

France: Crisis deepens over government's "First Job Contract" legislation

WSWS reporters
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Student protests were held across France on the weekend against President Jacques Chirac's promulgation of the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" (CPE—*Contrat première embauche*) legislation. Despite overwhelming popular opposition and ongoing demonstrations, the president backed Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and ratified the law, which allows young workers to be fired without cause during their initial two years of employment.

Protests erupted in cities and towns throughout the country after Chirac's televised speech on Friday evening. In Paris, some 5,000 youth were blocked by riot police when they attempted to march to the Elysee palace, the president's official residence. Protestors chanted, "General strike, Villepin resign, Chirac in prison" Riot police outside the University of Paris (Sorbonne), which remains under police blockade, fired tear gas at student demonstrators. Authorities reported 100 arrests.

Students in a number of cities and towns blocked roads and train lines on Saturday and Sunday, and announced plans for further blockades and occupations of highways, train stations, airports, and public buildings. "Demonstrations and strikes didn't do the job, so we need to diversify our ways of protesting," Karl Stoeckel, head of the high school students union UNL (*l'Union Nationale Lycéenne*), told the *International Herald Tribune*.

Workers and students will stage a national day of strikes and demonstrations tomorrow. The mass action is expected to be even larger than last Tuesday's mobilisation which drew between as many as 3 million people.

More than 20 million people—almost ninety percent of all television viewers—watched Chirac's speech. According to a survey conducted by *La Parisien*, only one-quarter of respondents found the president's address convincing.

Chirac and Villepin have refused to offer any genuine concessions on the CPE. The president's offer to reduce young workers' "trial period" from two years to one leaves all the essential aspects of the CPE unaltered. His other proposed adjustment would require that employers provide sacked workers with a reason for their dismissal—but this explanation only needs to be issued verbally. This measure drew praise from Laurence Parisot, head of the leading employers' association MEDEF.

The government has offered to discuss the proposed amendments to the legislation with the trade unions, through Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and other members of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party. Senior union bureaucrats have declared that they will not meet with Villepin until the government declares the withdrawal of the CPE. Sarkozy's new role as intermediary is designed to facilitate the unions' capitulation.

Several unions have already indicated that they are eager to get on board. "The trade unions' negotiating partner is no longer the prime minister, but the UMP deputies [who] we must put pressure on to get the law repealed," François Chérèque, head of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), declared. Jean-Claude Mailly, leader of FO (Workers Power) said that he would "not close the door to discussions with parliamentary representatives." Union officials from two management unions, the CFTC and CFE-CGC, issued similar statements.

The unions' willingness to meet with representatives of the government again demonstrates their determination to isolate and ultimately suppress the anti-CPE movement. Their concern from the outset has been that of preventing the movement from developing into an open struggle against the Chirac-Villepin administration.

Like the unions, the established parties of the French

“left” have spared no effort in demonstrating their worth to the ruling elite. Eleven organisations, including the Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens, and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), have formed the “Riposte Collective” to coordinate their prostration before the French state.

The Collective held a meeting ahead of the president’s speech and “solemnly request[ed] 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.”

On Saturday morning, the group formulated a joint response to Chirac’s announcement that he had promulgated the CPE. They declared that Chirac “has no awareness of the general interest and is seeking to manoeuvre to try to divide the movement and to continue to impose his policies and to turn his back on the aspirations of the youth and the vast majority of the population. By fanning the flames like that, he is dangerously exacerbating the social crisis which we are living through.”

The eleven organisations expressed their support for tomorrow’s national day of action and announced that they will distribute a joint statement at the demonstrations.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Brigitte Dionnet, a Communist Party executive committee member, after the meeting. The WSWS asked why the CP refused to call for an indefinite general strike aimed at bringing down the government. “Because it’s not for the Communist Party to call an indefinite general strike,” Dionnet replied. “It’s for the unions to do it, and then of course we will support all the mobilisations which occur and also the proposals that the unions make.”

When the WSWS noted that the call for a general strike was not a trade union question but rather a political issue, she replied: “Yes, but we believe that it’s not enough to decide to press a button for things to happen, and so we continue to argue and fight for the broadening of the mobilisation. If the workers want it, let them do it, we will support them.”

The WSWS asked whether then the role of the CP was to follow, not lead. “No, it’s not that we follow, it’s that everyone has their particular area of responsibility and we are trying to assume ours.”

The Stalinists indeed have a long established record of assuming responsibility for propping up bourgeois rule in France during times of crisis. In 1936 and 1968 revolutionary upsurges within the working class were

stifled and betrayed by the Communist Party, which had long ago abandoned the internationalist and socialist principles upon which the party had been founded in 1920.

In the present crisis provoked by the government’s attack on young workers’ conditions, the Stalinists have made every effort to channel the movement behind the trade unions, and have sought to win support for their 2007 election campaign. The Communist Party, once the dominant political force within the French working class, has been haemorrhaging members and supporters for years and is now little more than a bureaucratic shell. Robert Hue, the party’s presidential candidate in 2002 received just 3.4 percent of the vote.

The WSWS also spoke with François Sabado, the LCR’s delegate. Sabado is a member of the party’s political bureau and also serves on the executive bureau of the United Secretariat, the LCR’s affiliated international organisation. Asked how he thought the anti-CPE movement should continue, he replied, “We have been calling for an open-ended general strike for several days now. In the LCR our aim is the withdrawal of the CPE and we are also calling for the resignation of Chirac, Sarkozy, Villepin and the rest.”

The WSWS later managed to ask Sabado to explain why the LCR agreed to the Riposte Collective’s “solemn request” to Chirac just a day after they issued a statement describing any such appeal as a diversion. “All we want is unity of action, the mobilisation of the whole left in unity, that is what is important,” he replied. “Chirac spoke yesterday so, indeed, we did ask Chirac not to promulgate the law. That’s all.” Sabado then rejected further questions from the WSWS.

Sabado’s evasions are indicative of the LCR’s treacherous role in the anti-CPE movement. While their public representatives engage in demagogic calls for strike action and anti-government mobilisations, they are working hand-in-hand with the Stalinists and social democrats to tie the working class to the French state and prevent workers and youth from developing an independent socialist perspective.



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