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France

# The white flag goes up

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**On the morning of April 10, the French government finally caved in. After two months of a mass campaign against the CPE (First Employment Contract), the measure was withdrawn. The CPE would have allowed employers to sack workers under 26 during the first two years of their employment, without having to give any justification. Its supposed replacement is really just another measure to give hand-outs to employers who hire young people. It will be just as effective, or rather ineffective, as the many similar measures over recent years. It is nothing more than a very unconvincing attempt by the government at saving face.**

Students mobilized massively against the CPE, occupying and blockading universities and high schools. They were supported by a united trade union front - the movement was led by the Intersyndicale, a coalition of 12 trade union and student organizations. There was a succession of strikes and demonstrations, which at their peak brought 3 million people onto the streets. The movement was supported by the entire left, from the reformist Socialist Party to revolutionary organizations like the LCR and LO. In opinion polls 65 to 70 per cent of people opposed the CPE

In nearly four years of the right-wing UMP government, this is the first time that mass protests have succeeded in blocking one of its attacks. Previously defeats were suffered over pensions in 2003 and health insurance in 2004. Some politicians and commentators in France and abroad have argued that it is undemocratic for mass protests to be able to over-rule the decisions of elected representatives, revealing a touching faith in France's democratic institutions.

It is worth recalling that the UMP, which thanks to the peculiarities of the electoral system has an absolute and indeed substantial majority in Parliament, won just 33 per cent of the vote in the 2002 elections - a figure that goes down to 22 per cent of registered voters given the 35 per cent of electors who abstained. Representatives elected under those conditions and subject to no kind of control or recall by their electors are ill placed to give lessons in democracy.

According to the electoral calendar the government still has more than a year in office, until the 2007 elections. But after this it will be very difficult for it to push through any more major attacks. Indeed now would be the time for the unions and the Left to undo some of the damage already done, by going on the offensive and calling into question the "reforms" already adopted. A good place to start would be with the CNE (New Employment Contract) which was passed last autumn without the unions really mobilizing against it, and which allows employers in companies with less than 20 employees the right to sack workers during the first two years without justification.

Since the victory of the 'No' vote in last year's referendum on the proposed European constitution, France has had a lame duck president. Now it also has a lame duck prime minister and government. The simplest solution would be for them just to get out now, as more and more French people want them to. But they won't go unless they are forced to.