

France: Dispute escalates over “First Job Contract”

By Peter Schwarz
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Following mass demonstrations throughout France last Saturday, the conflict over a new law regulating employment rights for young workers, the “First Job Contract” (CPE), has intensified.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin reaffirmed his determination to retain this change to industrial law which makes it possible for companies to dismiss young workers under 26 years during their first two years of employment without giving any justification. Gaullist government spokesmen François Copé said any withdrawal of the law was out of the question. At most it can be “improved upon,” he said.

The French trade unions, the Socialist Party (SP), the French Communist Party (PCF) and the petty-bourgeois radical left are striving to establish control over a movement which has embraced broad layers of the population. Although it is clear that the government is neither willing nor able to withdraw its legislation, all of these organizations are studiously avoiding any sort of call for the resignation of the government. Instead they are seeking a way of resolving the conflict as quickly as possible and stabilizing the government.

According to press reports, Villepin spent all of Sunday in discussions with different ministers and spoke by phone several times with President Jacques Chirac. He also had discussions with economists and figures from “civil society,” whose identities remain unknown. On Monday, he met 20 heads of big business together with four ministers, all of whom supported the prime minister’s stand. To their own great disappointment, Villepin did not speak with the trade unions.

In the meantime, popular resistance to the law is growing. According to one opinion poll the law is opposed by nearly three quarters of all French citizens. Thirty-eight percent declared the law had to be changed, while 35 percent were in favor of its complete abolition. Opposition to the law increased to around 80 percent in the 15- to 24-year age group.

In Dijon, 450 student representatives from the occupied universities met on Sunday. Approximately two thirds of the 84 universities in France were shut down during the period of protest against the CPE. After 17 hours of discussion the student representatives adopted a call for a general strike to last until the government withdraws the CPE. In addition student representatives called for further days of action on Wednesday and Thursday this week; on Thursday a central demonstration is to take place in Paris, which will also be supported by the French federation of high school students, FIDL.

Following the Saturday demonstration, the trade unions also threatened strikes if the government did not back down. Bernard Thibault, chairman of the CGT, even spoke of a general strike. Jean Claude Mailly, secretary-general of the FO trade union, declared that the mobilization obviously had to be continued. In order to ensure its success several trade unions would have to call a strike involving wide sections of industry. The CFDT trade union announced that it had decided to give the government “time over the weekend to react.”

Several newspapers then appeared with the headline: “Ultimatum to the French government” and indicated that if the government did not react within 48 hours the trade unions would call a strike. In reality, the trade union leadership is desperate to avoid an open confrontation with the government, not to speak of measures aimed at its downfall.

The chairman of the teachers trade union FSU, Gérard Aschieri, openly expressed the motives of the trade union leaders: “We can no longer afford to wait because the student movement will continue and that could become dangerous,” he told the newspaper *Le Figaro*. “We therefore need a strike next week, we will publish an appeal.” In other words, Aschieri is afraid that the trade unions could lose control of the movement if they do not take some sort of action.

On Monday, trade union leaders met and came up with a thoroughly miserable compromise. Twelve trade union federations met in order to discuss how to proceed and then decided on a further day of action for Tuesday, March 28.

This means that protesting pupils and students will be left in the lurch for 10 days, thus giving the government ample time for its maneuvers and provocations. Spring holidays start at the beginning of April and the trade union leaders hope the protests will then just die down.

The secretary-general of the CFDT, François Chérèque, had already backed down considerably in an interview with *France Inter* on Sunday. With regard to talk of an alleged 48-hour ultimatum he responded that his organization had “never given an ultimatum.” Their main concern was that “all those concerned had two days to think about it.” And with regard to a strike he declared he was not empowered to make such a move until he had consulted with all of the regional and local federations of his trade union. “General strikes are not our usual way of going about things,” he stated.

The trade unions have consistently criticized the CPE from the

outset, not so much because of the content of the law but because Villepin sought to whip it through parliament without consulting them. In the past they have supported similar measures without complaint and worked to suppress any opposition. Just last summer the government introduced a very similar regulation, the “New Job Contract” (CNE), for enterprises with less than 20 employees—a move that met with no resistance from the trade unions.

As is the case in all other European countries the unrelenting series of welfare cuts carried out in France would have been impossible without the compliance of the trade unions. Now, however, they are fearful they could lose their role as intermediaries and no longer be needed.

The conflict over the CPE has also led to hectic activity by France’s political parties.

The Socialist Party (SP) alternates between the hope that the protests could increase its electoral prospects against the government and fear that the conflict could get out of control. Prominent party members, including chairman François Hollande, took part in Saturday’s demonstrations. Hollande promised to abolish the CPE if the SP won the elections next year and suggested suspending the protests until then: “If the government is not prepared to budge from its formula at the current time, then it should be suspended until 2007, and in 2007 the French can vote.”

The “Socialists” are doing everything in their power to dampen down the conflict. The conservative *Figaro* newspaper commented on the stance of the Socialist Party leadership as follows: “The chief executives of the party hesitate: should one ignite the fire or not?” All of them are seeking a way out of the crisis. Hollande wants to summon everyone together—youth, students, the trade unions, and even the opposing side, in order to arrive at a “correct formula.” Laurent Fabius suggests everybody sit down at the “same table” and Dominique Strauss-Kahn appealed to President Chirac to find a “solution.”

The spokesman for the SP, Julien Dray, accused the government of creating the conditions for unrest due to its obstinacy. “Once young people take to the streets who knows what will happen? Everything can be thrown into turbulence.”

The “Socialists” have every right to worry about a breakdown of order. The last Socialist Party led government under Lionel Jospin carried out measures very similar to those now introduced by Villepin. In 2002, when popular discontent with Jospin led to his defeat in presidential elections at the hands of the National Front candidate, the SP responded by campaigning for Chirac, whom they described as the embodiment of “republican values.” The SP has a thousand times more in common with Villepin, Chirac and their big business backers than the young people and workers who feel they are being treated by the CPE as throwaway articles—the “Kleenex generation.”

The PCF is behaving in a similar manner to the SP. It calls for the withdrawal of the CPE and appeals to the “political responsibility” of the government. PCF chairperson Marie-George Buffet called upon the government to finally stop “acting like a wall.”

It is clear that both parties are intent on defusing the conflict over the CPE as rapidly as possible in order to prevent any further

undermining of national authority. What they want to avoid at all costs is that the government is made vulnerable through popular pressure from the protests. Therefore they studiously avoid any call for the resignation of the government and repeatedly make clear their readiness to engage in dialogue.

They are supported in this by the pseudo-left Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). The LCR calls on the one hand for the expansion of the mobilization up to a “general strike involving all age groups and occupations,” while on the other hand endeavoring to steer the movement into the path of the SP, PCF and trade unions—at the same time suppressing any criticism of these organizations.

The spokesman for the LCR, Olivier Besancenot, called upon all left forces and their leaders, “from Lutte Ouvrière to the Socialist Party,” to participate in a common initiative. “The entire left should recognize its responsibility, irrespective of differences of opinion, and support the planned mobilization of student and youth organizations.”

Anyone with reservations about the politics of the SP and the PCF are taken to task by the LCR organ *Rouge*, which declares: “Irrespective of the aims and political calculations of the Socialist Party and despite the fears by the union leaderships of a confrontation with the government and the state, they are all forced to accompany and support the movement. Its driving force is the young people who take up the struggle, who fight for victory and the expansion of the movement, those wage earners who use every opportunity in order to express their solidarity, and who also want to take part in the fight.”

In other words, lose no sleep over the treacherous role of these organizations because the dynamic of the youth will force them “to accompany and support the movement.”

In reality, the mass movement against the CPE is doomed to defeat if it does not free itself from the crippling influence of these organizations and develop its own independent strategy. The government has already made clear that it has no intention of backing down. For their part the SP, PCF and trade unions will do everything to ensure the movement is diverted down a dead end.

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