

France: Protests continue despite government retreat on “First Job Contract”

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Thousands of high school and university students across France demonstrated against the Gaullist government Tuesday despite its retreat on the “First Job Contract” (CPE) legislation. The ongoing protests reflect the depth of opposition to the government and the scepticism with which many young people have received news of the government’s deal with the trade unions on the replacement of the CPE.

An estimated 41,000 students marched in Paris and other French cities. The turnout was far below previous demonstrations, which had drawn hundreds of thousands of young people onto the streets. While many high school and university students are now on their Easter holidays, the primary reason for the smaller scale of yesterday’s mobilisation was the agreement reached between the unions, with the support of the Socialist and Communist parties, and the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and President Jacques Chirac.

On Monday, Chirac and Villepin announced that the CPE, which allowed employers to fire young workers without cause, would be replaced. The proposed new measures include subsidies to companies that hire inexperienced workers and an increase in youth training placements in various industries. The new legislation is of a token character. Just 160,000 people are believed to be eligible for the programs, which will cost \$150 million euros (\$182 million) in 2006.

The withdrawal of the CPE was a politically embarrassing retreat for both Chirac and Villepin, who had earlier insisted that the measure could be modified, but not repealed. They, and the French ruling elite as a whole, had not anticipated or prepared for the immense and explosive eruption of social opposition provoked by the passage of the CPE, which Villepin had rushed through the National Assembly after cutting off debate. For Villepin, in particular, the withdrawal of the CPE represents a political defeat that will likely cost him his position as prime minister and end his presidential aspirations.

This setback for Chirac and Villepin does not mean, however, that the youth and workers of France have defeated the drive by the ruling elite and the political establishment to dismantle the welfare state and the labour protections established during the post-war boom period. The government, failing to bring the mass opposition under control and finding itself increasingly isolated, carried out a manoeuvre whose essential content was a turn to the trade union bureaucracy and the Socialist and Communist parties, enlisting their aid in dissipating the strikes and protests and buying

time to prepare a new assault on job security, this time with the tacit or open endorsement of the union bureaucracy.

The unions and official “left” parties are, for their part, doing their best to engender a mood of mindless euphoria and complacency so as to leave the students and workers politically unprepared for the next round of attacks.

Following the government’s announcement of the withdrawal of the CPE, trade union and student union leaders met at the headquarters of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the union federation linked to the Communist Party. The meeting was announced as a press conference, but CGT leader Bernard Thibault told the press that he had invited the student and labour organisations to a victory celebration, offering champagne all round.

The unions, in collusion with the official “left” political parties, had worked from the outset to prevent the mass movement from developing into an open struggle against the government and its entire right-wing program. Now they are claiming “victory” despite the government’s retention of measures that undermine workers’ conditions and increase employment insecurity.

One of these measures, the New Employment Contract (CNE), allows small employers to sack workers of any age without cause during the first two years of employment. The Equal Opportunity Law contains a raft of reactionary measures, including a de facto reduction in the minimum working age and permission for employers to have 15-year-olds doing night work.

Student union leaders—many of whom have close connections to the Socialist Party—seized upon the government’s withdrawal of the CPE to demobilise the protest movement. On Monday, Julie Coudry of the university union Confédération Étudiante called for an end to student strikes and blockades. Bruno Julliard, head of the main university students’ union, UNEF (Union Nationale des étudiants de France), called for any further mobilisations to be directed towards ensuring the rapid approval of the new legislation replacing the CPE.

According to official figures from the Ministry of Education, of the 62 universities not on holiday, 27 remain “disturbed” and five are still fully closed or blockaded. Students have come under heavy pressure from the government, police, university authorities and the student union leadership to lift the blockades in time for end-of-semester exams. The question has divided students at many universities.

At Rennes University, which has been closed since the beginning

of the anti-CPE movement in February, a vote by show of hands showed an even split on Monday evening. An end to the blockade was narrowly approved only after votes were individually counted.

The student unions' position contrasts with that taken by the National Student Coordination. This body, composed of delegates elected from high schools and universities, met again last weekend ahead of the government's announcement on the CPE. Student representatives warned in a statement released Sunday that they would reject "any manoeuvre by the government which would replace the CPE with a CPE Mark II bearing the mark of job insecurity." They demanded the complete withdrawal of the CPE, CNE and Equal Opportunity Law, as well as the government's new law which restricts the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers.

The National Student Coordination called on "the trade unions and student organisations to immediately break off all negotiations [with the government] and immediately call for regional demonstrations and a general strike until our demands are met." The students encouraged "workers and their organisations" to elect their own delegates in order to form a "Unitary National Coordinating Committee" of workers and students.

On Monday night, Yasmina Vasseur, a high school delegate to the National Student Coordination from Rennes, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the position of the trade unions and student unions. "I'm disappointed," she said. "That they're drinking champagne means they haven't got the same aims as us. They've been giving us support just for show."

She was particularly critical of UNEF: "They had their members in the Coordination. We voted that there should be no negotiations unless the CPE and the other demands were met, and they went to see the government all the same."

During Tuesday's demonstration in Paris, reporters for the WWS spoke with a number of students who expressed their determination to continue the fight against the government.

"We're at the beginning," said Yasmina Mraizika, a language student at the Sorbonne. "We don't know what's in the new law, and we want to extend the movement against both the Equal Opportunity Law and the CNE, which is another contract for insecurity. Our movement is for another world—against the process of making people's existence insecure. For the future of the struggle, we must be confident, but it's true some people are dropping out."

Julien Lucy, a student of philosophy at the Sorbonne, expressed his opposition to the deal negotiated between the unions and the government. "The unions have no interest in the movement going any further. They've politically manoeuvred to wear out the movement," he told the WWS. "The unions are not interested in a struggle against the government and the government takes advantage of this."

A series of protest actions were staged yesterday in addition to the main rallies. About a hundred students occupied a toll road outside Bordeaux and let vehicles pass through without payment. Youth invaded rail lines near Dunkirk and interrupted the high-speed TGV train service; they then organised meetings with delayed passengers to explain why they were continuing their protests against the government. Students also briefly occupied

runways at the Nantes Atlantique airport before being forcibly ejected.

The trade unions have meanwhile made clear that they intend to deepen their collaboration with the government and business groups. Union leaders yesterday agreed to a proposal by the employers' federation Medef that the "social partners" meet separately to "draw the lessons" of the CPE crisis and devise an agenda for mutual discussions on future "free market" reforms.

The withdrawal of the CPE has not altered the French and European ruling elite's determination to dismantle the social gains won by the working class in the post-war period and establish US-style labour relations. Jean-Claude Trichet, European Central Bank president and former Bank of France governor, spoke on behalf of the international bourgeoisie when he expressed his opinion on what was required.

"France, like others in Europe, is implementing reforms too slowly, and reform at a slow rate has an associated price," he declared. "In the world we live in today, this has a heavy price."

Discussion within the French press on Tuesday centred on how to ensure the support of the unions for further "reform" measures. "On the question of method, we now know with certainty that reforms (true ones) cannot be made if you go alone into the battle," leading right-wing daily *Le Figaro* editorialised. "As for the scale of the reforms, if they are badly managed, small questions can provoke big shocks. Better then to avoid a multitude of partial reforms."

In an interview with *Le Figaro*, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy insisted that he "had in no way given up on 'rupture' [with France's existing social model]". Sarkozy has emerged from the CPE crisis as the frontrunner for the ruling Union for a Popular Movement's presidential nomination in next year's election. He criticised Villepin for sidelining the unions, and has declared his intention to pursue "free market" reforms in partnership with the unions.



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