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France

Anti-labour law movement enters key stage

- News from around the world -

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The movement for the withdrawal of the CPE (see [Student movement puts government on the defensive](#) in this issue) is entering a decisive phase. The last two mobilizations saw the curve of the movement continuing to rise. On March 16th demonstrations predominantly made up of university and school students, but joined by many teachers and trade unionists, brought half a million onto the streets.

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On Saturday March 18th, a day of action supported by the trade union confederations and the student unions mobilised up to 1.5 million people. Opinion polls are now showing that 68 per cent of the population and 80 per cent of the young people directly concerned by the measure are in favour of the withdrawal of the CPE.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/PM7a.jpg>]

Even the prestigious Paris daily Le Monde, reflecting the pressure of public opinion and a desire to avoid further political and social polarization, has called, in the editorial of its March 21st issue, for the "annulment or suspension of the reform".

The scale of the mobilizations and the verdict opinion polls leave no ambiguity as to what the majority of people think about the reform. If the government was going to back down, now would be the time to do it.

But for the moment it is not backing down. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin is reportedly "shaken" but not ready to admit defeat. He is calculating that the movement has reached its high point and that the unions will not go as far as a general strike to defeat the CPE. And for the sake of his ambitions for next year's presidential election, he cannot afford to admit defeat.

De Villepin is supported, perhaps reluctantly, by President Jacques Chirac, who cannot abandon his protégé but who has nevertheless called on the unions to engage in "a constructive and confident dialogue", an appeal aimed especially at the moderate CFDT confederation.

Meanwhile a delegation of 20 French employers met with De Villepin on Monday 20th and suggested modifying the CPE by reducing the period when an employee could be sacked from two years to one and obliging employers to give a reason - while still leaving them the right to sack at will.

But divisions are appearing between the big employers, who can afford to be more flexible, and the small and medium-sized enterprises who are less willing to compromise over the CPE.

Perhaps the government will agree to modify some aspects of the CPE in order to maintain the essence of it, or perhaps they will try and push it through unchanged.

What is certain is that the only thing that can make them withdraw it is neither an editorial in Le Monde nor the

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solicitations of "enlightened" employers. It is the pursuit of the movement and, at the least, a massive one-day general strike.

From this point of view the result of the meeting between representatives of the trade union confederations and the student unions on March 20th was not as clear-cut as it might have been.

For the sake of maintaining a united union front and keeping the less militant unions on board, the call was not clearly for a one-day general strike, but for a day of "demonstrations, strikes and work stoppages" on March 28th - more than a week away. In the meantime the students will be organizing demonstrations on the 21st and 23rd March.

Two thirds of France's 84 universities are now wholly or partially blocked, and the last week has seen school students mobilise in large numbers. The school students' union FIDL has announced that 450 high schools are wholly or partially blocked by students, and that some of them are occupied.

Whatever the ambiguities of the call for March 28th, it is vital that the strikes on that day are massive. One encouraging sign is that the CGT and CFDT unions of the Paris public transport system have issued a strike call for March 28th .

It is also important that in the meantime trade unionists should support the student demonstrations. There is a certain danger that some young people, frustrated at the government's intransigence and the hesitations of the unions, may be drawn into the kind of confrontations with the police that marked the end of the demonstrations on March 16th and 18th, and which have left one trade unionist in hospital in a coma.

The key to the success of the movement lies in its mass character and in the student movement being backed up by workers taking strike action to force the government to back down.