

A socialist strategy for workers' power: the only answer to France's "First Job Contract"

World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
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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 April 4 Day of Action against the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" (CPE). We urge readers and supporters to download the statement, which is posted as a pdf file in English and French, and distribute it as widely as possible.

The month-long struggle against the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" has brought to the fore the fundamental class and political issues facing workers and young people not only in France, but across Europe and internationally.

The needs of youth and workers—decent-paying and secure jobs, education, health care, a future without war or repression—are in irreconcilable conflict with the interests of a financial elite who represent a failed political and economic system. This oligarchy of wealth and power is determined to make the working class pay for the crisis of the capitalist system.

This is the real content of all the attempts to smear French youth and workers as modern-day Luddites who are opposing the inevitable consequences of economic "progress" and the realities of globalization. It is the subordination of social needs to the accumulation of profit and the personal wealth of the rich, not the global integration of economic life, which underlies the assault on the basic needs of the working class.

In signing the "First Job Contract" (CPE) law, which allows employers to fire young workers without cause, French President Jacques Chirac has acted in behalf of the ruling class not only of France, but internationally. Over the past week it has emerged, for example, that the Christian Democratic-Social Democratic government in Germany is preparing a virtually identical measure.

Chirac's action, in the face of mass protests and strikes and opinion polls confirming the opposition of the vast majority of the French people, marks a turning point in class relations. The European bourgeoisie, taking its lead from its

American counterpart, intends to destroy all of the social gains achieved by the working class in the course of a century of struggle. It will not be deterred by the democratic will of the people.

With consummate cynicism, Chirac sought, in his televised address, to portray his decision as an affirmation of democratic processes. A law, rushed through parliament after debate had been suppressed, championed by the employers' association and opposed by the overwhelming majority of the population, is declared the embodiment of democracy!

The popular movement against the CPE has exposed the falsity of any perspective based on pressuring the government to reverse itself, and posed point blank the need to bring the government down and replace it with a government genuinely controlled by the working class and committed to a program that defends its interests. The underlying issue—the struggle for workers' power and the socialist reorganization of society—is emerging ever more directly.

The return of the official "left" parties—the Socialist Party and the Communist Party—to government would not halt the attacks on the working class and youth. The record of austerity measures and social cuts of the Plural Left government of then-Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin, which was voted into office in the aftermath of the mass strike movement of 1995, confirms that the policies of a new Socialist Party-Communist Party government would not in any significant way differ from those of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and President Chirac.

The development of the struggle has posed starkly the need to build a new, revolutionary leadership in the working class completely independent of the old bureaucratic organizations—the trade unions, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. The latter, far from spearheading the struggle against the CPE and the Gaullist regime, are once again—as in the 1930s, 1968, 1995 and 2003—working to contain the mass movement, channel it behind one or another section of the ruling elite, and lead it to defeat.

Neither the unions, nor the official “left” parties are calling, in the aftermath of Chirac’s decision, for the bringing down of his government. They are raising no such demands on the April 4 day of action, and are ignoring the call issued Sunday by the National Students Coordinating Committee for an unlimited general strike and for youth to appeal directly to workers in their factories and offices.

Once again, as on the March 28 mobilization, the unions are deliberately limiting strike action so as to allow most public transport to continue.

Chirac is well aware that the mass opposition has exposed the weakness and isolation of his government and the entire political establishment—hence his offer of “concessions” on the terms of the CPE and his call for negotiations with the unions. The content of this maneuver is to turn even more directly to the unions, the official “left” parties, and their “far left” assistants, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO), to contain, demoralize and dissipate the resistance.

These parties played a critical role in reelecting Chirac and enabling his Movement for a Popular Majority (UMP) to obtain its present majority in the National Assembly. In 2002, following the defeat of Jospin in the first round of the presidential election at the hands of the neo-fascist National Front candidate Jean Marie Le Pen, these “lefts” called for a vote for Chirac, portraying this veteran right-wing politician as the savior of the “Republic.” They share political responsibility for his reactionary policies.

Such is the logic of the cowardice and prostration of the official “left” parties and the unions that they now find themselves giving political credibility to Nicolas Sarkozy, the representative of the most right-wing section of the Gaullist UMP. Sarkozy, the chairman of the UMP and minister of the interior, is planning to oppose Villepin in next year’s presidential election. He has sought to position himself to benefit from the popular anger against Villepin by criticizing the prime minister for failing to negotiate with the unions, even as he declares his support for the CPE.

Sarkozy, who is bidding for support from racists and fascists within the Le Pen camp, has continued to denounce immigrant youth while overseeing the police violence and provocation against demonstrators, already resulting in close to 2,000 arrests. He is now employing the police to break up occupations by high school youth.

Following Chirac’s speech, Sarkozy seized the initiative to propose talks with the trade unions and student federations. On Sunday he called the secretary general of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labor), François Chérèque, and the chairman of the UNEF student organization, Bruno Julliard, both of whom are allied with the Socialist Party. The two declared their readiness to hold

talks with Sarkozy.

These developments underscore the fact that militancy by itself cannot solve the political tasks that confront the movement. There is no way round the building of a new party based on a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.

At the heart of this program is the international unity of the working class. In the epoch of capitalist globalization, none of the questions which have emerged in connection with the CPE can be resolved within the borders of the French nation state. Nor can there be a return to the social reformist policies of the 1960s and 1970s.

Today the working class in France and all over the world is confronted with transnational corporations that continually downsize and shift jobs from the advanced industrial nations to poorer regions where labor is 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, calling 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 organized 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 program: the Socialist United States of Europe.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is the central instrument for the building of an international socialist movement of the working class. The WSWS is the internet publication of the International Committee the Fourth International, which for decades has defended Marxism and the heritage of the Trotskyist movement. We invite all young people and workers to read the WSWS and join in the building of sections of the International Committee in France and throughout Europe.



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