

# French Public Stands Behind Protests Against New Labor Law

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By Angela Stephens

With French young people in the streets protesting a new law that will allow employers to fire workers under age 26 without review, French public opinion polls indicate that the French public is largely standing behind the protestors. This resistance to removing state protections appears to be related to a broader distrust: in a recent global poll, the French public was the most skeptical of the free market system compared to other countries. France is also one of the most negative countries in their assessment of their country's economic conditions and the world economy, although French youth are quite optimistic about their own personal prospects.

The government says the First Job Contract (CPE), which takes effect in April, will make employers more willing to hire young people. Young people and unions maintain that the new law makes their employment prospects more insecure than they are now.

Several polls reveal that a strong majority wants the law withdrawn, with French youth especially opposed. A poll conducted March 21-22 by the French polling organization CSA found that 66 percent wanted the law withdrawn, while 25 percent opposed withdrawing it. Among those aged 18-29, three-fourths (74%) want the law withdrawn. The highest support for withdrawing the law was among 25-to-29-year-olds--78 percent; among 18-to-24-year-olds it was 72 percent.

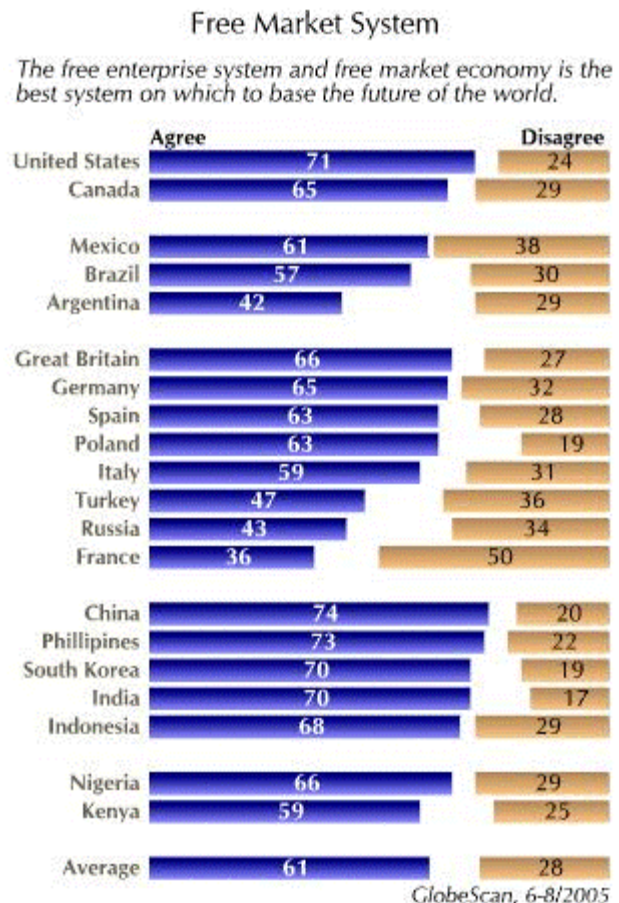
Similarly, a poll by the French polling organization BVA conducted March 17-18 found that those who want the CPE withdrawn outnumber those who want it maintained two to one (60% withdraw, 31% maintain). Here too the number is even higher among those aged 15 to 24--68 percent want the law withdrawn--while 24 percent want it maintained.

When respondents were asked by Ipsos March 25 if they approve of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's decision to maintain the CPE, 63 percent said they do not, while 34 percent said they approve.

A majority, 59 percent, blames the government for the deadlock, while 26 percent blame the unions and student organizations. Sixty-three percent are also skeptical about de Villepin's willingness to work with the labor unions to resolve the issue.

## French Skeptical of Free Market System

A GlobeScan poll of 20 countries around the world conducted between June and August 2005 showed that the French public is unusually skeptical about the free enterprise economic system. A majority or plurality of all of the other 19 countries polled agreed with the statement "The free



enterprise system and free market economy is the best system on which to base the future of the world." France alone had a minority, 36 percent, agreeing with the statement, while 50 percent disagreed.

Ironically, China had the largest majority agreeing with the statement, 74 percent. Turkey (47%), Russia (43%) and Argentina (42%) each had just a plurality agreeing.

The same poll found that the French are unusually high in their mistrust of large companies. Fifty-five percent said they did not trust large French companies to operate in the best interest of society (compared to an average of 47 percent among the 20 countries polled), and 61 percent said they did not trust global companies operating in their country (compared to a global average of 52 percent). Eighty-six percent also said that large companies have too much influence over their national government (compared to 73 percent globally).

Perhaps most significant, an overwhelming 79 percent favored more government regulation of large companies to protect the rights of workers. The global average was 74 percent.

### **Economic Pessimism**

A BBC poll of 32 nations conducted by GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes between October and December 2005 also found that the French were among the most pessimistic about the direction of the economy in terms of themselves, their country and the world. France had the second-highest percentage believing economic conditions were getting worse in their country (83%), after Zimbabwe (90%); the Philippines tied with France (83%). The French were also negative when asked whether their personal economic conditions were getting better or worse. France was one of only six of the 32 nations in which a majority said their personal economic conditions were getting worse--52% in France said this.

Even their perception of the world economy was far more pessimistic than average. Seventy percent saw economic conditions in the world as getting worse (compared to a global average of 37 percent). Only one other country had such a large majority.

### **Youth Confidence High On Personal Prospects**

Given their broad economic pessimism, French young people are surprisingly optimistic about their own economic prospects--which may help explain their readiness to press for better conditions. An Ipsos poll of French youth conducted in February found that 64 percent of those aged 15 to 25 said they are confident about their professional future (45% somewhat, 19% completely), while just one-third (36%) said they are not (20% somewhat, 16% not at all).

A plurality (45%) of those polled said they believe the new labor law will contribute to increasing insecurity of employment for young people. This concern was higher among those in the 20-to-25 age group (47%) than the 15-to-19 age group (42%). Just 23 percent overall said the new law will contribute to more hiring of young people, and 28 percent said the law won't have much influence on the labor market.