



FRENCH YOUTH PROTEST LABOR LAW

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A new French law intended to fix the high youth unemployment rate by making it easier to fire young people has sparked violent protests.

Under the law, employers can fire any worker under age 26 without reason during a two-year trial period of employment.

If companies are able to fire young people more easily than older workers, the lawmakers reasoned, employers would be more likely to hire them.

But the measure has angered French university students and trade unions, who have held weeks of protests and demonstrations – some of them violent.

The French government is refusing to back down, however, and now faces a nation-wide strike that could paralyze the city on Tuesday.

“We want to block access to important roads or maybe in shopping malls,” said Juliette Griffond, head of a student coordination group, according to Bloomberg news.

“The idea is to be visible. The idea is also to alert the population about the youth movement, to inform them. We want to have an impact on economic life.”

"We hope that after the protests the government ... withdraws the text," said the opposition Socialist Party's spokesman Julien Dray, Reuters reported. "There is no other solution."

Law intended to help students

The new law, known by its French acronym CPE, was introduced by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who is expected to be a presidential candidate in 2007.

In France, unemployment for all workers is high – at nearly 10 percent. By comparison, the rate in the United States is around 5 percent.

Overall, youth unemployment in France is 23 percent. However, in poor, immigrant communities around Paris, almost half of the youths are unemployed.

Jobs more secure in France

The labor situation in France is quite different than in the United States. French labor laws are designed to protect the worker and provide job security. The primary feature is the contract of indeterminate duration – or CDI.

Under the CDI, workers are essentially guaranteed a job for life. Although there is a probation period, it is only six weeks. After that, it is very difficult for employers to fire a worker.

Workers can only be fired if companies prove a “serious” fault. If the workers object, they can take the issue to court, where the law requires the court to rule in the favor of the employee whenever there is reasonable doubt.

Court cases are lengthy and expensive, lasting an average of 12 months and costing 12-24 months of salary.

Alexis Debat, a consultant working at George Washington University, said the labor laws are a drag on France’s economy.

“The system is very inflexible, and an employer has to think twice before hiring someone because he knows that this person will have to remain in his or her job regardless of the economic situation, regardless of whether the business situation is good or bad,” she told the NewsHour.

“And in many cases, this dilemma is resolved by the employer making the decision not to create a job.”

Negative response to change

Response to the new CPE law has been largely negative – 63 percent of the French people as a whole disapprove of the law, according to a poll published by the French newspaper Le Monde.

De Villepin has repeatedly refused to withdraw or suspend the CPE, however, he did agree to meet with representatives of the trade unions and students to review some of the laws more controversial elements.

“I want to respond to the two major concerns of youth on the First Employment Contract, the period of two years and the conditions of breaking the contract,” de Villepin said. “I want us to rapidly find a solution through dialogue.”

The long probation period is especially controversial because proof of employment is required to get loans.

“Of course I don’t like the new contract,” Patrick Maengando, a 22-year-old job seeker, told Bloomberg news. “Banks don’t lend you money and it’s hell to find an apartment when you’re on it, because you can be fired overnight.”

Immigrants in the poorer suburbs of France are more open to the law and suggest the students who have decided to protest the law don't understand the challenges they face.

"Students don't know the job market," Ali, an immigrant job seeker, told Bloomberg news. "I prefer to be hired on a CPE than to be unemployed."

--Compiled by Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra

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