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France

Student movement puts government on the defensive

- News from around the world -

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Over the last four years France's right-wing government has forced through a whole series of neo-liberal policies. Sometimes resistance has been fierce, as with the reform of the pension system in 2003. But overall the government has been able to impose its "reforms", mainly because the traditional workers' organisations were not prepared to go all the way in opposing them. This time, however, President Jacques Chirac and his Prime Minister and protégé Dominique de Villepin may just have bitten off more than they can chew.

The government's proposed "First Job Contract" would make it possible to sack young people under 26 in the first two years they were in a job, without giving any reason. It is one more link in the chain of the government's objective of tearing up all existing labour legislation, making job security a thing of the past and giving employers the right to hire and fire at will.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/prot2.jpg>]

And it is a measure aimed particularly at young workers entering the labour market. Slowly at first, but increasingly, opposition has been building up. The backbone of it is the biggest student movement for over a decade.

The first big mobilisation took place on February 7th, called by most of the main unions and by university and high school student organisations. It was, in French terms, a modest success, with over 400,000 demonstrators in the streets of France's towns and cities.

Over the next month, in spite of France's staggered school holidays which mean that all through the month of February some schools and universities were closed, the movement gained in depth and breadth. As students under began to grasp what was at stake the movement amplified and moved on from demonstrations and protests to occupations.

Today more than fifty of France's 84 universities are wholly or partially occupied by students. The third biggest of them, Nanterre has been closed down "for security reasons".

The second big day of action on March 7th was much bigger than the first, with a million people in the streets of 160 towns and cities. The demonstrations were made up of trade unionists and many young people, students and workers. The tone was very radical. It was clear that many young people had understood that the government was hand in glove with the MEDEF, the very vocal and aggressive French employers' association, whose local offices have often been targeted by students demonstrators, as have those of the UMP, the governing party. A

If the left parties have supported the movement and called for the withdrawal of the CPE - not only the Communist Party and the far left, but also the Socialist Party. Quite unusually outside election periods, SP posters could be seen on the walls calling for withdrawal of the CPE and supporting the demonstrations - an indication of the strength of the movement.

The government is trying to hold the line and has not hesitated to use the riot against the students. On the night of March 10th-11th, they invaded France's oldest university the Sorbonne, driving out the students who were occupying, injuring several - and bringing back memories of May 1968, of which the Sorbonne was a symbol. This week more and more school students have been mobilizing and on March 14th university and school student marched on the Sorbonne.

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The trial of strength with the government is now well and truly engaged and the rhythm of events has speeded up. The organisations of university and high school students have called a day of action on March 16th and are asking workers to strike in support. On March 18th, a Saturday, there is a day of action called by the unions, including the most right-wing of them, the CFDT which does not want to hear of any more strike action.

The main union, the CGT, has come out for a further day of strikes and demonstrations on March 30th. But that is too far away for the students. Their national coordinating committee meeting in Poitiers on March 11th called on the unions to organize a one-day strike on March 23rd, with a national demonstration in Paris.

The government is now seriously worried. Twice in the last twenty years, in 1986 and 1994, students have forced governments to abandon laws - in 1994 what was involved was a measure very similar to the CPE. Splits are beginning to appear.

Only a few right-wing politicians right openly call for the CPE to be withdrawn, such as Hervé de Charette, Chirac's former foreign minister. Many more are closing ranks with the government but privately expressing concern. Seven university presidents have now called for the withdrawal of the CPE.

The next couple of weeks will be decisive. If the unions respond to the student' call for a strike on March 23rd the dynamic of the movement will be reinforced. Much depends on the CGT, whose refusal to call for a general strike in 2003 let the government off the hook.

The LCR and its youth organisation, the JCR, have been heavily involved in the movement and are supporting the call for a national strike and demonstration. The LCR has also proposed to all the forces on the left the organisation of a united meeting to demand the withdrawal of the CPE.