

France: one million protest government offensive against young workers' conditions

By Rick Kelly
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An estimated 1,500,000 people demonstrated across France on Saturday against the Gaullist government's "First Job Contract" (CPE) legislation. The national day of action was the third mass protest held this month against the destruction of young workers' conditions.

A total of 160 rallies were held in cities and towns throughout the country. The biggest protest was in Paris, where organisers reported that 350,000 people attended. About 500 protesters later marched toward the Sorbonne (University of Paris), chanting, "Liberate the Sorbonne—police everywhere, justice nowhere." The university has been sealed off by riot police since Friday. Large demonstrations were also held in Marseille (130,000 protestors), Bordeaux (55,000), Nantes (45,000), Toulouse (40,000) and Rennes (35,000).

The demonstrations saw hundreds of thousands of high school and university students again marching through the streets. Last Thursday, 500,000 students protested nationally. The students were joined by a broad range of French society at Saturday's rallies. Retirees and older workers joined the youth in their opposition to the CPE. Workers of all ages—from the public and private sectors, unionised and non-unionised, immigrants and French-born—also demonstrated. Entire families, including those with very young children, came out to mark their opposition to the government.

The *Contrat de première embauche* allows employers to sack any worker under the age of 26 without justification during the first two years of employment. The Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin rammed the measure through the parliament on March 9. Hostility towards the government has steadily mounted in recent weeks. The CPE is widely recognised by ordinary people in France as the prologue of a broader offensive against the conditions of the entire working class.

At the demonstration in Paris, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed thousands of copies of the WSWWS statement, "Political Issues in the fight against the

government's 'First Job Contract' received by the protesters. The statement emphasised the European and international significance of the anti-CPE struggle, which has pitted workers and youth against France's entire ruling class. The WSWWS insisted the need for an independent struggle based on an internationalist and socialist perspective, opposing not just the entire Chirac-Villepin administration but also the official "left" bureaucracies of the trade unions and the "Plural Left"—the Socialist and Communist parties.

Contingents of workers marched under various trade union banners. Groups of Socialist and Communist Party members marched toward the front of the demonstration in Paris. François Hollande, Socialist Party leader, and Marie-George Buffet, Communist Party head, also attended the rally.

Only a small section of the demonstration, however, featured flags and banners of the old bureaucratic organisations of the French working class. Most people came independently and many carried their own placards: "No to throw-away youths," "Tired of being squeezed lemons," "No to the Kleenex contract," "Slave labour by the back door," "Throw away the job contract, don't throw away the youth!" One sign showed a guillotine slicing through the popular slogan of the 1789 French Revolution: *Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité*. The most popular banner declared, "Contract for slaves" (*Contrat Pour Esclaves*).

The demonstrators marched in high spirits and expressed their anger at the government and their determination not to give in. Young people chanted, "Villepin—if you're a real man, we are prepared to fight you" and "It's all going to blow up."

Significant numbers of black and Arab youth from the Parisian suburbs affected by last year's disturbances also attended the protest. The government's attempt to portray the CPE as a measure assisting these unemployed youth to find work has fallen flat.

A *Financial Times* report on March 17, "French poor and students keen not to be the 'Kleenex generation,'" noted widespread opposition to the government's reforms in the

impoverished outer suburbs. Youth unemployment is as high as 50 percent in these areas.

“If those students came up here and saw what it was like, they might still be protesting, but at least they would have a better idea of why,” Sema, an unemployed 26-year-old living in Clichy-sous-Bois, told the *Financial Times*. “[The CPE] is unfair. Two years is too long. That would be a big risk for people like me to take, with two babies at home. I could be left with nothing after two years. The bosses would take advantage of it to sack people after a few months.”

Small numbers of youth reportedly threw stones and other missiles at police towards the end of Saturday’s demonstration in Paris. Vehicles were set alight and shops damaged. Officers fired rounds of tear gas at the youths. At least 17 people were injured, and authorities reported 167 arrests. Police also charged and tear gassed protestors in Marseille, Rennes and Lille.

The government and sections of the French media have attempted to use the violence to discredit the students and their demands, despite evidence that neo-fascist groups have provoked some of the clashes. Last Friday, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy met with riot police and held up a damaged police helmet for the press. “Those who do this are not demonstrators, they are thugs,” he declared.

The growing protest movement has created a serious crisis for the government. Prime Minister Villepin, supported by President Jacques Chirac, has refused to withdraw the CPE legislation and has only promised greater “dialogue.” Last Friday, Villepin met with university chancellors. “He realises we are on the edge of a clash, a real clash,” Yannick Vallee, vice-president of the conference of university presidents, declared after the meeting. The university heads called on the prime minister to suspend the CPE and negotiate with the student unions.

University student strikes have affected about 60 of France’s 84 universities, and at least 16 have been shut down by student blockades. Academic staff in many universities have gone on strike in support of the anti-CPE movement.

The government has also sought to hold discussions with trade union leaders. Last week, the unions agreed to meet Jean-Louis Borloo, minister for social cohesion, and Gérard Larcher, junior minister for employment.

The trade unions—including the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and FO (Workers’ Power)—have striven to limit the protest movement to the single issue of the CPE legislation, and to channel popular hostility towards the government’s right-wing programme behind the Socialist and Communist parties. The unions are consciously aiming to isolate the anti-CPE movement, which they recognise has the potential to rapidly develop beyond their

control.

Trade union leaders met with student union heads in Paris last Saturday evening. The student leaders asked the trade unions to call a one-day national strike for next Thursday, March 23, when more high school and university student protests will be held. The trade union leaders refused the request. According to an internal memo written by Laurent Zappi, delegate of the education workers’ union FSU (Federation of Unitary Unions), the Stalinist-aligned CGT argued that trade union unity must be maintained, and since not every union agreed to a strike on March 23, it could not go ahead.

Last Friday, Bernard Thibault, head of the Stalinist-aligned CGT, told France 3 Television: “If they don’t listen to us we are going to have to think about moving to a general strike across the whole country. [But] I’m optimistic...that the government will finally take notice of the situation they’ve created for themselves.”

The CGT’s refusal to back next Thursday’s student protest underscored Thibault’s duplicity. As the Villepin government knows full well, the union leader has no intention of calling a general strike.

Following Saturday’s demonstration, all that the trade unions agreed on was that another meeting would be held on Monday (today) to debate the possibility of staging a one-day strike for March 28 or March 30. The delay is intended to dissipate the anti-CPE movement and give the government time to negotiate a compromise with them, allowing the unions to avert strike action.

The government insists that it will not rescind the CPE, but has indicated that it is willing to make some kind of gesture to the unions. Spokesman Jean-François Copé said after the demonstration that “[the government’s] hand is outstretched, the door is open” to discuss ways of “improving” the CPE.

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