

France: University and high school students demand general strike

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Student delegates from 114 schools and universities in France met at the University of Lille on April 1-2 to discuss their response to President Jacques Chirac's promulgation of the "First Job Contract" (CPE), which allows young workers to be dismissed without cause during a two year "trial period." The National Coordinating Committee called for an indefinite strike of workers and students beginning April 4.

Responding to Chirac's nationally televised address, in which he promised amendments to the CPE law reducing the trial period from two years to one and requiring employers to give dismissed workers an explanation for their sacking, the student meeting issued a statement, declaring: "Chirac claims to have listened to our expectations. This is a lie. Maintaining the trial period for a year would remain unacceptable because it's another step in the same direction. As for sacking . . . we will only have the right to hear the 'reason', justifiable or not, for breaking the contract. Thanks boss!"

The statement continued: "We pledge to support the workers' movement. We are available for every local joint action which helps to build the strike... We pledge to support all the demands formulated by workers in struggle, such as wage rises and the conversion of all insecure jobs into permanent jobs."

The Coordinating Committee called for a day of action on April 3 "directed at the workplaces, linked with the workers and their local trade unions: leafleting, blockades, factory and office occupations."

Other planned actions include: blockades of highways and rail lines on Thursday; protests against police repression, including demonstrations outside courtrooms on Friday; joint demonstrations of workers, the unemployed, and students on Saturday; a further national day of strikes and demonstrations on April 11. The students also pledged to maintain their blockades of universities and high schools throughout the Easter holiday.

The committee's statement declared: "The complete unresponsiveness of the government and of Chirac to our demands, the scope of the repression they are deploying

against the movement, and their decision to bind their fate, on several occasions, to the CPE . . . will oblige them to quit at the same time they withdraw their attacks."

The students' declaration did not, however, directly connect the call for a general strike with a struggle to bring down the Gaullist government of Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. Instead it said the strike should be maintained until the government rescinded its labour "reforms."

Chirac and Villepin have made clear, however, that they are determined not to back down. If their attack on workers' conditions is to be defeated, the anti-CPE movement must openly demand the removal of the entire administration. Then the struggle for secure and decent jobs for all youth can be carried forward on the basis of a fight for a government which genuinely represents the interests of workers and youth and which reorganises economic life on a socialist basis.

The position of the National Coordinating Committee nevertheless sharply contrasts with the manoeuvres of the student union leaders, most of whom have close connections to the left-wing parties of the political establishment. Like the trade unions, the student union leaders have attempted to wind down the anti-CPE movement and begin talks with the government.

Bruno Julliard, head of the main university students' union, UNEF (Union Nationale des Étudiants de France), spoke on the telephone with Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy on the weekend. "It's very likely that a dialogue will start," he later declared. Julliard has close connections with the Socialist Party.

While Sarkozy was organising discussions with student organisations and the trade unions, he continued to coordinate police attacks against young demonstrators. Yesterday morning 30 police temporarily forced open the Marguerite de Navarre High School in Alençon, northwest France. The school has been closed by protesting students for three weeks. Scuffles broke out as protestors tried to stop the police from escorting 40 anti-blockade parents and their

children from entering the school's side entrance. While no injuries or arrests were reported, the clash indicates the government's determination to suppress the high school protests. High school principals have been ordered to open their schools, using the police if necessary.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a number of student delegates at the National Coordinating Committee on Sunday, before the organisation released its statement.

Davy Cottet is a science student at the Franche-Comté University in Besançon, eastern France. "Yesterday's discussion lasted all night," he told the WSW. "We started to draw up a balance sheet of everything that's happened in France in the different universities, then the relationships we have with different trade unions and the mass of the workers everywhere. Then we had a lot of discussion on our demands and on how we were to continue the movement and what actions to prepare in order to press on in the trial of strength against the government to make it give way."

"I don't think this is just about the CPE—the demands are much wider, covering a whole program which has been put forward these last years, involving a lot of job insecurity. People are very fed up about the free market policies which have been imposed for quite a time. So it's not just limited to the demand on the CPE, but it broadens to more and more diverse issues."

"We are going to continue to go out to meet the workers in all the workplaces to explain our demands to them, to bring them into our struggle and to come out on demonstrations on the national strike days."

The WSWS asked Davy if he thought an indefinite general strike aiming at bringing down the government should be called. "That's the aim of our movement," he replied. "I think the youth are organised enough to mobilise the mass of wage-earners, and it's highly likely to continue until the withdrawal of all the government's reforms."

"We have voted on a demand, which is the resignation of the government. People should know that it has launched policies which we do not approve of, which it has tried to force through. So, since the people reject these policies, we think it is legitimate that the government should go."

"I think the aim of the movement is to bring out the demands of the people, and then we'll have to see if there is a party which is capable of supporting these demands politically in the next elections."

An English student at the University of Lille, and Thomas Boggio, who studies history at the same university, also spoke with the WSWS. The English student stressed that the movement was not just about the CPE. He said, "Fundamentally, I think, it's over the fact that politics,

capitalist politics, in all Western countries keeps society at a very poor level of existence, so people accept insecure jobs because it's better than nothing, and without a job, you've got nothing."

"Today it is a fact that at school, children are directed to manual jobs where there is currently no workforce. The state school system is not able to prepare them for a career or profession that they want, so they are pushed towards the jobs that no one else wants."

"One point that is very important in the government's labour reforms is the fact that a youth is now allowed to work at night when he is 15 years old. In 1874 the age limit for night work was set at 16, and now this has been reduced to 15, so there is a real regression."

"The movement is not conservative, it's progressive," Thomas said. "I read the *Courrier Internationale* and the international media. They say we protest because we are conservative and the French don't want to progress, that we want to maintain our social gains. This is a movement which refuses what they are offering us right now, it's true, but we don't want to go backwards. Too many people fought to get all those rights. Why go backwards now?"

"Given that there has been more than a month of demonstrations in the streets, it is clear that the government doesn't care about us. So I think it's not surprising that elements in the movement turn to violence, although I'm not a violent guy. Some people think it's the only way to make the government aware."

Thomas added, "All the time the movement should be questioning itself because, for example, we mustn't forget that during the events of 1968, Chirac, our president, was the secretary of state for social affairs and he was right in the middle of it. He knows this kind of movement very well. People have the impression that he doesn't know what he's up to, but as for me, I think he's a wily fox and he well knows what he's doing."



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