. The Socialist Party is less worse, let’s say. What will happen afterwards? We can’t say. We are in a very special situation. There are a lot of people, and even inside the movement we don’t agree on how to go about it. That’ll be decided in 2007.”

“It is true of, course, that we have to build a European-wide movement because we are in a European system. The movement in one country sparks off similar movements in other countries. We must keep the spark alive, then there’ll be a chain reaction and there’ll be an explosion. We must keep it at a European level. It must bring all parties together, which is very difficult.”

Jeremy Celoc, a social science university student from Guadeloupe, came to the demonstration with his friend, A. Konde. “The CPE is especially bad because it destroys any kind of future security,” he said. “You are then confronted with the permanent threat to your job and your existence. The protests here are very important to make the government realise that we are against this decision, but I don’t think that Villepin will give in, and even if he did, the more basic problem would not be solved. On the other hand, we will not give in either. We really don’t know how to solve this—basically, we are searching for a way out.”

“Of course, it is true that it is an international problem, and it would be very nice if a European protest movement developed, but up to now this hasn’t happened because the conditions in different countries are very different. But on the other hand, a common international struggle would strengthen us very much, because there is always the danger that we are played off against each other.”



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