

## Fearful of flexploitation

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*France's student protests are part of a wider revolt against the elite's support for a Thatcherite project*

Last Saturday, an estimated 1.5 million people surged on to the streets of France in protest against Dominique de Villepin's faltering government. Sparked by weeks of student opposition, and of teargassed occupations and demonstrations, the scenes have revived memories of May 1968.

France's universities are again centre-stage, with 64 out of 84 institutions blockaded and increasing numbers of secondary schools following suit. Just as before, the main players are an angry student population, a battle-hungry police force and an unpopular government. And now, like then, comes the threat of a crippling general strike called by the trade union movement as workers join the anti-government protests.

But this is where the comparisons should end. Today's eruption is more complex, its denouement more uncertain. Hot on the heels of the "non" to the European constitution last spring and last November's riots, it is clear that the current situation is the latest expression of the growing revolt against the authoritarian market society France has become and the elite that wishes to take the Thatcherite project further.

The match that lit this latest fuse is the *contrat de première embauche* (first employment contract), a law that allows employers to fire under-26s immediately and without reason during the first two years of their employment. For the government, the CPE is deemed necessary to tackle chronic unemployment, which stands at 10% - and more than double that for under-25s.

Plenty of economists refute the government's claims. Michel Husson of Paris's respected Institute of Economic and Social Research says: "There is simply no available evidence to suggest that higher flexibility translates itself into the net creation of long-term employment." Armed with such ammunition, the protesters believe the CPE is instead about further embedding the "flexploitation" model among a section of society increasingly blamed for the ills of France's economy and society.

As the sociologist François Dubet explains, the uneasiness is more deep-seated than just job insecurity. "The widespread perception in French society is that the gulf separating those 'inside' society, even if they are badly paid, from those 'outside', in particular living in the suburbs, has become more accentuated" over the past 20 years. Middle-class students live in increasing fear that they may end up on the wrong side of the line at any moment. In this sense, "the anti-CPE movement is for the middle classes what last November's riots were to the suburban poor", who were already on the other side of this boundary and could no longer tolerate it.

The protests are also fuelled by a sophisticated understanding of the underlying political agenda, namely De Villepin's race with the interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, for the presidency. Through his determination to show firmness in the face of the student protests, mirroring Sarkozy's handling of the November riots, De Villepin has backed himself into a corner. A recent poll revealed that 68% of French people want the repeal of the CPE.

The government has two options: either renounce the law outright or, to save face, use the constitutional council to declare the law unconstitutional and revoke it. But, as one government minister has warned: "If De Villepin steps back, he is dead."

Whatever the administration chooses to do, the mood of people across French society points to further confrontations ahead - with a dramatic political change of direction a distinct possibility.

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