

France: President Chirac enacts “First Job Contract” legislation

Rick Kelly, Antoine Lerougetel
1 April 2006

French President Jacques Chirac announced yesterday that he will ratify the government’s “First Job Contract” (CPE—*Contrat première embauche*) legislation. Chirac’s decision to press ahead with the CPE despite overwhelming public opposition and ongoing strikes and demonstrations signifies that the political establishment is preparing a decisive confrontation with the working class and youth.

The CPE allows employers to fire young workers without cause during their first two years of employment. In a televised announcement last night, Chirac repeated Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin’s assertions that the government’s attack on employment conditions would help jobless youth. “It’s time to disentangle the situation by being just and reasonable with but one requirement: the national interest,” he declared. “When the national interest is involved, there can be neither winners nor losers.”

Chirac offered no genuine concessions. He repeated Villepin’s previous offer to adjust certain aspects of the legislation, specifically reducing the two-year trial period to one year, and added that “in the case of the ending of a contract, the right of the young worker to know the reasons for it will be inserted in the new law.” In other words, companies can still sack young workers without cause so long as they offer an explanation for the dismissal. The proposed adjustments will take the form of further legislation to be approved by the parliament. The CPE as originally formulated is now law.

The president referred to the “social partners”—the trade unions and employers’ associations. “I know their sense of responsibility,” he declared. “I am inviting them, as well as the representatives of the university and high school students’ organisations, to play their full part in the elaboration of these new measures.”

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy declared his full support for Chirac’s announcement. “I welcome this decision, which is a wise decision and which corresponds to what the immense majority of UMP [the ruling Union for a Popular Movement party] deputies wished,” he said. Sarkozy’s support for the president is particularly significant given his previous criticisms of Villepin and aspects of the CPE. Sarkozy and Villepin are contending for the UMP’s nomination in next year’s

presidential election.

The government’s united front on the CPE is a reflection of the objective situation faced by the ruling elite. The ruling class can no longer afford to maintain France’s existing “social model” and is systematically dismantling the social gains won by working people in the post-World War II period. In the interests of maintaining the international competitiveness of French capitalism, all impediments to the accumulation of profit and private wealth are being dismantled.

As far as the government is concerned, any popular opposition to its programme is illegitimate. Chirac and Villepin have rejected any conception that their social and economic reforms should in any way reflect the wishes of the majority of the population. The political establishment now functions in an openly antidemocratic manner—carrying out the instructions of a tiny layer of financial oligarchs in opposition to the interests of the majority of the population.

French workers and youth have staged a series of mass demonstrations in the past month. Tens of thousands of students have gone on indefinite strike and mounted blockades of their high schools and universities. More than a million workers joined the youth in a national day of action on March 18, and last Tuesday more than 2 million striking workers and youth demonstrated across France. The national strike was the largest in two decades.

Thousands of students demonstrated in Paris and other cities after Chirac’s televised address. Youth in Bordeaux chanted, “Chirac resign” and “general strike until satisfaction.” Students in Paris marched from the Place de la Bastille to Chirac’s official residence to denounce his speech.

Every opinion survey published in the last month has demonstrated overwhelming opposition to the CPE and growing hostility to Chirac and Villepin. The latest poll published in *Figaro Magazine* shows Villepin’s approval rating at just 29 percent and Chirac’s at 20 percent. Of those surveyed, 78 percent said that they did not trust the president.

That such a weak and isolated administration feels capable of confronting the mass movement against the CPE reflects Chirac and Villepin’s confidence that neither the trade unions nor any of the “left” parties will mount any challenge to their rule.

The organisations of the French “left”—the trade unions,

Socialist Party, Communist Party, and the so-called extreme-left groups—have played a critical role in stabilising the government amidst the crisis sparked by the anti-CPE movement. All of these organisations have sought to prevent the mass movement from developing into a struggle to bring down the government. From the outset, their concern was to preserve the stability of the state and French capitalism.

The dominant theme of the trade unions' and "left" parties' response to Chirac's speech was one of regret that the president had not acted more responsibly. "I am afraid that we're not moving towards social peace," Socialist Party leader François Hollande declared. "[Chirac] has, I believe, missed the objective that he should have had: calm things down, give people an understanding of a position of justice and reconciliation. From this point of view, there's much to fear."

The trade union leaders issued similar statements. Prior to Chirac's speech, Jean-Claude Mailly, general secretary of the Force Ouvrier union, had offered to call off the national strike scheduled for next Tuesday if the president rescinded the CPE and held a new parliamentary debate on proposed labour market reforms.

The abject prostration of the "left" parties before the government was clearly demonstrated yesterday morning when 11 organisations—including the Socialist and Communist parties, the Greens and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR)—released a joint statement in response to the Constitutional Council's approval of the CPE's legality.

The text, released ahead of Chirac's national address, amounted to a craven appeal to the president. "The obstinacy of the government, the repeated provocative statements of the members of the government are irresponsible and poison the atmosphere," the parties declared. "The executive is making special interests and internal conflicts its priority over and above the national interest.... The organisations and parties of the left solemnly request of Jacques Chirac the withdrawal of the CPE in order to open negotiations with the trade unions and to bring the issue again before parliament. In light of the exceptional circumstances of his election in 2002, he would be bearing a heavy responsibility if he promulgated this law. It would be an unacceptable abuse of power."

This thoroughly dishonest statement was designed to sow the grossest of illusions among the working class and youth. Chirac was called upon to act "responsibly" and in the "national interest"—as though he were a neutral arbiter standing above the conflict, rather than the chief instigator of the administration's anti-working-class offensive that he is.

The joint statement's reference to the "exceptional circumstances" of Chirac's election in 2002 is particularly noteworthy. This refers to the presidential election four years ago when all the "left" parties lined up behind Chirac as he faced the National Front's Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of voting. The "left" parties still hope for a quid pro quo for their critical role in promoting Chirac as a defender of

democracy and helping him secure 82 percent of the final vote. However, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in 2002 when it campaigned for an active working class boycott of the antidemocratic ballot, Chirac has used his victory to step up the implementation of his right-wing programme.

The role of the LCR in the sordid manoeuvres of the 11 "left" organisations is particularly insidious. The LCR, which refers to itself as "anti-capitalist" and even Trotskyist, has embraced a popular front of the political establishment's left wing in order to prevent the anti-CPE movement from challenging the French state. The utterly cynical character of the organisation was demonstrated when the LCR issued a statement last Wednesday that declared: "To appeal to J. Chirac is nothing but a diversion that does not help the broadening of the [anti-CPE] mobilisation." Less than 24 hours later, senior party leader Alain Krivine co-signed the "solemn appeal" to the president.

French workers and youth cannot advance their struggle against the CPE and the government's right-wing programme without fighting to bring down the Chirac-Villepin administration. The political establishment's offensive against the working class can only be defeated by establishing a government that genuinely represents the interests of workers and youth. Such a government would reorganise social and economic life on the basis of establishing genuine social equality. A democratically planned economy, coordinated on an international basis, would provide the opportunity of secure and decent employment for every member of society.

The working class must break from all the bankrupt reformist and nationalist "left" bureaucracies and fight for the development of a new independent and revolutionary leadership of the working class that is capable of carrying its struggles forward. This is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its daily Internet publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact