

France: Amiens meeting discusses lessons of struggle against “New Job Contract”

Our reporter
6 June 2006

A public meeting called by the *World Socialist Web Site* and held June 1 in Amiens discussed the lessons of the mass movement against the “First Job Contract” (CPE), which extended from early February to mid-April and involved national mobilisations of up to three million people.

The CPE, which the Gaullist government was forced to withdraw April 10, would have enabled bosses to sack workers under 26 without cause during the first two years of their employment.

The movement, spearheaded by university and high school students, became the focus of resistance throughout the working class to the entire social programme of President Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. The watchword of the movement was opposition to the government’s imposition of *précarité* (social and job insecurity) on the French working class.

Those in attendance at the meeting represented a cross-section of youth and workers in France. They expressed a keen desire to draw a balance sheet of the experiences of the movement and develop perspectives for coming struggles.

Apart from high school and university students who had been active in the anti-CPE movement (two participants in the strikes, occupations and mass meetings travelled 450 kilometres from Nantes University), French and immigrant workers, blue-collar and white-collar workers, teachers and government employees participated in a lively discussion.

One young student from Robert de Luzarches high school in Amiens, who had been active in the blockades and mobilisations, came with his father, who had experienced the betrayals of the Communist Party as a young worker and party member in the general strike against General Charles de Gaulle’s government in May/June 1968.

Antoine Lerougetel, chairing the meeting, referred to a recent speech by Ségolène Royal, current media favourite for the Socialist Party candidacy in the 2007 presidential elections. Responding to a recrudescence of youth rioting in north Paris, she criticised the repressive police measures of the government as insufficiently firm. She proposed requiring parents of disruptive pupils to attend parenting classes and consigning sixteen-year-old offenders to military institutions. She made no proposals to ameliorate the conditions of France’s urban ghettos. Her speech was praised by Sarkozy, who has made “law-and-order” one of his trademark issues.

Lerougetel pointed out that during fight against the CPE, the Socialist Party had been part of the bloc of trade union and labour bureaucracies in the *Intersyndicale*, and of “left” and “far left” parties grouped in the *Riposte Collective*. Both coalitions had sought to limit, isolate and stifle the mass movement against *précarité*.

The experiences of the struggle against the CPE had revealed that the unions and the parties of the official left and the supposedly radical left had collaborated to block a struggle to bring down the government. Royal’s proposals represented a further and open shift to the right of these forces.

The Socialist Party had supported the imposition of the State of Emergency decreed by Chirac on November 9 last year in response to anti-

police rioting by immigrant youth, and had abstained in the vote on the anti-terror laws a month later. Many Socialist Party deputies had wanted to vote for the laws. These measures marked a significant step in the direction of a police state.

Peter Schwarz, a leader of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany and a member of the WSWs international editorial board, spoke on behalf of the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International. He said the CPE conflict was symptomatic.

“Its significance reaches far beyond France’s borders,” he explained. “It provides an insight into the social and political situation throughout Europe. Even though the French people tend traditionally to take to the streets in greater numbers than, for example, the German people, the same explosive tensions and political conflicts are present as well in Germany and the rest of Europe.”

Schwarz stressed, “The events which have been unfolding in France constitute a strategic international experience and must be carefully analysed. There is no national solution to the problems that the youth and the working class are facing. These problems pose clearly the task of building a new revolutionary party on socialist and internationalist perspectives.”

He pointed out that the conflict over the CPE had rapidly developed into an open confrontation between the government and vast sections of French society. “On one side there was the government supported by the employers’ organisations, and on the other side stood the youth, their parents and the great majority of the working people.”

The youth demonstrated their unwillingness to become a completely exploitable mass at the service of powerful economic interests. “They are demanding their place in society and at least a level of economic security equal to that of their parents. It’s not much to ask for—but it’s much too much for a government that subordinates every aspect of social life to the profit principle.”

The government had been compelled to make a tactical retreat and drop the CPE, but all the problems were still there: unemployment, *précarité*. “The government is still in power,” Schwarz said. “It has gone on to pass the law against immigration ... The movement had the potential to bring the government down, but the regime was saved by the unions and the ‘left’ and ‘far left’ parties.”

He added: “Right from the start, the unions sought to stifle and control the movement. They insisted that it was not their intention to bring down the government and that their sole demand was the withdrawal of the CPE. When the student movement demanded a general strike, they did not respond.”

“When the protest movement expanded they started to negotiate with the Gaullist party [the ruling Union for a People’s Movement] under Sarkozy’s direction. In doing so, they gave support to the most right-wing representative of the UMP, and raised his chances of being the candidate of the conservative and right-wing parties in the 2007 presidential elections.”

Schwarz emphasised that, for those who follow French politics, the betrayal by the unions was neither a surprise nor an accident. “Since the mid 1990s,” he said, “the French working class has on many occasions risen up against attacks from the government and the employers. However, all these struggles have failed due to the sabotage carried out by the unions and the official “left” parties, which either stabbed the movements in the back, or led them into an impasse.”

When, in 1997, the Gaullist government of Alain Juppé had to give way to the “Plural Left” government of Lionel Jospin, the Socialist Party prime minister carried out a policy of attacks on the past social gains of the working class, leading eventually to a return to power by the parties of the right.

“The struggle against *précarité*, unemployment, the destruction of social gains, racism, war and attacks on democratic rights,” Schwarz said, “requires the construction of a new party which is politically independent of the old bureaucratic apparatuses. This is possible only on the basis of an international socialist perspective which unites workers across borders and ethnic divides.”

He told the meeting that the domination of globalised economy over the national economy had destroyed the basis for the politics of social reformism, which, during the 1960s and 1970s, had still been able to score some limited successes. “That is the reason for the turn to the right of the trade unions and the official left parties,” he explained. “Their differences with the Chirac/Villepin government are purely tactical. They share the opinion that a ‘fundamental’ reform and ‘modernisation’ of the labour market—that is, the destruction of rights and pay levels—is indispensable for France to compete under globalisation.”

He said the phenomenon was international, and that “whether it be in Germany, Britain, Italy, the US, the policies of governments, whether they be nominally ‘left’ or right-wing, are fundamentally identical. In Germany, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats have formed a Grand Coalition, and the unions work closely everywhere with the government and the employers.”

“If there is a lesson to draw from the mass movements of the last decade,” he continued, “it is that the working class must break completely with the moribund trade union and reformist apparatuses and build an independent political movement. The role of the ‘far left’ is to prevent a break with these organisations.”

Schwarz pointed to the fact that the three so called “far left” tendencies in France—the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, LO (Lutte Ouvrière) and PT (Parti des Travailleurs)—after the withdrawal of the CPE all published statements whose main function was to confuse the essential political issues; “All three of them trumpeted the withdrawal of the CPE as a great victory. They drew the conclusion that the working class can impose all its demands by a quantitative enlargement of the movement and by maintaining its ‘unity.’ What they mean by unity is unity with the trade union bureaucracy.”

None had a word to say about a new political orientation, let alone a socialist policy, nor any programme which looked beyond the borders of France. All three had a completely nationalist and trade union perspective.

“In the advanced stage of the development of globalisation,” Schwarz continued, “when China and India are bringing low-paid workers by the millions into the world production process, these three organisation declare in unison that all that is needed is for workers to struggle a bit more to resolve the social crisis.”

This was not just stupidity or ignorance. “The glorification of the trade union struggle serves above all to bolster the union bureaucracies and the official left parties and channel the movement behind them.”

Schwarz stressed that “left unity” in reality meant the unity of the former reformist and Stalinist bureaucracies and middle-class leftists. The task, in fact, was to unite the working class of all nationalities and all ethnic groups.

“The term ‘working class’ is, for us, very broad,” he said. “It refers to the men and women who depend on a wage to live—manual workers, people who work in offices, high school and university graduates. To create that unity a programme is required which corresponds to the reality of the 21st century. Modern technology has created the material conditions for the solving of the most pressing problems of mankind, but this is impossible when all aspects of economic life are subordinated to private profit. It is possible only when production corresponds to the character of mass society, when the major banks and industrial facilities are owned and run socially.”

Schwarz concluded by stressing the role of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International in creating the foundations for an independent socialist movement of the working class and building a new revolutionary party. “Combativity and pressure from the streets cannot by themselves resolve spontaneously the problems of political orientation of the working class... The working class must be conscious of the incompatibility of its interests with the whole bourgeois order.”

A lively discussion ensued which continued in informal groups until the room had to be vacated, and then outside the meeting hall.

Sylvain and Oussama from Nantes University told of how the Socialist Party-dominated UNEF (National Student Union of France), the main student organisation, had attempted bureaucratically to limit the development of the movement at their university and control the mass meetings.

Oussama described how the Communist Party-influenced CGT (General Confederation of Labour) had tried to prevent student delegations from meeting with workers. “Officials would come to meet us so as to keep us from the ordinary workers,” he said. However, they had been able to collaborate closely with workers in the refuse collection service. “When workers started to join us, the government and the unions started to get frightened.”

Aurélien, a high school student from Amiens, said he felt the youth were being used by the CGT, who did not approve of their blockades.

Sylvain said it was necessary to build an alternative to the union bureaucrats. He had come to the meeting to see if the Fourth International could contribute to that, but was dubious that such a small organisation could achieve anything. WSWS supporters pointed out that it is the programme that builds the party. The main task was to analyse and clarify and raise the consciousness of the working class, and this was the role of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The WSWS had published 34 articles and analyses on the anti-CPE struggle.

Oussama said that students were bewildered by the multiplicity of left parties and groups, but agreed that it was necessary to study the history and origins of these organisations and of the Marxist movement to understand the role they were playing.

Another student from Amiens University wondered what had happened to workers’ traditional solidarity. A WSWS supporter explained how the Stalinists and the Social Democrats, over 70 years, had destroyed much of the socialist consciousness in the working class and that the WSWS’s task was to rebuild that consciousness.

In summing up the discussion, Schwarz pointed out that Stalin’s murder of the leading Marxists in the Soviet Union and abroad had been an important element in hampering the development of the Marxist movement. He said that one of the crucial lessons of the CPE had been that left and trade union bureaucracies did not move to the left under pressure from the mass movement. They might talk left, but when the bourgeois state was in crisis, as in France, they came to the aid of the state. Many thousands of people had gone through this experience in the recent struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact