

France: Political issues in the fight against the government's "First Job Contract"

World Socialist Web Site editorial board
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The following statement will be distributed at mass demonstrations being held Saturday, March 18, in Paris and other cities across France. It is also posted as a PDF file. We urge readers and supporters of the WSWs to download the leaflet and distribute it at the demonstrations as well as at schools, universities and work locations.

The struggle of youth and workers in France against the Gaullist government's CPE (First Job Contract) demonstrates the growing opposition among youth and workers across Europe to the assault on jobs, wages and working conditions. The issue at stake goes to the heart of the problems facing working people throughout Europe and internationally. In the name of making business competitive, governments are pitting young workers against older workers, immigrants against the native born, low-paid workers in the East against those in the West.

According to the perverse logic of Prime Minister Villepin, in order to create employment for young workers the bosses must be given a free hand to sack them. This is just another way of saying: Accept having your working conditions driven back to Zola's times, or reconcile yourself to permanent unemployment!

The CPE robs workers 26 and younger of any legal protection. But as far as the big business organization Medef is concerned, it does not go far enough. Medef's president wants a CPE-style contract for all workers. This only confirms that the CPE will set a precedent for similar attacks on the workforce as a whole.

The wave of student strikes and occupations, actively supported by broad sections of workers, brings together youth and working people of all nationalities, religions and races. This shows the potential for defeating the ruling elite's efforts to whip up anti-immigrant prejudice by uniting working people across Europe and internationally in a common struggle to defend social conditions and democratic rights, and oppose war.

In fighting this attack by the government of President Chirac and Prime Minister Villepin, workers and youth in France are giving a lead to their brothers and sisters around the world. However, as bitter experience has proven—from the mass strikes of 1968 and 1995 to the demonstrations and walkouts of the past two years—protest by itself will not defeat the corporate/government assault on the working class. The defense of living standards and democratic rights requires a political perspective that can unite workers internationally in a common struggle against the profit system that is the source of these attacks.

The conscious and declared aim of the current mobilisation must be not simply to pressure or shift the government, but to force it to resign. But this raises the question: With what should the Gaullist government be replaced?

Once again, bitter experience—from Mitterrand to the Plural Left government of Jospin—demonstrates that replacing the Gaullists with governments of the Socialist Party and Communist Party is not the answer. These parties will betray in the future as they have in the past, because in the end they are opposed to a revolutionary struggle against the profit system.

Villepin has made clear that the government has no intention of giving way. He sent the CRS riot police to break the occupation of the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, and in his interview with TF1 on Sunday he emphasized his determination to impose the CPE.

He has the support of the entire political establishment and international big business. As far as the French and European bourgeoisie are concerned, the only way to succeed against their longstanding economic rivals in the US and Japan and the rising threat from China and India is by gutting the living conditions and intensifying the exploitation of the European working class. All over Europe governments are imposing the same type of

“labour market reforms.”

This universal assault on workers’ living standards and democratic rights is inseparably linked to the turn by the ruling elites of America and Europe to imperialist war and neo-colonial aggression. Three years after the US-British invasion of Iraq, the German Social Democrats and Greens are exposed as secret collaborators in this war crime, even as they were publicly denouncing the war, and Chirac has dropped all pretence of opposition to imperialist war, joining Washington’s provocations and threats against Iran and threatening to unleash France’s nuclear weapons.

It is impossible to oppose the attacks at home without opposing the illegal and criminal actions being carried out abroad. It is necessary to raise the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US, British and other foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and to denounce the preparations for military aggression against Iran.

In the fight against the CPE, no confidence should be placed in the trade unions or the so-called left parties. Despite Villepin’s pledge to enforce the CPE, the union confederations have all accepted his invitation to discuss youth employment with the employers and government ministers. Once again, as with the struggle against the pension and education “reforms,” the unions are offering their services to the French ruling elite to isolate the youth and stifle their struggle.

The Socialist Party and the Communist Party have for nearly a quarter century played critical roles in helping impose austerity measures demanded by big business, first under Mitterrand and then under Jospin. They initiated many of the cheap-labour schemes that opened the way to the CPE.

Another government of the official left would play a no less treacherous role. Despite their criticisms of “neo-liberalism,” these parties are wedded to a nationalist and reformist perspective that leads inescapably to capitulation before the demands of the ruling elite.

They criticise the policies of the government from the standpoint of a return to the nationally based reformist policies of the 1960s and 1970s. In the era of globalisation, this is an illusion that they themselves must abandon the moment they assume government responsibility.

The starting point for an effective struggle against the attacks on the working class and youth is the recognition that the source of these attacks is the historic failure of the capitalist system itself. Capitalism is in crisis not just in

France, or Europe, or the US, but on a global scale. This is the root cause of the growth of imperialist militarism and the turn to dictatorial forms of rule.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, the Internet publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International, opposes all forms of nationalism, communalism and racial politics, which serve only to aid the ruling class in its strategy of divide and rule. We insist that the only program which articulates the needs of working people in any part of the world is the program of international socialist revolution.

The struggle against the global attack on workers’ rights and living standards requires the development of an international mass movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective. Such a movement must unite workers of all nationalities, races and religions and support the right of workers to live and work in any country they choose, with full and equal legal rights. It must indefatigably defend democratic and social rights and oppose imperialist war. It must champion the placing of the major financial, industrial and commercial enterprises under democratic and public ownership, so that economic life is no longer subordinated to the accumulation of corporate profit and personal wealth, but rather is organised on an international and rational basis to eliminate poverty and provide secure employment and decent living standards for all.

The working class of Europe must unite against the capitalist policies of the European Union on the basis of its own program: the Socialist United States of Europe.

We invite youth and workers to read and support the *World Socialist Web Site*. Providing a socialist analysis and orientation on world events on a daily basis, it is a crucial instrument for building an international socialist movement of the working class.



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