

Victory in France

Workers and Youth Defeat the French Government

Interview with Nicola Dessaux, a communist activist and a communist organiser engaged in the workers and youth struggle against the imposition of the CPE (The First Employment Contract) in France. This interview was conducted on the last day of the strike.

The victory of the workers and the youth over the right wing government in France marked a welcome development in favour of the workers movement in Europe. This victory was complemented by another successful strike by the public sector workers in Britain who came out in defence of their pension rights and staged the biggest mass strike since the 1926 general strike.

KOMONIST wishes to thank comrade Nicola for his time and wish him further success in his struggle against capitalism.

KOMONIST: The French society is experiencing a wave of social unrests. The youth revolts in the suburbs and the current struggles against the imposition of the CPE has once again put France on the map and drawn the attention of the revolutionaries across the world.

What are the underlying socio-economic factors that have led to such radical mass struggles at this particular time?

Nico: Since the seventies, unemployment in France has continuously grown. Now, there's something like four millions of unemployed people and seven millions of precarious jobs, which means one-third of the total workforce. Officially, this situation started with the oil crisis, but it is clear that bosses use unemployment as a means of pressure on labour costs and on working-class demands. During the eighties, the left-wing "government" closed all the big factories and mines, in order to suppress the "workers citadels". Unemployment is not a result of an economic situation, but a weapon in the hands of bosses. And now, it is the turn of small factories, with a few hundreds workers, which are closing down one after another. During the same period, the number of students has grown exponentially, as the suppression of professional formations turned many people toward universities. So, it has become very common for people with high diplomas to find a job that, ten years later, didn't need any qualifications. And it's also very common to be an unemployed after years of university training.

In November 2005, during the riots, Media were speaking of "ethnic gangs" and "unschooled" people". But when the trials began, as there was thousands of arrests, they discovered that many rioters who burned bins and cars were "white" people, with good education but no job. Or "coloured" people, born in France, schooled in France, but who were victims of racist discriminations in the labour market. All of them were living in poor suburbs where the unemployment rate is very high. After the riots, the government announced measures for youth jobs. CPE is officially one of these measures. Even if it is a part of a plan to suppress the CDI (full-time contract), which workers consider to be the norm. The CPE introduced the possibility for the bosses to fire a young worker without any explanation, during the first two years of his / her employment. The youths feel it as a strong injustice, and unions are very angry as it is a direct attack against the labour code.

So in February 2006, the students of Rennes, in the west of France, launched a strike against this CPE. This spread among all universities: 64 of them voted for the strike and students began to block the campuses – a new way of struggle in French universities. Then, after the high schools went on strike and began to block campuses also. Under the pressure of this movement, all the twelve unions called for a joint demonstration across the country, which gathered some three millions people.

This is the first time a struggle in defence of the labour laws started from the universities. It's very significant of the current situation: French students really feel themselves to be future workers – or unemployed – and most young workers have the experience of university or at least high schools.

KOMONIST: The International media and the bourgeois commentators are attaching a great deal of importance to the split and rivalries between ruling politicians. How significant are these internal differences within the government?

Nico: The rivalry between the Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and the Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy is not new, as both want to be the right wing candidate for the presidential elections of 2007. In itself, it is not really significant, as the right wing is traditionally divided. But everybody feels

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that the government is unable to handle the crisis, and the fact that right-wing MPs agreed to discuss directly with the unions, which is the role of the government, shows there is a political crisis. At best, they will benefit from the rejection of the right wing. Remember, in April 2002, the fascist candidate was in the second round of the presidential election, a situation which permitted Jacques Chirac to be elected with 82 % of the votes. In reality, the fascists didn't get so much more votes than in the last elections. But the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, lost four millions votes. Four millions of workers which usually vote for the left didn't vote because they condemned the right-wing policy of the Socialist party. Now, we face the same lack of alternative, even if the extreme-left – which is very strong in French elections – has better chances to benefit from the struggle. The main problem is... its fear of political power.

This is a very important issue for the struggle. The national coordination of students, which gather delegates from all universities on strike, asks for the withdrawal of government. But they can't go further in that direction, as the question of political power is not really and clearly discussed in the movement.

KOMONIST: The solidarity between the workers and their unity in action is a welcome development. What has prompted this unity? How organised are these struggles? Are there any formal or informal cooperation between the workers and the students?

Nico: Unions fear the CPE to be the first attack against the full-time job, as the government plans to launch a new type of contract which will suppress full time jobs. That's why all the unions, including the most moderate ones, agreed to refuse it. But without the students' movement, they won't have been so radical. In itself, this union unity is rather a surprise, as in spring 2003, during the struggle against the retirement reform; one of the biggest unions (CFDT, moderate) supported the government against the strike. Now, they joined the movement. This was a first victory for the students.

On the rank-and-file level, the unity was also a strong part of the struggle for students. Quickly, they called on workers, sent activists to the factories, called associations of the civil society to join, and done a great job to get this unity. The national coordination of students called for general strike, and some unions joined this call, locally and nationally. Even if most workers go on strike only once a week, for the biggest demonstrations, it enables worker activists to take part in common direct actions like road and port blockings.

KOMONIST: What have been the roles of the established unions? Where do they stand in this conflict?

Nico: As I explained, they play a big role in the biggest demonstrations, and they have adopted an unusually radical attitude. We should not be lured by this, as there is a strong difference between the demands of unions and of students. Unions ask for the withdrawal of CPE only, and the national coordination of students has a very complete agenda for the withdrawal of all laws that organize unemployment and precarious work and life in France.

One aspect of the movement is the refusal of leadership, which is a very strong feeling among the students. The national coordination of students, which meets every week in a different university, waited a long time to elect spokespersons, which changes each week. So the Media are not very interested to interview them. As a result, the president of the national union of French students (UNEF) is considered by papers and TV as the leader of the student movement, even if students don't recognize him as their representative. The workers unions also took a long time to admit the delegates of the coordination of students in their discussions, and prefer to discuss with the students unions, which are not very strong but are established. So, the students' defiance towards leaders and unions has benefited the unions' leaders.

KOMONIST: What are the different trends within this movement? What are the vanguards and militant leaders calling for?

Nico: This defiance against leaders is also defiance toward organised political trends. A lot of activists take the movement seriously, but they're generally discrete about their political or union affiliation. This is a rather common feature in the French student movement since twenty years ago.

A typical trait of demonstrations is students wearing political stickers on their coats, but with the name of the organisation cut out! Anyway, the Trotskyites – which are an important feature of the French left – are active in the national coordination, the anarchists are active in the rank-and-file movement, and the French communist party, which was almost void of the youth, has come back. It would be very time

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consuming to detail the nuances between all of them. What's clear is that a lot of students who weren't at all aware about politics are now interested and wants to get involve in a new way.

KOMONIST: your struggle so far has been very successful. What would, in your view, constitute a satisfactory outcome?

Nico: Now, the CPE has been withdrawn. First President Chirac asked, even if the law was signed, that it was not to be put into real application! Later, right-wing MP's agreed to come up with new proposals very soon, but unions still asked for the withdrawal first – and they won. In itself, it is only a small victory, as the problem that youth faces is precarious work and life, not only CPE, and their demands were larger than this. But this was clearly what was planned by most of the unions, which fear the radicalization of the movement and would prefer to negotiate the “end of crisis”. But the movement has probably gone too far for this time. The most radical students still consider themselves to be in the struggle, even if most universities have ended the strike. In some towns, direct actions still continue but on a smaller scale.

KOMONIST: Your struggle has generated a great deal of sympathy and support from many quarters. Revolutionaries from all parts of the world are watching you struggle with interest.

Nico: The movement of French students and workers have been an important struggle. It opens more questions than it solves problems, as after the withdrawal of CPE, work will still be precarious and students sill have hard times to find it. But the fact is a full generation of young people discovered the power of struggle and discussed its own future it is in itself a victory and will produce experienced and radical activists. It's our task to discuss the limits of the struggle and how to take it over, how to challenge the capitalist state and its government and how to challenge this society.

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The Plenum run out of time and was not able to discus items 7 and 9 and they were referred to the political bureau for consideration.

The Plenum also agreed to hold the party's first congress before the end of the current year and also agreed on the procedure to elect the delegates to the congress.

A number of resolutions, amongst those submitted to the Plenum, were also debated and adopted. The resolutions and the discussions of the fourth Plenum will be published in the party's publications.

The Plenum unanimously elected Koorosh Modarresi to the post of the secretary of the Central Committee (Party Leader). According to the newly adopted plan the leader of the party is also member of the political bureau. The Plenum elected a further 20 people to complete the twenty one member political bureau. The elected members are: Azar Modarresi, Asad Golchini, Asad Nodinian, Azam Kamguian, Aman kafa, Iraj Farzad, Bahram Modarresi, Soraya Shahabi, Hossein Moradbeigi (Hameh Soor) Khaled Haj Mohammadi, Rahman Hosseinzadeh, Saleh Sardari, Abdullah Darabi, Fateh Sheikh, Koorosh Modarresi, Mozafar Mohammadi, Majid Hosseini, Mohammad Fatahi, Mahmoud Ghazvini, Mosrafa Asadpour, Nasan Nodinian.

The Plenum concluded its proceedings with the concluding speech by Koorosh Modarresi and with the signing of the Intrnationale.

At the first meeting of the political bureau, held immediately after the Plenum, Fateh Sheikh was unanimously elected as the chair of the Political Bureau. Also a Leadership Committee made of 10 members was elected. The members of the Leadership Committee are: Asad Nodinian, Aman kafa, Bahram Modarresi, Soraya Shahabi, Hossein Moradbeigi (Hameh Soor) Khaled Haj Mohammadi, Rahman Hosseinzadeh, Abdullah Darabi, Koorosh Modarresi, Nasan Nodinian. According to the new plan the secretary of the Central Committee will also assume the post of the secretary of the Leadership Committee. Finally Koorosh Modarresi nominated Rahman Hosseinzadeh as the deputy secretary of the party and his nomination was put to vote and he was unanimously elected to the post of deputy secretary of the Party.

Central Committee of the Worker-communist Party of Iran – Hekmatist

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