

French government seeks delay in order to impose unpopular labour reform

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In the face of youth protests and strikes, after millions signed an online petition against the El Khomri law, the French government is seeking to delay the imposition of the unpopular labour law reform. It was initially due to be presented on March 9, but Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri only presented the law to the National Assembly yesterday. Parliamentary debate has been pushed back to May 3.

The aim of the Socialist Party (PS) government's manoeuvres is to work with the trade and student union bureaucracies to delay implementation of the reform and, using both police violence and the impact of upcoming school holidays, outlast protests against it.

Amid mounting anger, the government is moving to crack down on protests and blockades of high schools by students. At the March 24 protest, riot police in major cities attacked students and arrested some 40 protesters. Fifteen students were arrested in Paris and another nine students were detained in the western city of Nantes. During the past week, the police attacked and detained some students. Some students were fined and received a six-month suspended sentence.

Near the Henri Bergson school in Paris, a video shows a police officer hitting a student. According to witness statements to BFM-TV, "police attacked a 15-year-old high-school student as he was trying to move away from a cloud of tear gas when the police wanted to detain him."

The delay imposed by the PS government is a cynical manoeuvre: nothing fundamental has been changed in the bill. The core measures in the El Khomri law include allowing unions and management to negotiate contracts violating France's Labour Code at the level of individual firms; lengthening the work week; facilitating mass sackings; and undermining job security for young workers who are new hires.

While the PS is indicating that it will compromise on not fixing upper limits on penalties for illegal mass sackings, the central elements of the bill remain. Above all, it still retains the ability for the unions to negotiate contracts violating the Labour Code—a measure which, amid a growing global economic slump, paves the way for vast attacks on the working class.

According to the Odoxa poll for *Le Parisien* and *France Info*, published on March 24, 71 percent of the population are still opposed to the draft reform of the Labour Code, the same proportion as for the first version of the bill.

The critical question for youth opposing the bill is to orient to the only force that can halt the drive to austerity and attacks on democratic rights currently sweeping Europe: the working class. The struggle must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions and their student union allies, and develop into a broader struggle of the working class against austerity, war, and the state of emergency, politically and organizationally independent of the union bureaucracies and the PS.

The unions, the Left Front and other political satellites of the PS like the New Anti-capitalist Party, support the wars and the state of emergency imposed by the French state, however, and have repeatedly helped negotiate PS reforms.

Since Hollande came to power, they have isolated and suppressed struggles, including the Aulnay plant closure of French carmaker PSA Peugeot Citroën, and the Air France pilots' strikes. They have organised protests against the El Khomri law because they fear that the rising anger among workers and youth could escape their control and trigger a mass movement against the hated PS government. They are, however, petty-bourgeois tools of the ruling class, which funds them to the tune of 95 percent of their €4 billion yearly

budget.

Youth must be warned: to the extent that the struggle remains under the control of these organisations, which have no base of support in the working class, the struggle against the El Khomri law will be sold out. Indeed, the media and state officials have already started a cynical press campaign trying to demoralise protesters by speculating that opposition to the bill has been fatally weakened.

Following March 24 student protests across France, *Le Monde* reported, “the number of blockaded high schools seems to be trending downwards. The education ministry reports that 57 public establishments are affected of 2,500 in France, that is half of the number during the previous mobilisation on Thursday March 17.”

RTL Radio wrote, “For François Hollande, the storm has passed after numerous protests have been taken into account, and different demonstrations by the unions.” It quoted a government source as saying, “We have put out the fires.”

It concluded, “At the government, no one believes anymore in a massive mobilisation of the youth,” citing ministers who said, “Everything suggests things are running out of steam.”

This is echoed by the demoralised propaganda of the unions. While continuing to pose as opponents of the bill, they have not condemned police violence or sought to mobilise opposition to the state of emergency. They simply sought to maintain political control over protests that they called because they feared that if they had not done so, protests would have erupted against the reform anyway.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and other unions met and released a common strike call for March 31. It paves the way for them to wind down the movement. The statement reads, “After the March 31 day of action, the government must respond. If this is not the case, the signatories will invite the workers and youth to debate whether to continue action in the coming days and to reinforce mobilisations, including through strikes and protests.”

This is a reactionary fraud. With whatever minor modifications it feels compelled to introduce, the PS will press ahead with the El Khomri law. The unions’ invitation to “debate” whether or not to capitulate to the PS is a cynical dodge, to hide their alignment on the

PS and the media campaign pushing for the winding down of the protests. Youth and workers must reject such attempts to present the PS’ illegitimate and reactionary reforms as part of a “democratic” debate.

President François Hollande’s popularity is plunging to a new record low, becoming France’s most hated president since World War II. Last week, the Labour Ministry reported that the number of job seekers rose by 38,400, pushing jobless numbers to a record 3.59 million people.



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