

France: As millions protest government attacks, unions signal retreat on “First Job Contract”

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An estimated 2 to 3 million striking workers and students demonstrated throughout France yesterday against the Gaullist government’s “First Job Contract” (CPE) legislation, matching the turnout at a similar day of action on March 28.

Tuesday’s strikes and protests followed President Jacques Chirac’s announcement last Friday that he had officially ratified the CPE, which permits employers to dismiss young workers without cause during their first two years of employment.

Chirac said he would delay the enforcement of the law and support certain amendments to soften its impact, but he rejected out of hand the basic demand of millions of students, youth and workers who have been demonstrating and striking for more than a month to demand the withdrawal of the measure. The wave of protests, combined with opinion polls showing overwhelming opposition to the CPE and plummeting support for both Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, reflect the deeply held and broadly felt conviction that implementation of the measure will open the floodgates for the imposition of “American-style” market policies and the destruction of workers’ rights and social conditions.

In the face of the ongoing mass resistance and the obvious isolation and crisis of the government, union leaders on Tuesday backtracked from their previous public stance ruling out talks with government representatives until Chirac and Villepin agreed to withdraw the CPE. Leaders of five major unions, including the Communist Party-linked General Confederation of Labour (CGT), agreed to meet Wednesday with government ministers and parliamentary leaders of the Gaullist party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

This is a clear sign that the unions, backed by the official “left” parties—the Communist Party and the Socialist Party—are looking to dissipate the protest movement and work out a “compromise” within the framework of the CPE.

François Hollande, the head of the Socialist Party, stated openly the aim of these forces to bring the mass resistance to an end. “I’m hoping that we can get this conflict, which has lasted too long, over with, that this will be the last demonstration,” he said on Tuesday.

The struggle against the policies of the government has revealed an essential political truth: the main obstacle to defeating the attacks on social conditions and democratic rights is not the inherent strength of the government or the capitalist political establishment, but rather the cowardice and treachery of the old labour bureaucracies.

The conclusion that must be drawn is the need to break with these organizations and their nationalist and reformist perspective and build a new leadership in the working class based on a revolutionary

socialist and internationalist program.

The largest protest on Tuesday was held in Paris, where organisers reported 700,000 on the march. Estimates for other cities include 250,000 in Marseille, 120,000 in Bordeaux, 90,000 in Toulouse, and 75,000 in Nantes.

University and high school students demonstrated together with workers from both the public and private sector, including transport workers, air traffic controllers, education workers, and employees of France Telecom, Renault, and the oil company Total. There was, however, significantly less disruption from strikes in the public sector than occurred at last Tuesday’s day of action, indicating that the trade unions worked to minimise the impact of yesterday’s strike.

The French weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* reported on its web site Tuesday: “At midday on Tuesday, the presidents of the UMP parliamentary groups in the National Assembly and the Senate, Bernard Accoyer and Josselin de Rohan, sent a letter to the trade union and youth organisation leaders to invite them to discuss from Wednesday the bill improving the CPE. These discussions will be widened to the ministers of employment Jean-Louis Borloo and Gérard Larcher.

“The leaders of the five trade union confederations [CGT (General Confederation of Labour), CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), FO (Workers Power) and two management unions, the CFTC and the CFE-CGC] said on Tuesday the 4th of April that they are ready to meet the UMP discussion group charged with preparing a bill making improvements on the CPE on condition that the discussions take place ‘without taboos, without preconditions, and to ask again for the withdrawal of the CPE’.”

Union leaders and the head of the largest student union had already signalled their retreat on holding such talks. “I hope that after the meetings we should have in coming days, there will be a clear message that the CPE will never be applied,” declared François Chérèque, head of the CFDT, the union federation traditionally linked to the Socialist Party.

“We will answer yes to the invitation as long as there is a guarantee that no CPE contract will be signed in the coming days,” said Bruno Julliard, head of the university students’ union UNEF (*Union Nationale des Étudiants de France*), whose ties to the Socialist Party are well known.

Both statements imply an acceptance of the CPE law itself. Julliard’s “guarantee” does not differ in substance from the so-called compromise offered by Chirac in his speech last Friday.

There was much talk from union leaders and “left” politicians

Tuesday of an impending “victory,” but their actions make it clear the “victory” they are preparing will be a betrayal of the interests and aspirations of workers and young people.

In agreeing to enter into talks essentially on the government’s terms, the unions and parties of the official “left” are seeking to undercut demands from student delegates for an indefinite general strike and growing sentiment for a struggle to bring down the Gaullist government.

Their strategy doubtless involves an attempt to portray the movement as entering a “new stage,” which is to unfold in the National Assembly and in backroom meetings between union officials, party leaders, business representatives and government ministers. The pressing and overriding concern common to the official left and the French ruling elite as a whole is to break the back of the mass resistance and sow demoralization and confusion within the working class.

The unions, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party have repeatedly played precisely this role in times of great crisis for the French bourgeoisie—from the Popular Front government of 1936 that strangled the workers’ general strike, to the so-called “victory” engineered by the CGT and the Communist Party that broke the strike movement in May-June 1968 and saved the government of Charles de Gaulle, to the “no politics” stance of the unions and the official left parties that led to the defeat of the strike and protest movement of 1995, to the betrayal of mass protests against education and pension “reforms” in 2003.

In the current crisis, the unions and the left parties, including the so-called “far left” Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), are effectively lending political legitimacy and bolstering the political fortunes of the leader of the right wing of the Gaullist UMP, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. Chirac has instructed Sarkozy and his allies to head the discussions with the unions.

The interior minister is positioning himself for the 2007 presidential election on a program of right-wing economic reforms, repressive “law and order” measures, and anti-immigrant, racist scapegoating. Sarkozy has demonstratively overseen the police repression against the anti-CPE movement, posing for the cameras with riot police at recent mass protests. More than 3,000 people have been arrested in connection with the demonstrations, including 383 in Paris and 243 in other cities yesterday.

At the same time, while supporting the CPE, he has criticized Prime Minister Villepin’s tactics, attacking him, in particular, for failing to negotiate with the unions prior to the vote on the measure in the National Assembly.

The issues at stake in the present struggle go beyond the immediate question of the CPE. Laurence Parisot, head of the employers’ association MEDEF, spoke for the entire French bourgeoisie when she declared that irrespective of what happens with the CPE, further measures against workers of all ages must be implemented.

“The one merit of the crisis is that people have understood that there are real problems in our labour market,” she declared. “I’m convinced that France can undertake the reforms it needs.”

Parisot’s comments were echoed by Eric Chaney, economist at Morgan Stanley, an international investment bank. “The debate about labour market reform is now open,” he said. “It is very hard to imagine that the campaign for next year’s presidential elections can skirt this issue.”

The struggle against the CPE has brought to the surface the essential and irreconcilable conflict between the needs and interests of the

working class—for decent and secure jobs, health care, pensions, education, a future for the youth without war and repression—and the demands of a financial oligarchy whose wealth and power are based on a failed system—capitalism. This conflict cannot be resolved in the interests of the workers and youth so long as the present government, and the entire political establishment, remains in power. What is required is a conscious struggle for a workers’ government and the reorganization of society on socialist foundations.

The particular role of the “far left” parties—the LCR and Lutte Ouvrière (LO)—is to obscure these political truths, conceal from the masses the treachery of the unions and the official left parties, and politically disarm the mass movement.

The LCR was a signatory to a leaflet distributed at Tuesday’s demonstrations in the name of eleven left and radical organizations, including the Socialist and Communist parties, which reproduced the grovelling appeal made by these organizations on the eve of Chirac’s speech for the French president to retract the CPE. There could be no clearer demonstration of political bankruptcy than issuing such a statement even after Chirac had rejected it.

Lutte Ouvrière has demonstrated its prostration and political opportunism throughout the CPE crisis. The LO responded to Chirac’s promulgation of the CPE by issuing a brief statement promoting the illusion that more pressure from the streets would be sufficient to defeat the government’s attacks. It declared: “The only answer to give to Chirac and Villepin is to make the day of strikes and demonstrations on April 4 an even more demonstrable success than that of March 28.”

While refusing to publicly endorse the coming talks between the unions and the government and keeping organizationally aloof from the group of eleven left organizations headed by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, the LO advances no alternative perspective, helping, in practice, to channel the mass opposition behind the labour bureaucracies.

On Tuesday’s day of action, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed thousands of copies of the statement “A socialist strategy for workers’ power: the only answer to France’s ‘First Job Contract’”. The statement explained, “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.”



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