

# French unions hold talks with government in move to end “First Job Contract” strikes

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6 April 2006

France’s major trade unions and student unions, a total of twelve organizations operating under the umbrella of the *Intersyndicale*, held a joint meeting in Paris Wednesday morning to coordinate negotiations with the Gaullist government over the “First Job Contract” (CPE).

Five trade unions—CGT (General Confederation of Labour), CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), FO (Workers Power) and two management unions, the CFTC and the CFE-CGC—later held separate discussions with deputies from the ruling Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) party. Other unions will meet with the government in the coming days.

The CPE allows workers under the age of 26 to be dismissed without cause during their first two years of employment. President Jacques Chirac formally ratified the legislation last Friday, but declared that it would not be applied until additional laws were enacted modifying aspects of the CPE. The government proposes to reduce the trial period from two years to one, and require employers to issue sacked workers an explanation for their dismissal.

The unions claim their discussions with the government—coming one day after a second national day of action against the CPE that saw millions across France join in strikes and mass protests—are aimed at ensuring that new legislation nullifies the CPE. However, Chirac, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy have all rejected a withdrawal of the law.

The real aim of the unions is to work out a deal which, they hope, will provide some degree of political cover for their capitulation, in the face of overwhelming popular opposition, to the attack by the government and big business on long-standing laws

that provide a measure of job security for workers.

Working in tandem with the official “left” parties—the Socialist Party and the Communist Party—the unions are looking for a “compromise” which they will hail as a victory for the mass movement, even as they accept the basic thrust of the legislation. At the same time, they aim to wind up the mass mobilization of students and workers that has exposed the isolation of the Gaullist regime and the deep-going popular opposition to its right-wing policies.

There is an unstated agreement between the government, the unions and the left wing of the political establishment that the talks should provide a smokescreen behind which all of the participants work to suppress the popular resistance.

Chirac indicated as much on Wednesday, when he called on the unions to accept their “responsibility” and ensure that the discussions are “constructive,” and demanded that high school and university students end their strikes and occupations and resume their classes.

*Le Monde* reported that Sarkozy, who is overseeing the talks with the unions, said on Tuesday that “the repeal pure and simple of the CPE is out of the question.” The interior minister, who is also the chairman of the UMP and who has overseen police attacks on demonstrators resulting in thousands of arrests, added that the CPE would be implemented in its existing form if the unions refused to enter into negotiations.

The *Intersyndicale* on Wednesday issued a public demand for the abrogation of the CPE before April 17, when the National Assembly goes into recess. The unions “have all agreed that they would accept the invitation of the parliamentary groups in order to demand the withdrawal of the CPE,” said René Valladon, a leading official in the FO.

Valladon did not explain why, if the unions remained adamant that the law be repealed, they were bothering to negotiate with a government that has made the exclusion of any such action the precondition for negotiations. The deadline of April 17 indicates the real intent of the union officialdom. It is, they hope, sufficiently far off to give them time to divide and demoralize the mass movement. Not accidentally, high school students in Paris will be on Easter break at that time.

In the meantime, the unions will support no further strike action or join in student protests, effectively isolating continuing efforts by university and high school students to oppose the government's policies. This will give Sarkozy a green light to intensify police repression against students who are continuing strikes and occupations at hundreds of universities and high schools.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* questioned representatives of the trade unions and student unions at a press conference following their joint meeting on Wednesday. A WSWs correspondent asked the union leaders why they had agreed to talks with the government after having previously declared that they would not undertake any negotiations until the CPE was withdrawn. He followed by asking why they had agreed to meet with Sarkozy, thereby strengthening the most right-wing elements within the government.

"Your question is not suitable for a reply from the *Intersyndicale*," the FO's Valladon replied. "You should ask it individually to each of the organisations."

The WSWs later asked Maryse Dumas, a top official in the CGT, why her union had rejected calls by student delegates for a general strike and had refused to call for the resignation of the Gaullist government. She acknowledged that the CGT, which is politically allied to the Communist Party, opposed both general strike action and a fight to bring down the government.

"We are a trade union organisation and it is our aim not to make the government resign but to put pressure on it to change its policies," she replied. "Yes, the students called for a general strike, but in our experience strikes cost workers a lot. We think that it is necessary to have forms of action which allow a lot of people to bring enormous pressure to bear on the government."

Yasmina Vasseur, a high school student and National

Students' Coordinating Committee delegate, spoke with the WSWs after the unions' press conference. "I would have liked them to follow our call and to act in solidarity with us," she said. "Now they aren't, but we will continue our struggle, our demonstrations, our blockades of high schools and universities, our disruption actions."

She continued: "I can't understand why the unions aren't supporting us. I'm disappointed—we should be fighting all together."

While the unions enter into talks with the government and move to end the student protests, the official "left" parties seek to divert anti-government sentiment into politically safe electoral channels. The youth wing of the Socialist Party released a statement on Tuesday which, referring to next year's presidential elections, declared: "The countdown is starting tonight: D-Day minus 382!"

The Riposte Collective—an alliance that includes, along with the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and the "far left" Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—met Wednesday evening. No press conference was held after the closed meeting and no statement was issued.



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