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**France**

# **A Major Social and Political Crisis**

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**France has just experienced the third confrontation with the government in less than a year. The country had already seen political confrontation on a large scale with the mobilization against the adoption of the European Constitutional Treaty in the spring of 2005. Already at that time a powerful strike movement had mobilized high school students which was followed by severe repression.**

In the autumn, after several spectacular strikes in the Marseilles region, in particular the strike of the seafarers of the SNCM (National Corsica-Mediterranean Company), the revolt of youth in the poor suburbs made its mark on the country and even on Europe: weeks of riots, hundreds of vehicles burned in many towns and cities all over the country by young people who were exasperated by discrimination, social injustice, and racism.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Parisdemo2.jpg>]

Photo by Phototeque du mouvment social

This new trial of strength against the First Employment Contract (CPE) once again illustrated extreme instability, a relationship of forces between the classes where, in spite of the defeat in 2003-2004 and social question, a big majority of workers and youth still reject as strongly as ever pro-employer and liberal policies.

The French Right suffers from a growing lack of a social base. It was rejected at the ballot box in the regional and European elections of 2004 and in the referendum of 2005 and severely shaken by street demonstrations and strikes in 2003 and during the movement against the CPE.

These blows have led to crisis and internal division, which have weakened its capacity to respond to such confrontations. This paralysis is showing itself again today, after the withdrawal of the CPE, and on an unprecedented scale, with the political-financial Clearstream scandal, which is having a ravaging effect on the little political credibility that the Chiraquian majority still has

The mobilisation of youth against the CPE led to a social and political crisis that continued for several weeks, with open divisions and paralysis of the Right and with the social liberal Left obliged to follow to the end the demands of the movements.

Student youth has just experienced the longest and deepest mobilization since May 1968, marked by exceptional combativeness and by unity and democratic aspirations which found expression in a remarkable process of self-organization.

Over and above the activity of the main student union (the National union of Students of France - UNEF), from February onwards there developed, from the universities that were on strike, a national coordinating committee which was capable of meeting week after week, leading the movement and effecting the link-up between workers and the movement of the youth.

It gave this movement a precise political content and demands which, around the demand for "unconditional withdrawal of the CPE" progressively broadened out to challenge the New Employment Contract (CNE) and job insecurity, leading to confrontation between the government which was putting forward this project and to the demand for the resignation of this government.

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As the movement matured along the way, it was able at the same time to deepen its own basis and, around the battle for the withdrawal of the CPE, impose unity on the trade union and political leadership of the Left.

1) The CPE: an objective of the employers and a pawn in the political game

From the beginning of the year 2006 a trial of strength was joined against the government, a trial of strength of which student youth made up the backbone.

By integrating the CPE into its draft law on "equal opportunities", the Villepin government intended to prolong the offensive that was unleashed from the summer of 2005 by the promulgation of decrees undermining several provisions of the Labour Code, and by the implementation of the CNE.

The CNE is a contract which makes it possible in companies with less than 20 workers to impose on newly hired workers a "trial period" of two years, during which the employer can terminate the contract without any reason and without having to follow the legal procedures for sacking workers.

This offensive continued with the privatizations that were carried out at the SNCF, at the Marseilles Transport Authority (RTM), at EDF and GDF (the state electricity and gas companies). This aggressive political course of the government expressed both a further step in the implementation of the basic objectives of the right wing majority, corresponding to the demands of liberalism, and another point to be scored by Villepin in his rivalry with Sarkozy for the 2007 presidential election.

Since it was elected in 2002, the Right has known that it has been facing a paradox: the victory of Chirac (more than 80 % of the vote, against Le Pen) and the vague blue horizon which followed at the legislative elections, were the result of a massive loss of confidence in social democracy and its liberal policies, of a rejection which led to Jospin being absent from the second round of the presidential election.

And it was the implementation of policies that were just as and even more liberal that had already led in 2003 to the biggest strike movement since 1995, then to the electoral rejection of the Right in 2004 and of liberalism as a whole in the 2005 referendum. Demagoguery on law and order was, as in the rest of Europe, the corollary of policies of social regression. The social crisis that it led to drove the youth of the suburbs to express their anger and their revolt a few months later.

As in the rest of Europe, successive governments prepared their own electoral defeats by methodically applying the liberal recipes that were dictated by capital, generating a succession of social and political crises, reducing still further the real difference between the programmes of social democracy and those of the traditional Right. The SPD-CDU government in Germany is an example of this, and also an example of the shrinking of their social base that happens to the traditional parties because of the implementation of such policies. Thus, the project in France of the CNE and the CPE coincides with identical projects of the German and Spanish governments.

At bottom, the CPE is not therefore an isolated French initiative, but really corresponds to the orientations of the liberal European governments, who are concerned with undermining all the protections that workers can still derive from work contracts. Frontally attacking young people, it was the second prelude, after the CNE, to the march towards a single contract removing the protection which is a present given by the CDI (Contract of Unlimited Duration).

The objective is obviously important, because the employers know that it is urgent to fundamentally change the rules of employment, relying on high levels of unemployment, in particular among young people. The coming years will make it necessary for the employers to hire workers on a massive scale to compensate for the retirement of the

baby-boom generation. Although it intends to take full advantage of this demographic phenomenon to further increase productivity and reduce the number of jobs, hundreds of thousands of new workers will nevertheless be necessary. It will be less easy then to impose a new worsening of working conditions.

But Villepin's obstinacy during this crisis cannot simply be understood in terms of the employers' objectives. On the political terrain, Villepin also intended to make the CPE a new pawn in his battle for hegemony over the Right, against Sarkozy.

After the state of emergency decreed by the Prime Minister last November against the youth of the poor suburbs, it was important for him to once again show firmness and ability to impose social defeats, and thus to re-conquer the ranks of the UMP by conducting an offensive policy. As a result, after the decrees of last summer, we had recourse to an emergency parliamentary procedures (a single exchange between the National Assembly and the Senate) and to the "49.3" (a procedure which cuts short debate and avoids a battle around amendments by engaging confidence in the government) for the promulgation the CPE.

Paradoxically it is this stubbornness to try and prove himself as the leader of the majority that led to Villepin's political downfall, discredited by the legitimacy of the youth movement. In the eyes of millions of youth and workers, the government's loss of credibility developed at the same rhythm as the social and political crisis.

Isolated along with Villepin in his own majority, Chirac tried to save his prime minister at the beginning of April by giving back the initiative to the National Assembly with his institutional imbroglio of "promulgation without implementation". But in fact by doing so he gave carte blanche to Sarkozy, the leader of the parliamentary majority, who was able to appear as providing a way out of the crisis that Villepin had been incapable of finding.

Chirac and Villepin were obliged to follow the proposal of the UMP group and make the CPE disappear from the law for "equal opportunities". Even though this scandalous law was maintained (it includes several reactionary measures such as apprenticeship at 14, and working at nights and on Sundays for young people) this choice correctly appeared as a victory, a retreat on the part of the government, the first such retreat since the re-election of Chirac.

The fight back against the CPE resulted in a 90-day long tidal wave of mobilization of young people and by majority support for their fight among the population as a whole.

It is a whole generation of young people which went through the experience, during three months, of a militant mass movement, of democracy within the strike, of self-organization, of street initiatives, of confrontation with the political representatives of the state. The massive presence of young women among the high school and university students at every level is an obvious indication, not only of the mass character of the movement, but also of its democratic forms of organization under the control of general assemblies.

Faced with such a movement, the government tried everything: outrageous propaganda by the media supporting the CPE, which reminded us of the vain efforts employed a few months earlier to promote the European constitution; division by trying to oppose the "youth of the faculties" to the "youth of the neighbourhoods"; and finally police repression that was frontal and violent, aiming to discourage and intimidate, in particular, the high school students of the suburbs and the city neighborhoods.

2) The trade union front, its unity, its limits, and the battle for the general strike

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Unlike in 2003 and 2004, from January 2006 onwards all the trade union leaderships were united around the central demand of the movement: "withdrawal of the CPE". This unity, which was maintained in particular by the strength of the youth movement, is one of the elements which enabled the creation of a stronger and stronger relationship of forces among workers.

The strength of the student movement, joined by the high school movement at the beginning of March, the massive character of the refusal of job insecurity and liberalism among workers, were such that popular support constantly grew throughout the month of March, with a growing number of strikers and of workers' participation in demonstrations, bearing witness to the level of refusal of liberal policies and in particular of growing job insecurity.

It is also this continuing political consciousness, which has been affirmed on several occasions over recent years, that explains the policies of trade union leaderships like those of the CFDT, the CFTC, the CGC, and UNSA, which in contrast with their previous tactics firmly maintained the united trade union front until the withdrawal of the CPE. The electoral losses suffered by the CFDT in several sectors led it to be more prudent, all the more so as the government's arrogance didn't give it anything on which to base a policy of negotiations.

On the one hand, the workers were involved during the three months of the youth movement, with a growing level of participation in demonstrations and of the number of workplaces where strike calls were made, but without that being prolonged by ongoing strikes in workplaces or sectors. That can be explained by two elements:

Both in 1995 and in 2003, the sectors that went out on strike did so as much on the central issue (the Juppé Plan against the health service in 1995, the pension reform in 2003) as on the particular attacks that were conducted, against the rail workers in 1995 and against teachers in 2003.

Sectors could have come out on strike in the same conditions, for example, against the privatization of GDF, or in other sectors around wage demands, but this absence of a dynamic is also related to the balance sheet of 2003, to the consciousness of how difficult it is to make the government back down through the mobilization of a single sector.

Similarly, in October, the movement of the seafarers and workers of the SNCM and the powerful demonstration of October 4 did not have any follow up.

The trade union leaderships did not push in a direction that could have restored confidence to workers, that would have enabled them to think that the generalization of struggles was possible by starting from demands around employment or wages which would pose concretely the question of the extension of the movement and would push in the direction of "all together!" during the month of March. They accompanied the movement in a united way, while limiting its objective (unconditional withdrawal of the CPE), by national days of action, but they refused to extend the platform to the CNE and to job insecurity or to engage in the building of an ongoing general strike in both the public and private sectors.

In contrast, the multiplication of road blocks and occupations of public buildings was the form that was taken by the joining together of youth and workers. Once again the trade union leadership had pursued a policy whose aim was to avoid putting the government into crisis, to avoid a confrontation through street demonstrations and strikes.

The FSU (teachers' federation) and Solidaires, who were associated for the first time with the national trade union front, did not play a particular role in this movement, except by demanding that the front should be opened up to the student coordinating committee, and for Solidaires by the constancy of its advocacy of an ongoing general strike, which, however, it did not manage to concretize on the ground.

The dynamic of the movement came from the audacity of the youth, from their initiatives, from their willingness to address the workers and their organizations. The leaderships of the trade union confederations only acted under the pressure of the movement itself, under the pressure of workers too, but without any plan, without any policy of generalization. They were not up to the level of the possibilities of the discontent that existed.

### 3) The political Left and the movement

The traditional left also played the game of unity, accompanying the struggle while taking care to avoid confrontation. In the movement, the Socialist Party tried to play its card of being an alternative government...for 2007. It was able to support the movement to the hilt - even to participate in its launching at the beginning, through the MJS (the PS's youth organization) and the leaderships of UNEF and the UNL (school students' union), by supporting the central demand, but trying at every turn to keep the mobilization on the rails of a movement putting forward a single demand, putting forward at every moment the institutional levers (the role of the Assembly, the Constitutional Council) in order to avoid the political development of a confrontation in an extra-parliamentary framework.

The central slogan of Francois Hollande, First Secretary of the PS was ; "the electors will remember in 2007". Similarly, certain prominent leaders of the PS tried to make themselves heard by the MEDEF (the main employers' organization) by making their own alternative proposals to the CPE (other contracts specifically for young people), whereas the movement was moving forward towards a simple slogan: "no second-rate contracts for young people".

That is why, in the final weeks before the withdrawal of the CPE, we saw a big and growing gap between the slogans of the movement and the interventions of the PS, behind the unanimity for the withdrawal of the CPE. When the movement put forward the refusal of second-rate contracts and the demand for the resignation of Villepin and the government, the PS tried to maintain its own direction, even though the spokesperson of UNEF had quite a different discourse.

The Communist Party played on the same note as the PS, refusing to give the movement the character of a political confrontation with the government ("there is no question of demanding Villepin's resignation..."), but this party demonstrated, for the first time on such a scale, its weakness in the youth movement (as shown by the absence of its members from the national coordinating committee) and especially its clear refusal to push towards a political crisis, to push forward the movement of the street.

The PC, PS, the Greens, and other components of the traditional Left therefore concentrated until the end of March on calling on Chirac as a recourse against Villepin "so as not to open a political crisis", taking care to remain within the strictest institutional framework.

The LCR and the JCR developed an intense political activity over several weeks, as was shown by the place occupied by our young comrades in the movement and the LCR's place in demonstrations and political initiatives, as well as the role of our members in developing the mobilization among workers.

Its axes of intervention were developing the perspective of building a broad movement towards a general strike against job insecurity and unemployment, and the systematization of blockades, starting from the example of the development of the student and high school student movement, into which the JCR and the young militants of the LCR threw all their forces: to base ourselves on this development and on mobilization and confrontation in order to put forward the political demand for the departure of this illegitimate government, of this Right which has been disavowed three times in elections and twice more by the three million demonstrators who came into the street on March 28 and April 4. In the student movement the JCR members and young members of the LCR developed the axes of self-organization and the organization of an ongoing general strike in the universities and high schools, and these comrades took a real political place at every level of the movement.

To the political forces of the workers movement and of the Left, the LCR proposed a united front in the framework of the "Riposte" collective which brought together all the political forces of the Left. But apart from joint communiqués, the LCR ran up against the refusal at national level of joint initiatives in the form of meetings. Such initiatives were

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organized in several towns and cities, making it possible both to confront the forces of the Left with the demands of the movement and for the LCR to put forward our own proposals.

Among these proposals were:

the refusal of specific contracts for young people, the demand for the recognition of a full-time CDI as the only job contract, the banning of sackings and the demand for maintaining job contracts,  
the creation of hundreds of thousands of necessary jobs, in particular in the health service, education, the post office...  
the provision of an autonomy allowance of â,–800 for young people,  
the right to professional training, including during people's working lives, organized during working hours and remunerated accordingly.

Obviously, all these elements are linked to the overall anti-capitalist coherence of the LCR's proposals concerning public services, wages, and the sharing out of wealth, proposals that are outlined in the emergency plan that it has just brought out as a pamphlet.

The LCR was the only political force to demand loud and clear the departure of Villepin, Sarkozy, and Chirac, relying on the massive rejection of the government among the young people and the workers who were mobilized.

### Political Crisis and New Attacks

The state of decay of this government is continuing after the confrontation over the CPE. The corrosive character of the social crisis is once more taking on the dimensions of a political crisis with the Clearstream affair. This politico-financial scandal is continuing, at the time of writing this article, to produce its effects. The affair started from a sadly banal business of accounts in a company for financial transfers which is based in Luxemburg, accounts whose holders included, among others, leaders of the Socialist Party and the UMP. Clearly part of Chirac's apparatus tried to use this affair to discredit Sarkozy within the UMP.

The scandal, which also involves leaders of former public enterprises like EADS, is once again hitting Chirac and Villepin. This new crisis, which the Right cannot manage to bring under control, reveals once again the decadence not only of the Right but of the institutional system of the Fifth Republic.

A political system based on the personal power on the President of the Republic (who is elected by universal suffrage), it has exacerbated the hyper-centralization of French political life, its concentration on the government and the President, leaving little space for parliamentary life and even less to local institutions. Having survived May 1968 and many crises, this system has now run out of steam.

But during the crisis the attacks continue. After the proposal for the privatization of French Gas (GDF) in the form of a fusion with the Suez investment bank, there is a new blow against democratic freedom: parliament has just adopted another of Sarkozy's disgraceful laws, the CESEDA "for chosen immigration", in fact for disposable immigration, rendering even more precarious the living conditions of hundreds of thousands of immigrants.

The victory against the CPE might already seem long ago!

All these social and political mobilizations that we have experienced pose again and again in a very sharp way a clear demand: we need a perspective that corresponds to the size, the power, and the radical nature of this

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movement. What is needed to correspond to these movements is a fighting Left that breaks with the meanderings of the Left that runs the affairs of capitalism, an anti-capitalist force. The new generation which entered into battle over the last few weeks can be the cement for this force.