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French show how to fight... and win!

Dermot Sreenan

1994

PRIME MINISTER Edouard Balladur and his government have been in retreat over the last six months as the people of France take to the streets to demonstrate their anger at new policies. The government has backed down on Air France (see last issue of WS), on extra funds for church schools and with the fishermen. The turn of the students of France came when the government proposed to cut the minimum wage by 20% for people under 26.

The original plans were to have wages ranging from 30% to 80% of the minimum wage. It was a move calculated to pitch old against young. The bosses would now be able to make a saving of 20% by laying off anyone over 26 and taking on those younger. As one protest sign read "I've got a job, Dad, It's yours."

In France over 750,000 people under 25 are without a job and one in four school leavers have no chance of finding work. The move to cut wages has now been dropped but the struggles continue. On March 29th a student union leader, Bob Injey, said of the government "Basically, they all end up trying to justify lower pay

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for young people,”. Balladur had to cancel a planned TV address on that day to ‘celebrate’ one year of the right being in power because of the unrest.

Over 200,000 people marched in protest throughout France on March 26th. Calls have been issued by the Student Unions and the CGT Trade Union calling for further demonstrations. The range of demands encompassed by the protesters has broadened. Two Arab students were arrested and deported to Algeria. The youth and student movement saw this as a racist attack on the right to demonstrate and called for their return.

In Lyon as many marched as did in Paris. The demonstrators said they were demonstrating “opposition to the the youth minimum wage” and that they were “marching against a police state.” Signs were present reading “Solidarity with foreigners” and “Free our Comrades”.

Seven hours of street fighting took place with the police in Nante after a demonstration on March 24th. The cops poisoned the air with so much tear gas that they had to seek more from the city of Rennes. The protesters replied with “rocks, smoke bombs and flare pistols besides blocking the streets with burning barricades.” (Le Monde 26.3.94)

The rage and anger of the young is back where it belongs, on the streets. The support of the workers is coming onto their side and new demands are being raised. These are fearful times for the government in France and inspiring to those who have chosen to fight back. Balladur and his buddies are taking some blows. The people are delivering some heavy punches to his policy plans and if this level of action can be sustained, hopefully, the government will end up where they all belong, on the ropes.