

France: a government on the ropes

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"The executive (government) is in tatters, the ministers squabble, the (parliamentary) majority is rent by divisions". The quotation is not from one of the leaders of the mass movement against the CPE (First Employment Contract) that has shaken France over the last few weeks. It is from the editorial of the 7th April edition of the prestigious daily *Le Monde*. The editorialist also warned that "France is suffering from a dangerous power vacuum". That reflects the situation today.

The government has not given in by withdrawing the CPE, which would allow workers under the age of 26 to be sacked without reason during their first two years in a job. But it is reeling under the pressure of a movement that has seen universities and high schools occupied or blockaded by their students and a series of days of demonstrations and strikes backed by the unions, each of which has brought more people onto the streets than the one before.

On Tuesday March 28th, there were widespread strikes and an estimated 3 million demonstrators poured onto the streets of France's towns and cities. This represented, according to *Le Monde* (which like most other papers did not appear on March 28th due to strike action), the biggest demonstration in recent French history - bigger even than in 1968. Just a week later, on April 4th, the next day of action saw even more people on the streets. In between, French President Jacques Chirac addressed the nation on television. He announced that he was promulgating the law - then asked his government not to apply it until it was modified, proposing that the period when young workers could be sacked be reduced to one year and that employers should have to give a reason - without that impinging on their right to sack.

Chirac's attempt at minimal concessions was unanimously rejected by trade unions and student organizations. But it reflected the government's disarray. In the following days Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who had introduced the CPE, was dispossessed of the dossier, which was handed to his arch-rival, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. Under Sarkozy's direction, parliamentary leaders of the governing UMP party have been receiving delegations of unions and student unions.

The government and its majority are divided between those who want to simply withdraw the CPE, those who think it can survive in a watered down form and those who want to propose an alternative. For the moment the government is trying to avoid purely and simply withdrawing the measure. The highly respectable Conference of University Presidents has however called on it "to finally pronounce the word that the students and their unions have been demanding". The word in question being of course "withdrawal".

The government has been fought to a standstill by the movement. But will only give in if it is forced to. Student organisations have called for the movement to continue and intensify. And in fact over recent days students have been engaging in forms of direct action, of civil disobedience - blocking motorways, railway stations and other public places.

The united front against the CPE is very broad and has so far remained solid- embracing all the unions, the student organizations and the entire Left, from the Socialist Party to Lutte Ouvriere and the LCR. The unions are standing firm on the demand for withdrawal, described by Bernard Thibault, leader of France biggest union confederation the CGT, as "non-negotiable". In a

declaration on April 5th, the Intersyndicale, the united front of twelve trade unions and student unions, called for a new day of action on April 11th. The pressure must be maintained to force the government to back down completely.

The enormous mass movement of the last few weeks has created a veritable social and political crisis. It has expressed on the streets and in the schools the same rejection of neo-liberal policies that led to the defeat of the proposed European constitution in the referendum of May 29th last year. In an editorial in its March 31st issue, the London-based pro-business weekly The Economist informed its probably bemused readers, in a tone of exasperation, that only 36 per cent of French people thought the free market was the best possible system, as against around two-thirds of people in Britain, Germany and the USA.

This mass opposition to neo-liberalism is the fundamental problem of the French ruling class. And over the last few weeks a new generation of youth has come of age, not only demonstrating and occupying but organising mass meetings and engaging in intensive political discussion. And unity between workers and students has from the start been much stronger than in previous movements. This renewed combativeness and rejection of neo-liberalism will re-emerge over the next months and years, in the streets and no doubt in next year's presidential and parliamentary elections.

P.S.

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