

French Left rejects Chirac call for talks

Paris, April 1 (Reuters): French Left-wing parties rejected President Jacques Chirac's call for dialogue today, reaffirming their plans to march next week against a youth job law they insist the government should withdraw.

Opposition groups, reacting to Chirac's yesterday's speech saying he would sign the law but modify it, said they would join unions and students to stage more big protests that have gripped France.

"We have confirmed our unanimous agreement to demand the definitive withdrawal of the CPE (law) and the opening of real negotiations with all unions, students and high school pupils before any new law goes before parliament," Patrick Farbiaz, a leader of the ecologist Greens party, said after a meeting.

A conservative strategy huddle earlier today agreed the law's critics had to hold talks with the government before it could introduce any modifications to the law allowing bosses to sack workers under 26 during a two-year trial period.

Protesters say the First Job Contract creates "Kleenex jobs" that make it easier for firms to dispose of young workers.

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THE TELEGRAPH

French House debates tough immigration law

Paris: France headed into a highly divisive fight over immigration policy on Tuesday when Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy submitted a bill in parliament to attract skilled newcomers while keeping poorer ones out.

His proposal, widely seen as part of his campaign for the presidential election next year, has attracted criticism from left-wing parties and church leaders and prompted the far-right to step up its stridently anti-immigrant line.

But it puts him at the centre of attention at a time when Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin is seriously weakened by his recent climbdown over labour law reform and a growing scandal about an alleged smear campaign against Sarkozy.



Critics of the proposed law say it will stigmatise foreigners

Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, has had to defend himself against charges he is running a xenophobic drive to poach votes from far-right National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who launched his presidential campaign on Monday.

"All democrats should wel-

come it if the National Front's score falls," Thierry Mariani, a deputy and Sarkozy ally, said on Monday.

Sarkozy says the bill aims to attract a new generation of skilled workers who would embrace French values and traditions, thus easing the tense race relations that led to last autumn's suburban riots by youths mostly of immigrant origin.

The law would create a three-year "skills and talents" residence permit to attract skilled workers. It would also make it harder for resident immigrants to bring family here, force newcomers to take French and civics lessons and end their automatic right to a long-term residence permit after 10 years in France. REUTERS

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Villepin defiant, will not step down

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Premier's position becoming untenable

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PARIS: Despite the fact that his position at the head of a Government in deep crisis is becoming increasingly untenable, French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin remained in a defiant mood on Thursday, denying any wrong doing and telling journalists he would not step down.

Mr. de Villepin is accused of having ordered an investigation into the financial dealings of his arch rival, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy who was implicated in a series of fabricated charges against top French political, industrial and military personalities. Mr. de Villepin reportedly ordered the enquiry despite knowing that the accusations were false and failed to inform Mr. Sarkozy of the attempted slander. The Prime Minister has repeatedly denied he ordered such an enquiry.

• Denies any wrong doing

• Says he is hurt by "sheer calumny"

But French daily *Le Monde* published the full text of the sworn testimony of former military intelligence chief General Philippe Rondot, who told magistrates that Mr. de Villepin had indeed asked him to investigate the Interior Minister in what has come to be known as the Clearstream Affair.

Scathing criticism

The French press on Thursday was unanimously scathing in its criticism of the Prime Minister who was accused of lying to Parliament and to the people. The right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* which usually supports

the Government asked: "Why did he repeatedly lie about the mention of his rival's name in connection with these murky dealings?" Whereas left wing daily *Liberation* bluntly called the Prime Minister "a liar." The Opposition and several members of his own UMP party are now openly calling for the Prime Minister's resignation.

In an attempt to turn the tables on his questioners, Mr. de Villepin said journalists should abide by the ethics of their profession, claiming he had been "deeply hurt" by what he described as "sheer calumny."

Refuting the intelligence official's leaked sworn account, he said again that Mr. Sarkozy's name was not mentioned at their meeting in connection with secret accounts and that President Chirac "at no point needed to give me instructions."

05 MAY 2006

নব্য-উদার অর্থনীতিকেই ধাক্কা দিয়ে গেল ফরাসি গণবিক্ষোভ

কাজের নিরাপত্তা কমায় আন্দোলন। সমর্থন দিলেন সাধারণ মানুষ। আন্দোলন ক্রমে 'অর্থনীতির মার্কিন মডেল'-এর বিরোধিতা হয়ে দাঁড়াল। প্যারিস থেকে লিখছেন ব্যাসদেব দাশগুপ্ত



রাস্তাই একমাত্র রাস্তা। গণবিক্ষোভে উত্তাল ফরাসি যুব-জনতা। ছবি: এ এফ পি

নব্য-উদার অর্থনীতির একটি বড় দিকচিহ্ন: এই নীতি কল্যাণরাস্তার ধারণটিকে (অর্থাৎ, রাষ্ট্র সাধারণ মানুষের মৌলিক প্রয়োজনগুলির দায়িত্ব নেবে এবং তা যথাযথ পূরণ করবে) ভেঙে দিতে চায়, এবং সাধারণ মানুষ রাষ্ট্রের কাছ থেকে যে সুযোগ সুবিধা পেয়ে আসছেন, সেই সুবিধাগুলোকেও একে একে সরিয়ে নিতে চায়। বিভিন্ন আন্তর্জাতিক সংস্থা এবং বহুজাতিক সংস্থার (যেমন, বিশ্বব্যাঙ্ক, আন্তর্জাতিক অর্থভান্ডার, ডি এফ আই ডি, এশিয়ান ডেভেলপমেন্ট ব্যাঙ্ক বা মার্কিনসে) মোটা মাইনের বিশেষজ্ঞরা এই নব্য-উদার অর্থনীতির মূল কথাটি বিভিন্ন সূত্রে বলে বেড়ান, নানা রিপোর্ট লেখেন। আর বিভিন্ন রাষ্ট্রের সরকার এই প্রবল আন্তর্জাতিক চাপের কাছে কার্যত নতিস্বীকার করে এই নীতিটি গিলতে বাধ্য হয়। এক দশকেরও বেশি গোটা বিশ্ব জুড়ে এমনই চলছিল, কিন্তু সম্প্রতি গোল বেধেছে।

নব্য-উদার অর্থনীতি বলে, এই নীতি সাধারণ মানুষের ভালের জন্যই। কিন্তু, সেই মানুষই বেশ কিছু নব্য-উদার নীতির বিরুদ্ধে প্রতিবাদ জানাতে আরম্ভ করে, কয়েকটি জায়গায় বেশ জোরের সঙ্গেই। যে হেতু এই অর্থনীতিকে মার্কিন প্রশাসনের নীতি বলেই দেখা হয়, তাই স্বভাবতই এই প্রতিবাদের সূত্রে মার্কিন বিরোধিতার ছাপ ছিল। বর্তমানে লাতিন আমেরিকায় যে রাজনৈতিক প্রতিবাদ-প্রক্রিয়া চলছে, তা এই প্রতিবাদের একটি বড় উদাহরণ। গত বছর থেকে, ইউরোপেও এই ধরনের প্রতিবাদ আরম্ভ হয়েছে এবং এর ফলেই ফ্রান্স এবং নেদারল্যান্ডস-এ গণভোটের মাধ্যমে ইউরোপীয় ইউনিয়নের ধারণাটি মুখ খুবড়ে পড়েছে। ফ্রান্সেও নব্য-উদার নীতির বিরুদ্ধে মানুষের প্রতিবাদ সম্প্রতি ভয়াবহ চেহারা নিল।

অন্যান্য দেশের মতোই ফ্রান্সেও কল্যাণরাস্তার পরিসরটি ক্রমশ সঙ্কুচিত হচ্ছিল, তবে সেই কাজটা চলছিল ধীর গতিতে। অন্তত, রাষ্ট্রের জনকল্যাণমুখী কর্মসূচির কিছুটা এখনও সামাজিক নিরাপত্তা, কর্মনিশ্চয়তা বা স্বাস্থ্যবাবস্থা ইত্যাদির মধ্যে অবশিষ্ট আছে। এখনও ফ্রান্সের আইন কাউকে চাকরি থেকে ছাঁটাই করার ব্যাপারে যথেষ্ট কড়া।

চাকরির নিশ্চয়তা নষ্ট করার প্রথম ধাপ হিসেবে ফ্রান্সের সরকার দেশের প্রথম চুক্তিভিত্তিক চাকরি সংক্রান্ত আইন Contract Primere Embauche (সংক্ষেপে সি পি ই) প্রণয়ন করে। এই আইনের ফলে কোনও নিয়োগকর্তার পক্ষে অনুর্ধ্ব ছাব্বিশ কোনও কর্মীকে তার চাকরির প্রথম দু'বছরের মধ্যে ছাঁটাই করা অনেক সহজ হবে। উৎপাদনশীলতা বৃদ্ধির যুক্তি মেনে

কিন্তু এই আইন আসেনি, (প্রসঙ্গত, ফ্রান্সে উৎপাদনশীলতা বিশ্বে প্রথম সারিতে), এর পিছনে ছিল একটি বিতর্কিত যুক্তি: নমনীয় শ্রম আইন দেশে বেকারত্বের সমস্যার সমাধান করবে (ফ্রান্সে এখন তরুণদের মধ্যে বেকারত্বের হার ২৩ শতাংশ)।

প্রথমে, এই আইনের প্রতিবাদে নামেন প্রধানত ছাত্ররা। ঘটনাটি আপাতদৃষ্টিতে আশ্চর্যজনক, কারণ এই আইনটি না তৈরি হলে এই ছাত্রদের একটা বড় অংশই তো কয়েক বছরের মধ্যেই কর্মহীনদের খাতায় নাম লেখাবে, ফলে এই আইনে তো তাঁদের সুবিধাই হওয়া উচিত। যাই হোক, ছাত্রদের উদারপন্থী সংস্কার সম্বন্ধে কিছু পূর্ব-অভিজ্ঞতা ছিল, ফলে তাঁরা সমগ্র প্রক্রিয়াটির মধ্যে একটি ভিন্নতর পরিকল্পনার ছাপ স্পষ্ট দেখতে

ইউরোপে একটা ধারণা আছে: ফ্রান্সে যা হবে, গোটা ইউরোপেও তাই হবে। সুতরাং, ইউরোপের নব্য-উদারপন্থীরা ভয় পেয়েছেন, তাঁদের নীতির বিরুদ্ধে ফ্রান্সের এই প্রতিবাদের প্রভাব গোটা ইউরোপে পড়বে।

পেলেন। এক ছাত্রনেতার ভাষায়, 'আমরা সংস্কার চাই না। আমাদের যেটুকু আছে, আমরা শুধু সেটুকু ধরে রাখতে চাই।' অল্প দিনের মধ্যেই শ্রমিক সংগঠনগুলিও প্রতিবাদে যোগ দিল। সি পি ই-র বিরুদ্ধে এই প্রতিবাদ ফ্রান্সে ১৯৬৮-র বিক্ষোভের পরে সবচেয়ে বড় গণবিক্ষোভের আকার নেয়। দেশের সব গুরুত্বপূর্ণ কলেজ এবং বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় বন্ধ হয়ে যায়। প্যারিস এবং অন্যত্র পথ অবরোধের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে রেল এবং বিমান পরিষেবাও বন্ধ হয়ে যায়। এক মাসের মধ্যে দু'দুটি সাধারণ ধর্মঘটে অর্থনীতিও ধাক্কা খায়। ধারাবাহিক ভাবে ফ্রান্সের ৬০ শতাংশের বেশি মানুষ ছাত্র-শ্রমিক সংগঠনের নেতৃত্বে চলা এই আন্দোলনে স্বতঃস্ফূর্ত সমর্থন জানিয়েছেন। এতে আরও একটি কথা স্পষ্ট: সে দেশের মানুষের মধ্যে নব্য-উদার নীতির বিরুদ্ধে ক্ষোভ বাড়ছে। সি পি ই-র বিরুদ্ধে আন্দোলন ক্রমশ গোটা নব্য-উদার নীতির এবং ফরাসি নাগরিকদের ভাষায় 'অর্থনীতির মার্কিন মডেল'-এর বিরোধিতা হয়ে দাঁড়িয়েছে।

সংসদে সি পি ই পাশ করিয়ে ফরাসি সরকার এক অভূতপূর্ব সমস্যায়

পড়ল। সমস্যা আরও বাড়িয়ে তুললেন সে দেশের দক্ষিণপন্থী প্রধানমন্ত্রী ভিলপ্যাঁ। তিনি সি পি ই নিয়ে কোনও সমঝোতায় আসতেই রাজি হলেন না। রাষ্ট্রপতি শিরাক এই বিলে তাঁর সম্মতি দিয়েছিলেন, কিন্তু খুচখাচ কিছু পরিবর্তনের জন্য বিলটিকে আবার সংসদে ফেরত পাঠিয়ে এ বিষয়ে তাঁর অস্বস্তিও স্পষ্ট করলেন। সরকারি স্তরে যখন এই সব কাণ্ড চলাছে, তখন প্রায় তিরিশ লক্ষ মানুষ প্রতিবাদে প্যারিসের রাজপথে নেমে পড়েছেন, আইনশৃঙ্খলা বেহাল। সরকারি মহলেও বিলটি নিয়ে মতানৈক্য দেখা দিল। বেশ কিছু প্রভাবশালী রাজনীতিক (যাঁদের মধ্যে অন্যতম প্রাক্তন রাষ্ট্রপতি ভ্যালেরি দি'এস্ত্যাগ এবং বর্তমান গৃহমন্ত্রী সারকোজি) রাষ্ট্রপতির অবস্থানে নিজস্বদের অনাস্থা জানালেন এবং সি পি ই-কে পূর্ণ সমর্থন দিতে অস্বীকার করলেন। বেগতিক দেখে পরিস্থিতি সামাল দেওয়ার জন্য রাষ্ট্রপতি ও প্রধানমন্ত্রী ছাত্র এবং শ্রমিক সংগঠনগুলির সঙ্গে আলোচনায় বসার প্রস্তাব দিলেন। কিন্তু তারা জানাল, 'হয় সম্পূর্ণ জয়, নয়তো হারা। আলোচনার মাধ্যমে কোনও মধ্যপন্থা নয়।' ১০ এপ্রিল নাগাদ শিরাক এবং ভিলপ্যাঁ বুঝলেন, সি পি ই নিয়ে এই অযৌক্তিক যুদ্ধ চালিয়ে যাওয়া যাবে না। শেষ পর্যন্ত আইনটি তুলে নেওয়া হল।

সি পি ই-র বিকল্প আইন বলছে: কমবয়সী অদক্ষ শ্রমিককে পাকা চাকরি দিলে এবং তাঁদের দক্ষতা বৃদ্ধির জন্য প্রশিক্ষণের ব্যবস্থা করলে নিয়োগকর্তা ভর্ত্তুকি পাবেন। ভর্ত্তুকি খাতে বায় হওয়া অর্থ (যার পরিমাণ বছরে প্রায় ত্রিশ কোটি ইউরো) আসবে তামাকের ওপর বসানো একটি নতুন কর থেকে।

ইউরোপে একটা চলতি কথা আছে: ফ্রান্সের ইচ্ছা হলে ইউরোপের ঠাণ্ডা লেগে যায়। সুতরাং, ইউরোপের নব্য-উদারপন্থীরা ভয় পেয়েছেন, তাঁদের নীতির বিরুদ্ধে ফ্রান্সের এই জোরালো প্রতিবাদের প্রভাব গোটা ইউরোপে পড়বে এবং গোটা ইউরোপ জুড়ে নব্য-উদার অর্থনীতির বিরুদ্ধে জনমত তৈরি হবে। ফ্রান্সের এই আন্দোলন নব্য-উদার অর্থনীতির বিরুদ্ধে সাধারণ মানুষের চরমতম বিরাগের একটা স্পষ্ট প্রমাণ। এই ঘটনা আরও প্রমাণ করল, শ্রেণি অবস্থান নির্বিশেষে মানুষ একজোট হয়ে অন্যায়ের বিরুদ্ধে শক্তিশালী রাজনৈতিক মতবাদ গড়ে তুলতে পারে। ফ্রান্সের ভবিষ্যৎ শাসকবর্গ এর পর কোনও নব্য-উদার নীতি চাপিয়ে দেওয়ার আগে বহু বার ভাববেন, কারণ এ বারই তাঁরা বুঝে গিয়েছেন, সাধারণ মানুষ, আর তাঁদের নব্য-উদার যুক্তিতে অর্থনীতি বুঝতে রাজি নন।

লেখক কল্যাণী বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে অর্থনীতির শিক্ষক

60 15
25 19

Post-riots, rightist party gains in France

By Craig S Smith

Paris: France's far-right political party, the National Front, has emerged stronger than ever from the civil unrest that has plagued the country in the past six months, a new survey shows, suggesting that the party could play a major role in the presidential election next year.

The National Front's outspoken and vehemently anti-immigration leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has had occasional bursts of support before: four years ago, he made it to the runoff for president, losing to President Jacques Chirac.

But after riots by second-generation immigrant youth last fall, Le Pen's approval rating in polls surged five percentage points, to 21%, according to a survey by IFOP, a French polling institute, published on Friday.

That is not far behind the approval rating of Chirac's would-be successor, Dominique de Villepin, the embattled prime minister, whose score slumped to 29 percent this month amid the political fiasco when nationwide protests forced the government to scrap a new labour law.

Fridric Dabi, who wrote the report, said a string of national crises had bolstered Le Pen's standing, including the resounding rejection last year of a proposed European constitution, which was officially supported by Chirac's governing Union for a Popular Movement Party and the opposition Socialist Party.

A nationwide outburst of vandalism and arson by the children of France's largely Muslim immigrants further played into Le Pen's hands: the National Front responded with a computer-generated video that showed Paris in flames beneath the banner, "Immigration, explosion in the suburbs, Le Pen foretold it."

The image of French-Arab and French-African

youths hurling bottles and stones at the country's anti-riot police during the recent demonstrations against the labour law is only likely to reinforce support for Le Pen, Dabi said.

"All of these crises were very different, but their common point is that they benefited parties outside the political system," Dabi said.

The National Front holds no seats in parliament, but it has up to 30% of the seats on some municipal councils, many seats on regional councils and seven seats in



the European Parliament.

More than a third of respondents in the IFOP survey said Le Pen's party was in tune with "the concerns of French people."

Still, few analysts contend that Le Pen can repeat his 2002 performance.

The Socialist Party did not unite behind a strong candidate in that election. And although it split over support for the European constitution last year, the party is clearly on the mend.

Its rising star, Sigolhne Royal, is the front-runner among presidential contenders in popularity polls, with 34% support among prospective voters, according to a TNS Sofres/Unilog survey published this week. NYT News Service

THE TIMES OF INDIA



(গত সপ্তাহের পর)

বিপ্লব, বিক্ষোভ

নতুন নয় ফরাসি

মূল্যকে

ফ্রান্স আমাদের কাছে বরাবরই সাহিত্য, শিক্ষকতা আর ভাস্কর্যের পীঠস্থান। প্যারিসের আইফেল টাওয়ারের সৌন্দর্য ফরাসি সুরার মতোই মাদকতাময়। কিন্তু সে দেশের ইতিহাসে, শৈল্পিক মননের এই ঐতিহ্যের পাশাপাশি বিপ্লব এবং বিক্ষোভেরও আশ্চর্য সাহাবস্থান। ফরাসি বিপ্লবের রক্তাক্ত ইতিবৃত্ত কমবেশি আমরা সকলেই পড়েছি। বছর ধরে আসেই, মিনিমাম ওয়েজ 'ল' অথবা ন্যূনতম মজুরি সংক্রান্ত আইনকে কেন্দ্র করে ১৯৯৪-এ ফরাসি জনতার চাপা অসন্তোষ তুমুল বিক্ষোভের আকার নিয়েছিল। আমেরিকার ইরাক আক্রমণের প্রতিবাদেও ফ্রান্সের রাজ্য বার বার নামে এসেছেন সেখানকার বিক্ষুব্ধ মানুষ। কিন্তু অনেকেই ধারণা, এই সব কিছুকে ছাপিয়ে এ বারের জনরোষ বার বার মনে উসকে দিয়েছে ১৯৬৮-র বিক্ষোভের স্মৃতি।

১৯৬৮-র বিক্ষোভ

প্রায় চার দশক আগে একাধিক

বিতর্কিত শ্রম আইন প্রত্যাহার, দাবি মানল ফরাসি সরকার

বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় এবং প্যারিসের উচ্চ-বিদ্যালয়গুলির ছাত্রদের ডাকা ধর্মঘটের মাধ্যমেই ১৯৬৮-র বিক্ষোভের সূত্রপাত। সে বারও ফরাসি মূল্যবোধের রাজ্যে রাজ্যে মিছিল করেছিল বিক্ষুব্ধ ছাত্ররা। তাঁদের সঙ্গে বিক্ষোভে সামিল হয়েছিলেন প্রায় দশ লক্ষ শ্রমিক। দেশব্যাপী ধর্মঘটের ডাক দিয়েছিলেন তারাও। প্রবল জনরোষ সামলাতে হিমশিম

শেষেছিল পুলিশ-প্রশাসন। হয়তো এই সব কারণেই সে বারের ঘটনার সঙ্গে এ বারের সমস্যার মিল খুঁজে পেয়েছেন অনেকেই। আবার অনেকেই মতে ঘটনাক্রমের এই প্রাথমিক মিলটুকু বাদ দিলে 'সে বার' ও 'এ বার' অমিল বিস্তর। তাঁদের মতে, এ বারের বিক্ষোভ মূলত চাকরি ক্ষেত্রে 'সৃষ্টি হতে চলা সজাবা' অনিশ্চিত্যতাকে

কেন্দ্র করে। কিন্তু ৬৮-র বিক্ষোভ সংঘটিত হয়েছিল সমাজের কিছু অবদমন মূলক নীতির বিরোধিতায়। সে বারের ঘটনার রেশ দেশের সীমানা ছাড়িয়ে আন্তর্জাতিক মহলেও যথেষ্ট প্রভাব ফেলেছিল বলে মনে করেন তাঁরা। আর এ সপের জেরেই, তৎকালীন ফরাসি প্রেসিডেন্ট চার্লস দ্য গল পদত্যাগে বাধ্য হয়েছিলেন বলে তাঁদের অভিমত।

আগ্নিগর্ভ পরিস্থিতি

সোবোর্ন বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় 'দখল' করে শুরু হওয়া এ বারের এই ছাত্র-আন্দোলন ক্রমশ ছড়িয়ে পড়ে ফ্রান্সের মোট ৮৭ টি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের মধ্যে ৬৪ টিতেই। প্যারিস, বোর্দো, লোনে, ন্যান্সি-ফ্রান্সের প্রায় সব শহরেই ছড়িয়ে পড়েছিল বিক্ষোভের রেশ। জনতা পুলিশ খণ্ড খণ্ড চলাচল প্রায় প্রতি দিনই।



বিক্ষোভকারী শ্রমিক ও ছাত্র সংগঠনগুলি। দাবির প্রশ্নে তারা অনমনীয়। অবিলম্বে বাতিল করতে হবে আইনটির 'আপত্তিকর' অংশ। অবশেষে দেশজোড়া ধর্মঘট, পাড়তে থাকা বিক্ষোভ ও প্রতিবাদের ঝড়ে জেরবার ফরাসি সরকার মেনে নেয় বিক্ষুব্ধদের দাবি। দীর্ঘ টালবাহালার পর ১০ এপ্রিল জাতি শিরাক এই বিতর্কিত আইন প্রত্যাহারের কথা ঘোষণা করেন। (শেষ)

বাচস্পতি



ANADARABLE PAINIKA

বিক্ষোভের শেষ

অধ্যায়

শ্রম আইন: বহাল রাখার সিদ্ধান্তে সরকার ১৩ জনই থাকে, ততই তাঁর হয়েছে বিক্ষোভের আঁচ। ফরাসি পরিস্থিতি নিঃস্বপ্নে আনতে হস্তক্ষেপ করতে বাধ্য হন ফরাসি প্রেসিডেন্ট জাক শিরাক। ৩১ মার্চ শিরাক জানান, এই আইন কার্যকর করতে সই করবেন তিনিও। তবে ছাত্র-স্বার্থের কথা মাথায় রেখে দু-একটি বিষয়ে নমনীয় হতে তাঁর আপত্তি নেই। কিন্তু প্রেসিডেন্টের এই প্রস্তাব পত্রপাত কার্যকর

ফ্রান্সে আত্মসমর্পণ

ফ্রান্সের প্রধানমন্ত্রী দমিনিক দ্য ভিলপ্যার প্রস্তাবিত 'ফার্স্ট জব কনট্রাক্ট' বাতিল, ফলে চাকুরির নিরাপত্তা লইয়া চিন্তিত ফরাসি জনতার উল্লাস শিখরস্পর্শী। সেই উৎসবে পরোক্ষে ফরাসি প্রেসিডেন্ট জাক শিরাকও সামিল। এমনকী মন্ত্রিসভায় ভিলপ্যার সহযোগী কতিপয় মন্ত্রীও ইহাতে স্বস্তির শ্বাস ফেলিয়াছেন নিশ্চিত। যেমন, স্বরাষ্ট্রমন্ত্রী নিকোলাস সারকোজি, যিনি ইতিপূর্বে একাধিক বার প্রকাশ্যেই প্রস্তাবিত নূতন বিধিটির ব্যাপারে অসন্তোষ প্রকাশ করিয়াছেন। সমগ্র কাণ্ড, অর্থাৎ ছাত্র-যুব তুমুল বিক্ষোভ, ধর্মঘট এবং পরিণামে প্রেসিডেন্ট কর্তৃক তাঁহাদের দাবির যথার্থ স্বীকার— দেখিয়া মনে হইতে পারে, বুঝিবা ১৯৬৮-র বসন্তের বজ্রনির্ঘোষ ফিরিয়া আসিল। কিন্তু তাহা নিতান্তই আপাতদর্শন। বাস্তব পরিস্থিতি ভাবিয়া দেখিলে মনে হইতেই পারে, সরকারের এই পশ্চাদপসরণ তাৎপয়পূর্ণ হইলেও ইহাকে সবিশেষ যুক্তিসিদ্ধ ভাবিবার কোনও কারণ নাই।

ফ্রান্সে পনেরো হইতে চব্বিশ বৎসর বয়ঃক্রম পর্যন্ত জনগোষ্ঠীতে বেকারদের হার প্রায় বাইশ শতাংশ, যাহা শঙ্কাজনক এবং যে হার ইউরোপের নিরিখেও যথেষ্ট উচ্চ। বিদ্যালয় এবং বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় স্তরে শিক্ষার হার যথেষ্ট উজ্জ্বল, কিন্তু সেই অনুপাতে চাকুরির বন্দোবস্ত হয় নাই। পরিণামে উক্ত বয়ঃসীমার ত্রিশ শতাংশ ব্যক্তিও চাকুরিতে নিযুক্ত নহেন। তদুপরি, এই সকল চাকুরির একটি বৃহদাংশই নিতান্ত কয়েক মাসের ঠিকা কাজ, দীর্ঘমেয়াদি কোনও বন্দোবস্ত নহে। এমতাবস্থায় ফরাসি জনমানসে চাকুরি লইয়া উদ্বেগ স্বাভাবিক। প্রশ্ন হইল: তাহার নিরসনের উপায় কি চাকুরির তথাকথিত নিরাপত্তা বৃদ্ধি? ফরাসি জনতার উল্লাস দেখিলে সহসা তাহা মনে হইতেই পারে, কিন্তু এই গোলমালে যে বার্তাটি ক্রমাগতই চাপা পড়িয়া যাইতেছে, তাহা হইল ভয়াবহ বেকারত্ব। সম্পূর্ণ ঘটনাটির ফলে ভবিষ্যতের অন্যতম প্রেসিডেন্ট পদাভিলাষী ভিলপ্যার উচ্চাশা বিপন্ন হইল বটে, কিন্তু ঈষৎ বৃহত্তর প্রেক্ষিতে দেখিলে ফ্রান্সও তাহার একটি জ্বলন্ত সমস্যাকে যথাযোগ্য ভাবে সমাধানের সরণিতে আনিবার একটি সুবর্ণসুযোগ কার্যত হারাইল। সাম্প্রতিক একটি সমীক্ষায় প্রকাশ, তিন-চতুর্থাংশ ফরাসি যুবক-যুবতী সরকারি চাকুরি করিতে আগ্রহী, কারণ তাহাতে আত্মবিশ্বাসের অল্পসংস্থানের বন্দোবস্ত নিশ্চিত। নিরাপত্তাকামী এই সকল তরুণ স্রবণে রাখিলে ভাল করিতেন, তাঁহাদিগের অধিকাংশের সম্মুখে বাছিয়া লইবার জন্য যে দুইটি বিষয় আছে, তাহা কিন্তু 'নিরাপদ' সরকারি চাকুরি এবং 'বিপজ্জনক' স্বল্পমেয়াদি কাজ নহে। বরং শর্তগুলি হইল, হয় স্বল্পমেয়াদি (ফলে 'বিপজ্জনক') কাজ, নতুবা নিতান্তই বেকারত্ব। এই তমসার অন্য প্রাস্তটি অধিকতর নির্মম। বর্তমানে বিবিধ আইনের বশে স্থায়ী চাকুরিগুলি এতখানিই নিরাপদ এবং সেই ধরনের পদে বহাল কোনও ব্যক্তিকে সরাইয়া দিবার কাজটি এতই কঠিন যে নিয়োগকর্তাগণ ওই ধরনের পদসৃষ্টিতে আর আগ্রহী নহেন। ফলে, অদূর ভবিষ্যতে যে ফ্রান্সে স্থায়ী চাকুরির বন্যা বহিবে, এমন সম্ভাবনা ক্ষীণ।

বাস্তবের নিরিখে দেখিলে অবশ্য গভীরতর একটি প্রশ্ন উঠিয়া আসে। উদার অর্থনীতির কালে নমনীয়তা বা পরিবর্তনক্ষমতাই যেখানে সাফল্যের একমাত্র মাপকাঠি, সেই পরিস্থিতিতে চাকুরিকে আরোপিত নিরাপত্তার মাধ্যমে সুরক্ষিত রাখিবার ভাবনাটিই কার্যত অর্থহীন। ভিলপ্যার প্রস্তাবিত আইন নিয়োগকর্তাগণকে প্রথম আগত কর্মীকে ছাঁটিয়া ফেলিবার অধিকার তুলনায় সহজ করিতে চাহিয়াছিল। বুঝাই যায়, যথার্থ মানে যোগ্যতা প্রদর্শনে সক্ষম হইলে কোনও নিয়োগকারীই খামখা অভিজ্ঞ এবং যোগ্য কর্মীকে সরাইতে চাহিবেন না। অন্য দিকে, তাহাকে সরাইবার অধিকারটি বিদ্যমান বলিয়া সম্পূর্ণ পরিস্থিতিটি মুক্ত এবং নমনীয় থাকিবে। অসদৃশ্যে যে কোনও নীতিরই অপব্যবহার হইতে পারে। তাহার জন্য নিয়মটিকে দোষারোপ করা উচিত নহে। এক্ষণে ফরাসি জনতা উদ্বাহ হইয়া চাকুরিগত নিরাপত্তার এক প্রকার ছদ্ম উদযাপনে বিভোর। জনতার জয়ধ্বনির মাধ্যমে তাঁহারা কল্পস্বর্ণ নির্মাণের স্বপ্ন দেখিতেছেন।

Chirac comes under pressure to scrap controversial job law

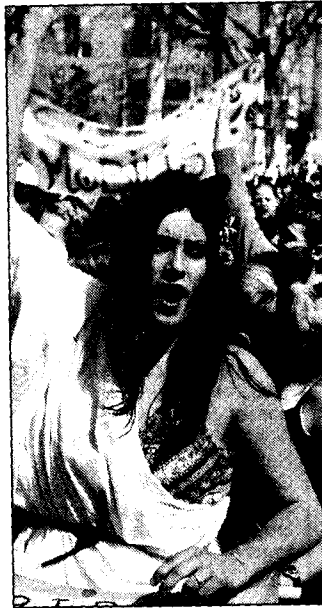
Paris: President Jacques Chirac, juggling the demands of outraged students, frustrated lawmakers and his loyal premier, faces a delicate decision on how to finesse a contentious youth employment law to pull France out of crisis. Calls mounted on Sunday for Chirac to jettison the most inflammatory part of the law, a new job contract that would make it easier to fire young workers. Many warned that only a withdrawal would quell wildcat protests that threaten to spin beyond the control of unions and student groups at the forefront of the two-month-old protest movement.

"They should put an end today to this vaudeville," the leader of the centrist UDF party, Francois Bayrou, said on France Inter radio.

France is a country "adrift, of rulers who no longer hold the helm," he said. He suggested holding early presidential elections instead of waiting until next spring to replace the 'decomposed' leadership.

While protesters bounded onto the court at a Davis Cup tennis tournament and staged a sit-in at a busy supermarket in weekend demonstrations, key players in the governing UMP party met to work out a compromise plan, based on last week's talks with labour leaders.

Chirac kicks off the work-week with what promises to be an intense and potentially piv-



Analysts have warned that only a withdrawal of the controversial law would quell wildcat protests that threaten to spin beyond the control of unions and student groups across France

otal meeting with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and the UMP leaders who led the talks with unions. After that, the president will decide what to do with the law, according to his aides.

Based on that decision, unions were to make their own announcement on whether to stage more of the

protests and strikes that have shut down universities and tangled traffic in recent weeks—and cast a shadow on what is likely to be Chirac's last year in office.

No solution will please everyone. Many predict Chirac will replace the contested article with another type of contract for young people that would satisfy unions. But that would effectively bury the job contract that Villepin so fiercely defended, and be tough for the headstrong premier to swallow—though he insisted last week that he is not ready to resign.

Villepin devised the law to get more young people in the work force as part of broader reforms to drag France into the global economy and shrink massive youth unemployment, but critics say it punishes young people and attacks cherished labour protections.

Their protests have paralysed many schools, and some students have had enough. "Make Love, Not Strikes," read a placard as a few hundred college and high school students circled a Paris square on Sunday in a protest demanding that schools reopen.

Chirac appeared to be seeking to balance the ambitions of Villepin and Sarkozy, an energetic presidential hopeful who has distanced himself from the unpopular law and has sought a starring role in ending the crisis. Agencies

Chirac scraps job law, blow to Villepin

Paris, April 10 (Reuters): French President Jacques Chirac scrapped a youth job law today after weeks of angry unrest, in a climbdown that undermined his Prime Minister and handed protesters victory.

Chirac's decision was a personal blow to Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who had championed the First Job Contract (CPE) as a vital job-creating reform of the French economy but had seen his popularity slump as mass opposition grew.

The government U-turn over the CPE makes it unlikely France will attempt broader reform of its highly-regulated labour market before 2007, some economists said.

Villepin said in a television

address he regretted that the strikes and street protests showed the CPE could not be applied but gave no hints about his own political future, on the line over his handling of the dispute.

"The necessary conditions of confidence and calm are not there, either among young people, or companies, to allow the application of the First Job Contract," Villepin said, adding he would open talks with unions on youth employment.

A protest march in Paris planned for tomorrow should show whether student anger over the contract has abated.

In one sign that student protests could be dwindling, the education ministry said only five universities were

closed or disrupted by strikes and 30 others functioned normally.

Villepin had said the CPE would reduce youth unemployment of 22 per cent. Lack of jobs is the country's number one political issue and a major reason for weeks of rioting in poor suburbs late last year. The "easy hire, easy fire" CPE would have allowed firms to sack workers under 26 without giving a reason.

The Prime Minister's poll ratings plunged as opposition to the measure mounted, damaging his chances of becoming the ruling UMP party's candidate for President in elections in 2007.

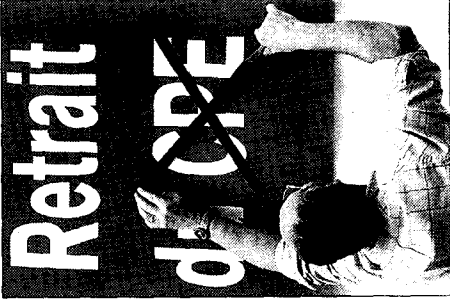
"The President ... has decided to replace article 8 of the equal opportunities law with

measures to help disadvantaged young people find work," the presidency said.

Chirac and Villepin were careful to say that the CPE, part of a wider law on equal opportunities, was being "replaced" rather than repealed. Unions who had opposed the measure, arguing it would create insecurity for young workers, declared victory.

"Perhaps we will drink a drop of champagne. This is an undeniable victory for a social movement," said Gerard Aschieri, secretary of the FSU union. "The CPE is dead and buried. That means the goal of securing the withdrawal of the CPE has been achieved."

said Jean-Claude Maily, secretary general of Force Ouvriere union.



A man places a black cross on a banner calling for the withdrawal of the youth job law in the Paris suburb of Montreuil. (AFP)



Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin in Paris. (AFP)

Protesters
refuse to
compromise

Associated Press

PARIS, April 5. — Demonstrators blocked French roads, rail lines and mail delivery trucks today to demand the repeal of a divisive employment law, and unions vowed they would not compromise that goal in talks with President Mr Jacques Chirac's ruling party.

Massive marches yesterday again drew more than 1 million protesters and brought renewed violence putting the unions in a position of strength as they headed into talks that Mr Chirac's government hoped might offer a way out of the crisis. Mr Chirac said in a Cabinet meeting that he hoped the talks would be constructive, a government spokesman said.

"Students must be able to prepare for exams, and high schoolers must go back to school," the President added. Some universities have been shut down for weeks, and many high schools have been affected as well. Unions were unbending in their demand that the law, which would make it easier to fire young workers, must go. Labour leader Mr Bernard Thibault said the law's repeal was "not negotiable."

06 APR 2006

THE STATESMAN

Controversial labour law is now official in France

AGENCE FRANCE PRESS
PARIS, APRIL 2

A CONTROVERSIAL law on jobs for young people in France that has spawned a series of strikes and sometimes violent protests was published today in the official journal.

The official legitimisation of the youth jobs law, called the First Employment Contract (CPE), came after unions and students rejected a compromise offered by President Jacques Chirac to defuse the crisis.

Chirac's proposal on Friday—to ratify the measure, but suspend its application and bring in two major amendments—was flatly dismissed by unions, student groups and the Left-wing Opposition, and derided by much of the French press.

More determined than ever to fight the law, its opponents have called for a major day of strikes and demonstrations on Tuesday, the latest in two months of protests that have drawn millions onto the streets, with hundreds of people arrested in violence on the fringes of the marches.

France's main trade union, the CGT, warned following Chirac's televised address on Friday that it planned to step up its protests to force the gov-



Anti-labour law protests at the Bastille Square, Paris

ernment to repeal the law, which opinion polls have said is rejected by a large majority of French people.

France has been plunged into a row over the youth employment contract, with many universities closed for a nearly month, and tensions are mounting between pro- and anti-strike students.

Opponents of the contract, which allows employers to fire under 26-year-olds during a two-year trial period without explanation, say it will erode hard-won labour rights and make it more difficult for youths to find long-term jobs.

02 APR 2006

Unpopular labour law reforms

The politically charged public protest in France that peaked in Tuesday's countrywide strike against a new hire and fire legislation is the strongest rebuff to the ruling centre-right coalition's repeated assertions that the country's social model will not be sacrificed at the altar of economic reforms. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's controversial law, which has been upheld by the Constitutional Council, targets workers between 18 and 26 and has been enacted ostensibly to tackle youth unemployment, which stands at twice the national average for all age groups. It is the latest in a succession of perceived pro-market measures such as the move to merge two state-owned energy giants and the decision last year to relax the 35-hour working week (a legacy from the previous socialist government) which allows businesses greater flexibility to negotiate over-time pay and vacations. Against this backdrop of a steady erosion in their rights, it is hardly surprising that trade unions have thrown their weight behind the popular resistance to the Government's attack on the unorganised student community. The new law envisages extension of the probation period for workers from three months to two years, accentuating uncertainty in a climate of low economic growth, high unemployment, and simmering social discontent. Its purported objective is to create jobs for France's youth, its vast underclass in particular, that was at the centre of the riots that rocked the country last November. But such an explanation has only added to the ire of the protesting students and the general public already betrayed by the total absence of debate preceding the enactment of this controversial package. Given its basic objective to single out a section of the workforce for the extended probation, members of the socialist opposition in Parliament had challenged the law as discriminatory and iniquitous. Even trade unions broadly sympathetic to economic reforms have suggested an alternative in the form of a single contract and a guarantee of protection to workers relative to the number of years spent in employment.

In recent years France has been faced with an unprecedented challenge to its position in many of the manufacturing sectors under conditions of globalisation. With a highly welfare-oriented model of social protection like some of the other Western democracies, it is not alone in attempting to achieve competitiveness in labour markets. The political cost of such intervention to incumbent governments has often been considerable. In France, the ruling coalition was shocked by the popular rejection of the European Union constitution last year in what was widely perceived as a referendum on its policies. It is a moot question whether any lessons have been drawn from that verdict and if they are reflected in the formulation of policies. Prime Minister Villepin who is a contender for the centre-right's nomination for the 2007 presidential election must be concerned about the question more than anyone else.

Constitutional Council clears job law

Jacques Chirac likely to promulgate the controversial legislation

Vaiju Naravane

PARIS: France's Constitutional Council on Thursday approved "without reserve" new legislation changing France's existing labour laws, thus strengthening the position of embattled Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and plunging the nation into political uncertainty.

For over four weeks, French streets have been in a state of

ferment with mass demonstrations attended by as many as three million people protesting against a new labour contract, the CPE, that would allow employers to fire under-26 recruits at any time without explanation during a two-year-long trial period.

The Socialist Party had challenged the legality of the contract saying it discriminated against young workers and was

contrary to international labour norms.

More protests threatened

With the Council approving the legislation as being fully in accordance with the Constitution, the Left wing Opposition, trade unions and student bodies have warned of more protests to follow if the President fails to allow a fresh reading of the bill in Parliament. Mr. Chirac is to address the nation late on Friday. He is widely expected to promulgate the legislation.

Government officials and

media commentators were unanimous in predicting that Mr. Chirac will use his evening address to stand by his embattled Prime Minister and announce he will sign the CPE onto the statute books.

"Jacques Chirac has decided to promulgate the CPE," headlined the conservative *Le Figaro* newspaper, while the Left-wing *Liberation* said that by refusing to refer the law back to Parliament -- as the Opposition is demanding -- "Chirac takes on the street." A contract that loosens job protection for under 26 year-

olds, the CPE has turned into one of the worst crises in Mr. Chirac's 11-year presidency -- sparking a protest movement that on Tuesday brought more than a million people onto the streets.

More than half of the country's 84 universities remained shut or disrupted, as well as hundreds of high schools, as students carried out more wild-cat actions -- blocking roads and invading railway tracks. Another day of nationwide strikes and demonstrations is planned for next Tuesday.

01 APR 2008

THE HINDU

Is it a revolution? *France*

ELAINE SCIOLINO profiles the anarchists on the streets of Paris

THE images are unnerving: hooded, swift-footed youths infiltrating protest rallies in the heart of tourist Paris, smashing shop windows, setting cars on fire, beating and robbing passers-by and throwing all sorts of objects at the riot police.

They are called the casseurs — the smashers. With more huge marches planned for next week as part of a continuing protest of a new jobs law, they are the volatile chemical that could ignite an even bigger crisis for the government than the impasse over the law itself.

They create primarily a law-and-order problem, evoking the rioting that gripped the troubled suburbs of French cities for weeks last fall. Pumped up by news coverage, these youths boast of trying to steal cell phones and money and vow to take revenge for the daily humiliation they say they endure from the police.

But the casseurs create an image problem as well, as striking TV images and photographs of youths, some of them masked, and the police using tear gas and water cannons, give the impression of a Paris under siege. "Don't Go to Paris,"

After the broadcast of the first women's game, a short video clip was aired in which Khamenei said: 'Polo is ours. We have let it go. Now we have to reclaim it'

read a headline in the British tabloid *The Sun* last Saturday.

In live coverage of the mass protests in Paris on Tuesday, CNN compared the protests to the 1989 Tiananmen Square

uprising in Beijing. On Wednesday, a CNN correspondent called the comparison "regrettable" during a meeting between Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy and the foreign news media.

What worries the authorities now is that the targets of anger are shifting, moving beyond attacks on property to attacks on people as well. "I am deeply worried because we are seeing an unleashing of violence by 2,000 to 3,000 thugs who come to smash and loot," Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy said in an interview in the popular tabloid *Le Parisien* on Wednesday. "My objective is to avoid mistakes by the police, so that people can protest in safety."

The police and independent analysts say that most of the vandalism and violence that has marred the protests has been by young men, largely immigrants or the children of im-

Strike paralyses France

Millions take part in marches across the country

Vaiju Naravane

PARIS: France came to a complete standstill on Tuesday as a nationwide strike got underway to protest against Government legislation that would allow employers to fire young under-26 recruits at any time, without explanation during a two-year-long trial period.

Unions claimed another success in their escalating campaign against the First Employment Contract (CPE), with three million people taking part in some 130 protest marches across the country.

Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of Paris, Lyon, Marseille and other major towns as schools, universities, post offices, banks and railway and airline services remained severely affected. Thousands of public school teachers from the nursery to the high school level marched with their students.

Clashes in Paris

In the capital, which has seen scenes of extreme violence between police and gangs of youths intent on wreaking havoc, 4,000 policemen and anti-riot forces were called out. Despite that, clashes took place as the rally reached the Republique area of Paris.

Unions have described this as a "make-or-break" situation.

"It is historic. It is unthinkable for the Prime Minister to stay fixed in his position. For us there is just one issue and that is withdrawal of this reform," said Bernard Thibault of the CGT union at the start of the biggest demonstration in Paris.

Unions and student groups are demanding withdrawal of the CPE, but Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin is offering only "adjustments" on its two most contentious aspects: a two-year trial period, and the free hand given to employers during that period to sack under 26-year-olds without explanation. Meanwhile, unions turned down an



A banner reads "Contract for slave" during a protest in Marseille on Tuesday. - PHOTO: REUTERS

invitation from Mr. De Villepin to attend talks on the contested issue.

Though police personnel were deployed in the thousands to head off more violence from out-of-town trouble-makers, a gang of masked youths smashed cafe windows near the Place d'Italie in the south of the capital.

Visiting a police station near the route of the Paris march, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy told officers their task was "first to protect the demonstrators, second, to arrest as many hooligans as possible, and third to protect passers-by and shops. Whatever the provocation, do not yield to it."

29 MAR 2006

THE HINDU

French job law talks at a standstill

Vajju Naravane

PARIS: With negotiations at a standstill between French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and student bodies, trades unions and other opponents of a new type of employment contract, France is bracing itself for total disruption with a general strike called for Tuesday. Known as the CPE, the new contract will have a trial period of two years during which employers would be free to fire recruits without any explanation. Bernard Thibault of the General Labour Confederation

(CGT) union said he hoped the general strike would prove to be a "turning-point" in the three-week long protest movement. "We have not yet reached the climax of the dispute. Each day of action has seen an ever bigger turn-out ... The only solution is withdrawal of the CPE. And we can do it," he told journalists.

Determined

Two days of contacts between the Prime Minister and the unions have led nowhere and protesters are determined to keep up the pressure until the Govern-

The only solution is withdrawal of the CPE, says union leader

ment backs down, withdraws the hated CPE and comes to the table for negotiations. On Saturday, the largest student unions turned down the Prime Minister's offer of a meeting.

This new escalation follows demonstrations in Paris that once again turned violent on Thursday. Parts of the Sorbonne University have been completely destroyed while the Institute for higher

studies and research in the social sciences (EHESS) was vandalised with computers stolen or broken, office furniture smashed and filing cabinets overturned. Student bodies said their members were not involved and police claimed the damage was done by "non-student violent elements" who joined the tail end of demonstrations with the express purpose of doing battle with the police.

The Government claims it is introducing these measures to stimulate job creation. Unions say the new contract discriminates against the young.

French students snub PM's offer for talks

Paris: Four French student leaders have snubbed an invitation from the prime minister to hold talks on a new youth jobs contract, calling instead for a big turnout at protests and a general strike due on Tuesday.

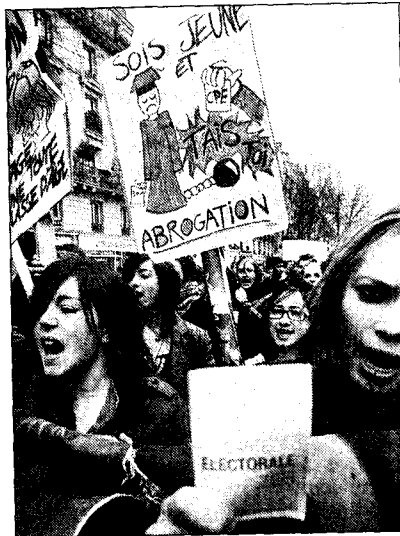
"For two months, young people and working people have expressed their worries and rejection of the First Job Contract that makes a period of precariousness a mandatory phase for an entire generation," said student leader Bruno Julliard, as he read out a letter signed by him and three other leaders.

The leaders, speaking outside Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's office, called for a "massive mobilisation" on Tuesday against the First Job Contract (CPE) for people under 26, which allows employers to fire them without giving a reason during a two-year trial period.

Strikes are expected to disrupt public transport and authorities have warned of likely disruptions to flights. With many schools closed, working parents will need to take time off.

"This Tuesday could be a turning point, things can change day by day," the leader of the CGT communist labour union, Bernard Thibault, told the *Le Journal du Dimanche* weekly.

According to an opinion poll by Ifop for the same weekly, 83% of 962 people questioned want President Jacques Chirac to involve himself with the crisis. Students have blocked dozens of universities and school children and parents joined large protest marches last Saturday, Tuesday and Thursday that degenerated into fights between police and rioters in Paris and other cities. The four student leaders did not go inside for the meeting requested by Villepin, although three moderate student leaders, who have not been involved in the protests, did meet him.



Students in France are opposing a new law that makes it easier for employers to sack young workers

Afterwards, Villepin said he wanted to find a solution. "I want to respond to the two main preoccupations of the young about the CPE—the period of two years and the conditions of ending the contract," he said, adding more meetings with the students were planned next week. Nicolas Sarkozy, widely seen as the main rival to Villepin on the right ahead of 2007 presidential elections, renewed a call for a compromise in a speech to his UMP party. "Twenty years of mass unemployment, 15 years of mediocre economic growth, 10 years of sluggish purchasing power, seven political changes since 1981—how can we blame the young for saying out loud what their parents think?" he said.

"Knowing how to reach a compromise, that is being courageous and useful to France," Sarkozy said. Reuters

27 MAR 2006

THE HINDU OF INDIA

Students snub French PM's offer for talks

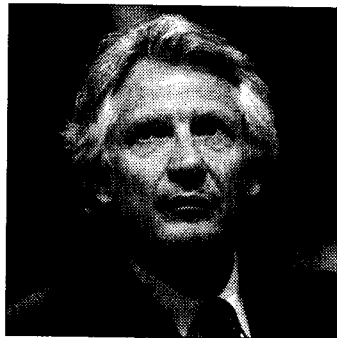
ASSOCIATED Press
Paris, March 25

FRENCH STUDENTS snubbed an invitation to talks on Saturday with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, bringing the prospect of further social unrest and a nationwide strike next week a step closer.

Villepin made a new plea for talks on Saturday, saying he was ready to discuss the most contentious points of a youth jobs plan that has sparked repeated violent protests. He also proposed more scholarships for students to help them between graduation and their first jobs. "I hope that, through dialogue, we can rapidly find a solution," Villepin said.

Earlier in the day, leading student unions had refused to meet Villepin and delivered him a letter instead. The students told journalists they were angry that Villepin said he was ready only to discuss changes to the law — not its withdrawal.

"This is serious: It's a joke to propose dialogue in this manner," said Julie Coudry, president of the Student Confederation. The largest student association, UNEF, also refused talks. The lack of any breakthrough left France facing the prospect of widespread transport disruptions in Tuesday's strike and the possibility of a protracted face-off over the law, which makes it easier for companies to hire —



Dominique de Villepin
Crisis hour

and fire — young workers. Civil aviation authorities said they expect disturbances.

It remained unclear how Villepin would calm the nationwide swell of student protests that has led to blockades at dozens of universities and violent clashes with police. Interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy on Saturday urged unions and the government to reach a compromise.

"I urge all parties to take this outstretched hand because nobody will come out a winner if there are no discussions," he told party members. The impasse over the jobs measure has exposed France's deep divisions about the direction of reform, between those who argue that new approaches are needed and others who insist that change must not come at the expense of the country's social protection.

26 MAR 2006

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

French students say no to talks with PM

PARIS, March 25. — French students snubbed an invitation to talk today with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, bringing the prospect of further social unrest and a nationwide strike next week a step closer.

Mr Villepin made a new plea for talks today, saying he was ready to discuss the most contentious points of a youth jobs plan that has sparked repeated violent protests. He also proposed more scholarships for students to help them between graduation and their first jobs. "I hope that, through dialogue, we can rapidly find a solution," Mr Villepin said.

Earlier in the day, the leading high school and university student unions had refused to meet Mr Villepin and delivered him a letter instead. The students told journalists they were angry that Mr Villepin said he was ready only to discuss changes to the law and not its withdrawal. "This is serious: It's a joke to propose dialogue in this manner," said Ms Julie Coudry, president of the Student Confederation.

The largest student association, UNEF, also refused talks, while two smaller, less representative student unions agreed to meet Mr Villepin. The lack of any breakthrough left France facing the prospect of widespread transport disruptions in Tuesday's strike and the possibility of a protracted face-off over the law. **AP**

26 MAR 2006

772

Blast rocks France varsity as job protests intensify

■ 1 killed, 20 missing ■ Chemistry school at Haute-Alsace destroyed

AGENCIES

Mulhouse, March 24

ONE PERSON died and up to 20 were missing on Friday after an explosion destroyed a research building at a French university in the eastern city of Mulhouse, as protests by students and unions against the new job law got more violent.

A second person was admitted to hospital with serious injuries but his life was not in danger, emergency services said. Around 150 others near the building when it exploded suffered shock or light injuries, a fire brigade officer said.

"There were screams from inside. I saw one wounded person," witness Cedric Ridepi told the LCITY station. The inside of the building was devastated, with fires in several places, he said. Rescue workers faced thick smoke when they arrived at the ENSCMu Institute (National Advanced School of Chemistry) on

Villepin refuses to give in to unions' demand



TALKS BETWEEN French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin (picture left) and trade unions ended in deadlock on Friday after Villepin refused to withdraw his jobs contract. "We are facing a total refusal," said Francois Chereque, secretary general of the CFDT union. "The only thing we've got is that he will see the organisations of high-school and university students, and that meeting will take place — at our insistence — tomorrow morning," said Bernard Thibault of the CGT union.

the university campus, a witness said. Fire brigade captain Bertrand Ley said the blast was heard across the city.

Guy Schultz, president of the Haute-Alsace University to which the institute is affiliated, said the dead man was a professor at the institute. "We don't yet know the cause of this explosion," said Brigitte Ludmann, an official at the regional prefecture which covers Mulhouse, close to

workers, has thrown the conservative government into a crisis and fanned student blockades at dozens of universities.

Youths have been at the forefront of opposition to the law, backed by France's powerful labour unions and parties on the left who sense an opportunity to deeply wound the governing conservatives ahead of next year's presidential and legislative elections.

On Thursday, rioters mixed in with demonstrators turned the park in front of Napoleon's tomb into a battlefield. Youths with baseball bats attacked student protesters and others hurled concrete chunks at riot police, who responded with baton charges and tear gas. At least 60 protesters and police were injured, police said. One demonstrator was hospitalised with serious head injuries, according to the Paris hospital network. A protester injured at Saturday's march remained in a coma.



A student throws a dustbin at a burning car during a protest against France's new job law in Paris on Friday. AP

Chirac walks out as Frenchman speaks English at EU meet

Brussels: French President Jacques Chirac walked out of the first working session of the European Union summit in protest on Thursday after the head of Europe's employers' association, a Frenchman, spoke in English.

When Ernest-Antoine Seilliere, head of the UNICE employers' federation, started his speech to the EU's 25 leaders, Chirac interrupted and asked why he was speaking in English, according to a French official.

"I'm going to speak in English because that is the language of business," replied Seilliere, former chief of the French employers' group, which has been at odds with the government recently.

In a protest that sparked surprise among his EU counterparts, Chirac stood up and left the session, taking finance minister Thierry Breton and foreign minister Philippe Douste-Blazy with him, the official said. Chirac, an ardent defender of the Gallic tongue, and his ministers returned after Seilliere finished his address. Seilliere was warning against protectionism in his speech, but French officials said Chirac's decision to leave had nothing to do with the content, only the language.

The incident, confirmed by French officials, came on top of a row over alleged protectionism by Paris, which dominated leaders' comments to the media but in typical EU fashion was not mentioned directly in the summit chamber.

Later a French diplomat speaking on condition of anonymity because Chirac had not yet addressed the issue denied that the French president had officially left the meeting. "He didn't leave the summit, he just briefly made himself absent."



The surprise walkout by Chirac, confirmed by French officials, came on top of a row over alleged protectionism by Paris, which dominated leaders' comments to the media but in typical European Union fashion was not mentioned directly in the summit chamber

home—the use of English terms in the language of Moliere itself. And the EU has bulged from six members, of which three spoke French, to 25 now, many of whom increasingly use English. Questions at the EU press briefings used to be exclusively French, now English dominates.

The EU provides plenty of guarantees for all official languages of the member states and has an army of translators to back it up. Even if the language issue was important enough for Chirac to walk out, some barely noticed.

"That was not dramatic at all," said Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson. Chirac's sulk highlighted divisions that have plunged European Union heads of state into wrangling over 'econom-

ic patriotism'. The two-day Brussels summit has been riven by the protectionist policies of France, Spain and Poland. The meeting was due to focus on greater economic cooperation and reform, but has been dominated by the row. France has come under attack from the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy, who say it is failing to uphold the rules of the single market by protecting its firms from foreign takeover.

Britain wants to open up Europe's state-dominated energy market in particular to greater competition but Chirac is refusing to cooperate.

The row is so serious some at the summit question the future of the European 'project'.

Chirac's walkout meant he missed Mr Seilliere, head of UNICE, the umbrella organisation for business leaders in the EU, urging leaders to 'resist national protectionism in order to avoid a negative domino effect'. German chancellor Angela Merkel told France it must 'not just think nationally'.

And Europe Minister Douglas Alexander attacks the French stance in a German newspaper article published today.

He says: "It is not a patriotic act to protect your own industries from international competition. Indeed in the long term it damages their competitiveness." Alexander warned that a 'fortress Europe' could quickly become a 'jobless Europe'. On the prospect of a clash between the 'economic patriotism' of some countries and the Britain's desire for economic liberalisation, Blair's spokesman said: "We are in favour of maximum liberalisation ... as quickly as possible."

Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi attacked Mr Chirac's role in a merger of two French energy giants. Undeterred by the row, several EU leaders are plotting to revive the EU constitution less than a year after it was rejected by referendums in France and the Netherlands. Daily Mail & Agencies

France students call strike

Paris, March 20: French trade unions and student organisations called today for a one-day general strike on March 28 to pressure the conservative government to withdraw a new youth employment law they say undermines French labour law.

"All the unions are calling to make March 28 a day of demonstrations, strikes and work stoppages," said Rene Valadon, confederal secretary of the Force Ouvriere union.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin has rejected suggestions to withdraw the law and offered to hold talks with his critics on ways to improve it.

Over half a million people demonstrated on Saturday against the law, which makes it easier for employers to fire

workers under 26 years old.

Earlier, President Chirac came to the aid of his embattled government today as it dug in for a long fight to keep the law.

Chirac, who until today had watched from the sidelines as Villepin has become engulfed by the middle-class revolt, told opponents of the first jobs law (CPE) that it would stay in force. "It is essential to take steps for youth employment," he said.

"Questions and doubts are being expressed and that is wholly legitimate, but they must not lead us to do nothing."

Chirac's words were comfort for Villepin as he sought to defuse anger that has united students, unions and the Left-wing Opposition. Opinion

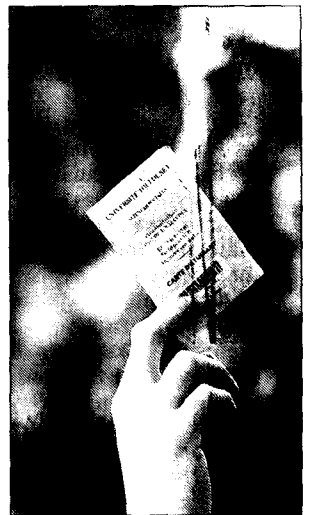
polls suggested that 60 per cent of the country wants the government to scrap the CPE.

The main criticism of the law is that it allows companies to dismiss workers under 26 without giving formal reasons.

Villepin told business leaders that he would stand firm. "Laws of the republic, voted democratically by parliament, must be obeyed," he said. He is said by his aides to be convinced that he can face down the national protest.

Villepin has won support from heads of some of France's biggest corporations, and business leaders have given lukewarm support to the scheme, partly because they want an overhaul of French labour laws.

THE TIMES, LONDON, AND REUTERS



A student holds up his identity card during a vote on the general strike in Toulouse University. (AFP)

21 MAR 2006

THE

Job law protests spread across France

REUTERS
Paris, March 19

THE FRENCH government looked set on Sunday to resist demands, backed by hundreds of thousands of protesters in marches across the country, to withdraw a law that cuts job security for young workers.

Trade union and student leaders gave Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin a 48-hour ultimatum to scrap the First Job Contract (CPE) or face more unrest like Saturday's mass protests, including a possible general strike.

The turnout at marches nationwide was 1.5 million with up to 400,000 of them in Paris, organisers said. Police

said 500,000 people marched and 167 were arrested in Paris after rioting that followed the march. Some 17 protesters and seven members of the security forces were injured.

The day after the protests broken glass littered some streets in eastern Paris, along with the hulks of three burned out cars. In Paris's Latin Quarter there was smashed glass and graffiti after a late night clash near the prestigious Sorbonne University.

But there was no hint of a government climbdown and Villepin looked set to stand firm, believing the law could significantly reduce unemployment, the top social issue, before presidential elections in 2007.

"To hold on would seem to be Villepin's leitmotiv ... even after a week that has seen the reinforcement of the struggle against the CPE and a day of major protests," said a signed editorial in *Le Journal du Dimanche*.

Under the law aimed at cutting youth unemployment, employers will be able to fire workers under 26 without giving a reason at any time during a two-year trial period. Opponents say that will create a generation of disposable workers with no security.

Government spokesman Jean-Francois Cope said after some 160 protest marches on Saturday that the government wanted dialogue but gave no sign it was preparing to withdraw or sus-

pend the law, as unions, student groups and left-wing political parties demand.

"Beyond the passions of the moment, don't we all have an interest in a dialogue?" Cope said. "The door is open."

That offer was only for talks on increasing job protection for young people within the CPE context rather than opening the way to the possibility that the law itself could be abandoned, *Le Parisien* newspaper said.

Fresh graffiti on walls at the Sorbonne on Sunday said, "If everyone disobeys, no one will be able to command." Another, painted onto a police barricade blocking access to the university, read: "Police everywhere, justice nowhere."



Students protest against the youth job law in Paris on Sunday.

EPA

Paris: Same sight, different cry

2006



A student lobbs stones at police in Paris on Sunday. (AFP)

Paris, March 19 (Reuters):

The sight of thousands of students marching in Paris recalls the May 1968 revolt, but the image is deceptive. Their worried calls for jobs have nothing in common with the exuberant cries of four decades ago.

Banging drums and waving banners reading "Hands off our labour law", tens of thousands marched through Paris yesterday urging the government to withdraw a youth labour contract in favour of more advantageous older laws.

The protests defending the generous worker protection system — a stand also popular among the trade unionists who joined the students — could not have been more different from the radical calls to change bourgeois society in 1968.

Back then, students chanted "Be realistic, ask for the impossible!" and "Workers of the world, have fun!" Yesterday's protesters can hardly believe their parents marched along shouting: "The boss needs you. You don't need him."

Francois Harve, a 52-year-old teacher who marched as a student in 1968 and was back on the street on Saturday, said

1968



A protester throws stone at a police van in Paris in 1968

yesterday's protesters might seem conservative compared to then. "But I have no problem with being considered a 'social reactionary'. I just want to maintain the social progress we have achieved," Harve said, standing near a banner reading "Life-long job insecurity? No thanks!"

"The reasons to march now are very different. Back in 1968, it was an anti-authoritarian protest. We were against the war in Vietnam and wanted to change society. Today, the movement is emerging out of a situation of unemployment and insecurity."

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin hopes his CPE (first job contract) will help cut unemployment in a country where almost one in four young people has no job.

But the protesters say the CPE, which lets firms fire workers under 26 without explanation in their first two years on the job, will only make the situation worse for young people.

Marie-Paule Chavanat, 55, said the protesters' social situation today seemed much worse than four decades ago.

In May 1968, student strikes in Paris escalated into a crisis that threatened President Charles de Gaulle's government as workers staged a general strike and students fought running battles with police in Paris's historic Latin Quarter.

"Back then, there was no unemployment. It was a situation of abundance. The protests were about liberties and sexual freedom. Today, the protests emerge out of a situation of social precariousness," Chavanat said. "I didn't really feel concerned then. I thought the protests were for people who had all. But today, there is a real problem."

Not '68, but French youths hear similar cry to rise up

The French government seems to fear its people, and the people seem to fear change, says **ELAINE SCIOLINO**

ONCE again, students are on the barricades in France, evoking comparisons to the uprising of May 1968. But this is not a revolt. It is not 1968 revisited.

Certainly, students are taking to the streets and shutting down universities, and tear gas penetrated the heart of Paris. On Thursday, hundreds of thousands of protesters, most of them students, filled the streets and marched in cities throughout France. With teachers, workers, labour union leaders, the jobless, even retirees beginning to

tions coincide with a time when the French government seems to be in free fall. In the face of the unrest, President Jacques Chirac and his ministers have been reduced to pleading for dialogue. The government also seemed ineffectual during last fall's riots, and was battered last May when French voters rejected a new EU constitution.

In contrast to the fall riots, which were centered in immigrant-heavy, working-class suburbs, these protests are a mostly middle-class phenomenon that seems to be spreading.

In Paris on Thursday, demonstrators paralysed traffic for hours as they marched toward government offices. In the upscale Seventh Arrondissement, a small group of masked protesters hurled rocks at anti-riot police officers from a small park just a few blocks from the prime minister's office.

In Rennes, the police used tear gas against youths. In Bordeaux, protesters disrupted rail traffic. In Nancy, youths threw stones at the police. In Toulouse, the university was closed after clashes. Large protests were

even appeared in Paris Match. "We had an idealistic vision."

The current problem stems from a flawed educational system that churns out young people who lack the necessary skills to get jobs, combined with labour laws that discourage job formation because they require hugely expensive benefits and job-security packages that make it nearly impossible for employers to fire anyone.

The headquarters of UNEF, the student organisation, in a gritty section of northeast Paris reflects the disparate nature of



oin in, a larger nationwide protest is planned for Saturday.

And the images of cheering students occupying the 17th-century Sorbonne, the birthplace of the '68 revolt, last Friday night called forth memories of that exhilarating, romantic leftist youth movement.

But the students' goal this time is far more modest. They want the abolition of a new law, the First Employment Contract, which aims to increase hiring by allowing employers to fire new workers without cause in their first two years.

"We're not back there in '68," said Nadjet Boubakeur, a 26-year-old history major at a public university and a leader of the student movement UNEF. "Our revolt is not to get more. It's to keep what we have."

Nonetheless, the demonstra-

Students clash with the police and paralyse normal life in upscale sections of Paris

'The students are afraid they have fewer opportunities than their parents. But their parents are also afraid of unemployment in the future. The result is that society is politicised, but in a negative way'

also held in Marseille, Montpellier, Lyon, Lille, Clermont-Ferrand, Limoges, Angers, Nantes and Strasbourg.

It is a moment of street theatre and fierce debate, with sweeping commentaries about watersheds and crossroads and references to the unrest that shook Paris in May 1968. That was a time of student dreams and of student revolt aimed at transforming an authoritarian, elitist system. It pushed 10 million workers to go on strike in France and came close to forcing de Gaulle from power.

"Sixty-eight was a mass revolutionary movement to create a socialist society," said Henri Weber, now a member of the European Parliament, who was a Communist leader of the 1968 revolt and whose photo protesting in front of the Sorbonne

the movement. The walls are lined with posters advocating causes like new schools, an end to the war in Iraq, a boycott of McDonald's, a ban on smoking. The air is filled with smoke. The motto on UNEF fliers protesting the new labor law is hardly a call to action. "Against Precariousness," it reads.

But the students have succeeded in creating an open-ended standoff between the government and a large swath of the people in which both sides seem to be driven by fear.

The government seems to fear its people; the people seem to fear change.

France likes to think of itself as revolutionary. But it is run like a big corporation with a powerful president at the head. Any change in the distribution of power can set off a crisis. Parliam-

ent is seen as too weak to serve as a check to that power. Protests are one of the only ways to get the government's attention.

"This is a moment of fear, anxiety and malaise in France that touches all ages and classes," said Anne Muxel, director of the research centre at the Paris Institute for Political Studies. "The students are afraid that they have fewer opportunities than their parents. But their parents are also afraid of unemployment, of the future. The result is that society is politicised, but in a negative way."

On Thursday, as students stepped up their street protests, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who has presidential ambitions but whose approval rating has plummeted in recent weeks, called himself "open to dialogue" to "improve" the employment plan under the constraints of the law.

The opposition Socialists have joined forces with those condemning the law, with Francois Hollande, the party head, dismissing de Villepin's words as platitudes. President Chirac is seen as a spent force, even by some in his inner circle.

"The protests are a symptom of a great malaise with no chance for change before the presidential election," said Alain Duhamel, a leading political commentator. "The majority of the French are passionate in their distrust of market forces and in their refusal to embrace flexibility. And the majority of the young are convinced that they will not live as well as their parents."

The students have vowed to continue their struggle until the government backs down. Those marching voiced a variety of complaints about the new labour law. "This contract is like living beneath a guillotine," said Charlotte Billaud, 21, a political science student in the third year of her five-year programme at the Sorbonne. "When you can be fired without reason, you do not dare criticise your boss or join a union."

If there is a historical resonance, it is not with 1968 as much as with 1994, when the prime minister at the time, Edouard Balladur, clashed with students over a minimum wage law. Then, like now, there were street demonstrations, tear gas, damage to property, injuries and accusations that the measure was discriminatory.

Politics played a role. Balladur, like de Villepin today, had his eyes on the presidency, and he chose to back down on the law. Weakened, he was eliminated in the first round of the 1995 election.

A cartoon of de Villepin this week in the left-leaning newspaper Liberation showed him looking in the mirror and seeing the face of Balladur.

The New York Times

পুনরাবৃত্তি নয়, ফরাসি ছাত্র-বিক্ষোভ ৬৮-র ছায়াই

প্যারিস, ১৭ মার্চ: আটত্রিশ বছর আগের এক বসন্তে একটা প্রজন্ম মনে করেছিল: যে পৃথিবীতে না থেকে মরার নিকমতটুকু অর্জন করতে হয় একঘোষেমতো মনে নেওয়ার বিনিময়ে, সেই পৃথিবীর কাছে আমাদের কিছু চাওয়ার নেই।

ওই 'পচাগলা' পৃথিবীটাকে ছুড়ে ফেলা ছাড়া আর কোনও বিকল্প ভাবতে পারেনি তারা।

আটত্রিশ বছর পরের প্রজন্ম বলছে: "ভিলপার্ন সরকার আমাদের ভবিষ্যত স্থিতিশীলতা কেড়ে নিতে চাইছে। আমরা কাজ চাই, চাই নিরাপদ চাকরি।" বিপ্লবায়নার আঁতুত্বের ফ্রান্সে আবার রাস্তায় নেমেছে ছাত্রেরা। ছাত্র-পুলিশ সংঘর্ষে কাল শুধু প্যারিসেই আটক করা হয়েছে ১৮৭ জন ছাত্রকে। সেই সর্বোদম বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়কে ঘিরেই জলে উঠেছে আগুন। ১৯৬৮-র উত্তাল ছাত্র-শ্রমিক আন্দোলনের স্মৃতি তাই ফিরে আসছে বারবার। সেই সঙ্গে বড় অনিবার্য ভাবে চোখে পড়ছে বদলে যাওয়ার সময়ের চিহ্নগুলোও। গত দু-বছরে ফ্রান্সে জনবিক্ষোভ কম হয়নি। ধর্মীয় প্রতিষ্ঠানগুলোর অধিকার চেয়ে আন্দোলন করেছে সংখ্যালঘুরা। কিছু দিন আগেও অ-শ্বেতাঙ্গ যুববিক্ষোভ কম নাকাল করেনি ফরাসি সরকারকে। সেই বিক্ষোভ বেআরু করে দিয়েছিল ফরাসিদের সুপ্ত জাতিবিশ্বেষ। সঙ্গে ছিল অর্গনৈতিক অনিশ্চয়তা আর হতাশাবোধ। এ বার কিন্তু প্রতিবাদের চল ফরাসি সমাজের মূলপ্রবাহেই।

প্রতিবাদের কেন্দ্রে রয়েছে নয়। শ্রম আইন, সিপিই। যে আইনে কোনও কারণ না দেখিয়েই ২৬-অনুর্ধ্ব কর্মীদের যখন তখন ছিঁটে ফেলার অধিকার বর্তাবে। জনমত সন্নীক্ষায় প্রকাশ, ৬৮ শতাংশ মানুষের ধারণা, এই আইন বাতিল হওয়া উচিত। ছাত্র বিক্ষোভ সংগঠিত হচ্ছিল ৭ মার্চ থেকেই। গত কাল দেশ জুড়ে প্রায় তিন লক্ষ ছাত্র প্রতিবাদ মিছিলে যোগ দেয়। আপাতত ফ্রান্সের ৮৭টি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের ৬৪টিতেই আন্দোলন মিছিলে যোগ দেন। প্যারিস-শিস' আর ড্রামের আওয়াজ দিয়ে শুরু হওয়া মিছিল যে ক্রমে হিংস্র হয়ে উঠবে তা প্রথমে বোঝা যায়নি। পুলিশ জড়ো হতেই বাডতে থাকে উত্তেজনা। কাঁদানে গ্যাস আর জল ফেলার জন্য ফরাসিরা



ফ্রান্সের ছাত্রদের বিক্ষোভ। — রয়টার্স

প্রত্যাহার ছাড়া কিছুই তাবছেন না তাঁরা। বুনো জুলিয়াড ৬৮-র ড্যানিয়েল কোহন-বেটিউ বা রুডি ডুস্কো নন। দুনিমাকে বদলে দেওয়ার স্বপ্ন তাঁর নেই। তিনি শুধু বলতে চান, আমাদের বিদ্রোহ আরও কিছু পাওয়ার জন্য নয়। যা আছে, সেটাকেই ধরে রাখার জন্য।

মোকাবিনায় মলোটু ককটেল, পাথর, চেয়ার-টেবিল, রাস্তার রেলিং, বাদ যায়নি কিছুই। ইতিহাসপ্রসিক লেফট ব্যাকের দুটি কাঁকে তুলনু করে দেওয়া হয়, জ্বালিয়ে দেওয়া হয় বইয়ের দোকান। প্যারিসের অভিজাত বাজার সেভরে-বাবিলোন মোটোতেও পুলিশের সঙ্গে খণ্ডযুদ্ধ বেধে যায় ছাত্রদের। স্কোর মধ্যে সর্বোদম বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় পুরোপুরি চলে গিয়েছিল বিক্ষুব্ধদের দখলে। রাস্তায় রাস্তায় তখন জ্বলছে গাড়ি, সংবাদপত্রের কিস্ক। আহুড়ে পড়ছে প্রতিরোধের স্লোগান। একই ছবি ন্যান্সি, তুলো, বোর্দো অঞ্চলেও।

মাঝ রাতের পরে পরিস্থিতি নিয়ন্ত্রণে আসায় সরকার এখন আপাত ভাবে খুশি। স্বরাষ্ট্রমন্ত্রী আর শহরের পুলিশপ্রধান প্রায় এক সুরে বলার চেষ্টা করেছেন, কিছু বিক্ষুব্ধ র্যাডিকাল, নে-রাজবাদী গোষ্ঠী আর ছিটকে গুন্ডার উস্কানি ছাড়া ঘটনা এত দূর গড়াতেই পারত না।

সরকার কিন্তু মনে মনে প্রমাদ গনছে। ১৯৬৮ অবধি যাওয়ার দরকার নেই। ১৯৬৬ আর ১৯৯৪-এর ছাত্র বিক্ষোভের কথা তাদের ভালই মনে আছে। জাক শিরাক বা এদুয়াদ বালাদুর পিছু হটেতেই বাধা হয়েছিলেন এবং তার ফল তাঁদের রাজনৈতিক ভাবে ভুগতেও হয়েছিল। প্রধানমন্ত্রী দমিনিক ভিলপার্ন আগামী বছর প্রেসিডেন্ট নির্বাচনে দাঁড়াতে ইচ্ছুক। ফলে তাঁর পক্ষে এই পরীক্ষাটা উত্তরে যাওয়া খুই জরুরি। বিশেষত যখন বিরোধী দলগুলো সুযোগ বুঝে ছাত্রদের সমর্থন করছে।

আগামী কাল ছাত্র ও শ্রমিক ইউনিয়নগুলি একত্রে মিছিল করবে। সেখানে প্রায় ১০ লাখ লোক জড়ো হবে বলে মনে করা হচ্ছে। প্রেসিডেন্ট জাক শিরাক, ভিলপার্ন সর্কলেই বলছেন, ছাত্রদের সঙ্গে আলোচনায় বসতে তাঁরা রাজি। কিন্তু ভিলপার্ন সিপিই প্রত্যাহারে রাজি নন। আবার ছাত্র নেতা বুনো জুলিয়াড বলে দিয়েছেন, সিপিই প্রত্যাহার ছাড়া কিছুই তাবছেন না তাঁরা। বুনো জুলিয়াড ৬৮-র ড্যানিয়েল কোহন-বেটিউ বা রুডি ডুস্কো নন। দুনিমাকে বদলে দেওয়ার স্বপ্ন তাঁর নেই। তিনি শুধু বলতে চান, আমাদের বিদ্রোহ আরও কিছু পাওয়ার জন্য নয়। যা আছে, সেটাকেই ধরে রাখার জন্য।

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obs: students to step up pressure

40 French universities affected by partial or total shutdown due to agitation



BREWING CONFRONTATION: Riot police stand guard at a police station where arrested students were kept near the Sorbonne University in Paris on Monday. — PHOTO: REUTERS

PARIS: French students and unions vowed to step up the pressure over a contested youth jobs contract on Monday, after Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin refused to give way to a growing movement of opposition.

Nearly 40 universities across the country were hit by partial or total shutdown, ahead of three days of planned street demonstrations on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Tensions were reported between strikers and students wishing to continue their studies, and the authorities in some establishments were arranging secret ballots to determine the balance of opinion.

On Sunday, Mr. Villepin appeared on national television in a bid to defuse the growing sense of

crisis over the First Employment Contract (CPE) — an open-ended contract for under 26 year-olds which can be terminated within the first two years without explanation.

New guarantees

The Prime Minister said the law — which cleared its way through Parliament last week — would come into effect as planned, but he promised new “guarantees” over training and severance pay.

Opponents on Monday angrily condemned Mr. Villepin’s intervention, and promised to maintain their campaign till the CPE is dropped.

“He said that the law will be applied. My reply is that the street will speak. You can’t put out a forest fire

with a glass of water The mobilisation will grow. The Prime Minister has been weakened, and if we push a bit more he will give way,” said Bruno Julliard of the UNEF student union.

High-school students and young people no longer in education were being urged to join the protests, Mr. Julliard said.

The CPE is intended to encourage employers to take on young people by removing the fear that they could be stuck with a costly long-term commitment if the worker proves unsuitable or if economic conditions deteriorate.

But opponents — who include all the left-wing political parties — argue that the contract will be used for cheap-rate labour and make it har-

der for young people to get long-term employment.

The protest movement brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets last Tuesday, followed by sit-ins and strikes and most of France’s 85 universities.

In a highly symbolic development, riot police on Saturday morning used force to evacuate the historic Sorbonne university in Paris, centre of the May 1968 uprising. The Sorbonne remained closed on Monday with a large police contingent stationed outside.

France has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe, with more than one in two out of work in some of the poor high-immigration city suburbs that were hit by November’s riots. — AFP

French PM's labour law sparks off student outrage

Paris: Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin vowed to press on with a new labour law that has fanned broad protests, pleading with the French to accept reforms to a brittle job market saddled with double-digit unemployment rates among the young.

Villepin, speaking in a prime-time interview on Sunday, vowed to work with labour leaders to defuse tensions that swelled a day earlier when riot police stormed a Paris university to remove some 200 students holed up inside to protest the new law. They fear it will hurt job security.

Villepin, facing his toughest labour test yet since taking office last June, said France needs to catch up with reforms already enacted in neighbouring countries and reduce youth unemployment rates now at 23%. In some troubled suburbs—like those where a wave of rioting broke out last fall—the figure is as high as 50%, he said.

Parliament on Thursday approved a law creating the “first job contract,” which would make it easier for employers to hire and fire young workers during the first two years of employment.



The job contract will make it easier for employers to hire and fire young workers in the first two years of service

The measure is to take effect in April.

Conservatives argue the greater flexibility will spur companies to bring on more young workers. Critics fear the law will provide less job security for youths and erode France's generous labour protections.

“I will not accept leaving these youths on the side of the road,” he said, offering a string of rhetorical questions. “How do we envisage that France retain its place and keep its social model if we are unable to plan the necessary changes?”

Villepin, the driving force behind the jobs plan, has faced calls from fellow conservatives to reassure youths that they will be eligible for access to bank loans, housing and government compensation after the law is enacted.

“Villepin alone against everybody,” read Sunday's front-page headline in the weekly tabloid *Le Parisien Dimanche*.

The left-leaning opposition, leading labour unions and France's biggest student groups have urged Villepin to withdraw the measure and start from scratch with new talks. AP

Police end Paris student protests

Paris, March 11 (Reuters): French riot police used tear-gas to break up a three-day sit-in at Paris's Sorbonne university today, stirring up memories of May 1968, as angry students warned of a mounting challenge to government labour reforms.

Students had occupied the prestigious faculty, the centre of France's 1968 riots, since Wednesday to protest against the youth jobs plan, which has ent conservative Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's popularity tumbling.

French media said interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy had cut short a trip to the French West Indies because of the protests, the worst disturbances since weeks of suburban riots ending in November focused attention on poverty

and led to curfews.

Police stormed the Sorbonne just before 0300 GMT, forcing out around 200 students staging the protest and arresting 11 people, a police spokesman said.

Two people were being treated for minor injuries including a photographer who was struck as demonstrators threw bottles, chairs and fire extinguishers at the police.

Police moved into the university building after students had also blocked off the square outside the Sorbonne as well as the Boulevard St Michel in the heart of the Latin Quarter.

Thousands of people have protested this week at Villepin's plan to introduce a flexible First Employment Contract (CPE), which critics

say will allow employers to hire and fire young workers more easily, with students demonstrating across France.

"We have the impression the government has decided to respond to the student movement with truncheons and repression," Bruno Julliard, president of students' union UNEF. "If the government wants to continue using force to wage a battle for the CPE, as Villepin says, then we are heading towards a serious conflict."

Education minister Gilles de Robien said protesters had destroyed books and questioned whether all were real students. "When I see young people, students, or people who claim to be students, starting to destroy our national heritage, which has been

built up over centuries, destroying old books, smashing objects, vandalising the building, then I think it is right that the Sorbonne should be evacuated," he said.

Julliard denied reports that some of the protesters included disaffected showbusiness workers who have orchestrated repeated demonstrations across France for the past three years to campaign for better working conditions.

After fostering a decisive, no-nonsense image when he was promoted to revive conservative President Jacques Chirac's ailing government last year, Villepin has seen his once solid popularity hit the new employment plan.

An opinion poll published showed a seven-point fall in his approval rating.



Students (right) confront policemen outside the Sorbonne University, Paris. (AFP)

Chirac red-flags scrap warship

SUNDAY, IN INDIA



Jacques Chirac

Paris, Feb. 15 (Agencies): President Jacques Chirac today ordered a French warship bound for a scrapyard in Gujarat to return to French territorial waters pending a final decision on how to dispose of the asbestos-laden vessel.

The statement by Chirac's office came after France's top administrative court ordered the suspension of the transfer of the aircraft carrier Clemenceau to the shipbreaking yard at Alang in the western state.

India's Supreme Court had already banned the 27,000-tonne decommissioned warship from entering the country's territorial waters pending a final decision on whether the Clemenceau's asbestos represents a health hazard to Indian scrapyard workers.

"The President has decided to put this ship in French waters on a position of stand-by which offers all security guarantees until a definitive solution for its dismantling is found," said the statement released by Chirac's official Elysee Palace.

Chirac, whose state visit to India on Sunday has been overshadowed by legal wrangling over the Clemenceau, also ordered a fresh study to determine exactly how much asbestos remains on board the carrier.

The ship's journey has been beset by troubles, including a delay of more than a week after Egypt ordered the vessel inspected before it could cross Suez Canal.

The Clemenceau, once a symbol of French naval prowess, was scheduled to reach Alang early next month. It left France on December 31 and has been waiting in the northern Indian Ocean for weeks, pending a decision by the Supreme Court to allow it in.

At the crux of the problems were varying

estimates about how much asbestos was still on board the decommissioned ship. Environmentalists protesting against France's decision to send the ship to India for scrapping say they believe there is between 500 and 1,000 tonnes of asbestos on board the ship, risking the health of Indian workers.

French officials say they have removed most of the asbestos, leaving only 45 tonnes needed to make the ship seaworthy.

France's top administrative court issued a fast-track ruling today ordering the transfer to be suspended, in response to complaints by Greenpeace and three anti-asbestos groups. It also sent the case to a Paris administrative court for a detailed legal ruling, which could take up to six months.

Chirac said he hoped the European Union would consider strengthening Europe's capacity to dispose of pollution, and that leaders worldwide would accelerate efforts to improve international rules about waste disposal.

"The government will now examine ways of reforming France's policy on exporting waste materials. It will also create a panel of ministers to study how to manage maritime wreckage with partner countries," Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's office said.

France had earlier argued that it had few choices on what to do with the hulking 26,700-tonne vessel, with defence minister Michele Alliot-Marie saying there were no suitable scrapyards in Europe.

Greenpeace France director Pascal Husaing welcomed the decision to recall the ship. "This is a victory for international law, a victory for Indian workers, and a victory for workers all across Asia," he said.

STAND-BY, IN FRANCE



Clemenceau

France to take back toxic waste

ALANG (Gujarat), Feb. 8.

Seeking to allay the apprehensions of environmentalists, French ambassador Mr Dominique Gerard today said his country was "committed" to taking back all the toxic material that had come out of its decommissioned aircraft carrier le Clemenceau if the Indian government or the Supreme Court wanted that. Mr Gerard, who surveyed the Alang yard today, said that it would be the first time that a ship would be dismantled after being depolluted or decontaminated.

"He said they would send a detailed inventory of the ship to the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee by tomorrow. The diplomat also made it clear that they would respect the Supreme Court's decision on the matter.

"If deemed better by the (Supreme) court or the (Indian) government then we are prepared to take back the toxic waste back to France."

Mr Gerard said: "The contract says that the propriety of the ship will be transferred when the ship is demolished so we keep responsibility of the ship". The ambassador said that France saw the endeavour as an "economic" issue which presented a great opportunity for "technology transfer" to India.

— PTI

THE STATESMAN

A year of turmoil for France and Chirac

Vaiju Naravane

THE YEAR 2005 was one of rude awakening for France and an *annus horribilis* for its President, Jacques Chirac. The entire year was dogged by poor economic performance, persistently high unemployment figures, and a runaway public deficit well above the European Union's prescribed levels. France, it has become increasingly clear, is suffering from a collective depression characterised by a shrinking withdrawal from the challenges and opportunities thrown up by a fast moving, globalised world calling for quick, innovative responses, speed, mobility, and above all flexibility.

As the May 2005 referendum to ratify the European Constitution approached, calls went up to preserve the French "model" of high government subsidies for health and pensions, a 35-hour work week, job security, and generous unemployment benefits. And this, in the face of overwhelming evidence that the country, already living on borrowed money, would not be able to sustain those payments into the next decades and that today's working generations would be unable to shoulder the burden of a huge, ageing population.

The French President's first big jolt came when a convincing majority of the French (over 52 per cent) rejected the proposed constitution, describing it as a neo-liberal threat that would expose the French to unfair cut-throat competition from economies like those in Eastern Europe, where labour is considerably cheaper and taxation significantly lower than in France. President Chirac had staked his entire reputation on the success of the referendum, even going to the extent of describing those opposed to the project as "anti-European." The French public's firm rejection of the treaty cast a shadow on the last two years of his presidency with an increasing number of people questioning his ability and even right to lead the country.

Soon after the referendum, amid cries of foul play, Paris lost its bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games to London. Both Tony Blair and Mr. Chi-

Poor economic performance, high unemployment, racial tensions, rejection of the European Constitution – the French had little to cheer in 2005.

rac had made the journey to Singapore to present their respective projects. Mr. Chirac suffered from unfavourable comparisons with Mr. Blair who appeared articulate, dynamic, and young before his rather heavy-handed, old-fashioned rhetoric.

Another reversal in the shape of a mini-stroke quickly followed. The President's week-long hospitalisation and even longer stay away from the public eye finally dented what little hold he appeared to have left over the popular imagination. At 73, Mr. Chirac appeared both old and adrift, incapable of steering the ship of state.

His illness prompted a tough succession struggle between his Prime Minister and protégé, Dominique de Villepin, and the Interior Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, who heads the ruling centre-right UMP party.

Rioting by immigrant youth

Political pundits began predicting a rough ride for Mr. Chirac should he attempt a third term in 2007. But not even the keenest political observer could have predicted the political earthquake that hit France last November, when bands of enraged suburban immigrant youth (mainly North African Arab and black) went on a three-week-long rampage to shake the French Republic to its very foundations.

The immediate cause of the rioting was the accidental death by electrocution of two teenagers fleeing police checks combined with anger over tasteless remarks by Mr. Sarkozy on how he would rid the suburbs of delinquent "scum." The sense of outrage in the large suburban ghettos surrounding the capital spilled out into the streets. It was an entire generation of youngsters shouting out its anger and despair at the step-

motherly treatment at the hands of the Republic.

The three-week-long spree of violence and the French Government's rather ham fisted response brought in much criticism from abroad. It set off a national debate with intense soul searching on questions such as the values of the French Republic, immigration, and integration.

France is fiercely set against multiculturalism and does not recognise racial, religious or linguistic differences in its population. No statistics are kept about colour, religion or faith. Most French people would argue that one of the Republic's main virtues is that it is officially colour blind and secular. Under French law, every citizen has a right to equal treatment regardless of race, religion or sex and the census does not record a citizen's ethnicity. The civil service is not allowed to hire on the basis of background. State schools bar all students from wearing religious signs or clothing, whether it is the Jewish kippa, the Sikh turban or the Muslim headscarf.

But in reality there is a yawning gap between theory and practice. These egalitarian laws have failed to bridge the social gap and deliver equal economic opportunities to white and coloured: unemployment rates among France's Muslim and African minorities are twice the national average. In some of the riot-torn suburbs, with big immigrant populations, unemployment is running at up to 40 per cent, compared with 10 per cent among the population at large, which is predominantly white and Judeo-Christian.

In Parliament, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin made a rousing speech in defence of France's republican values: "France is not a country like others," he concluded. "It will never accept that citizens live separately, with different opportunities and with unequal futures. For

more than two centuries, the republic has found a place for everyone by elevating the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. We must remain faithful to this promise and to republican demands."

The riots of 2005, the worst France has known since the student uprising of 1968, opened a veritable Pandora's Box. France was forced to acknowledge that despite its glorious laws, society remains deeply racist. Studies have revealed discrimination in almost all spheres from employment to housing to the way people are treated by administrative officials and the police. A person is often denied a job interview on the basis of his name and address. The same CV sent with a Christian or French-sounding name and with an inner city rather than suburban address elicits far more responses from prospective employers. The media revealed the plight of several immigrant families forced to live in cheap hotels because they could not find a flat to rent despite legal papers and job certificates.

Integration means more than just forcing immigrants to adopt French ways. The economic issues cannot be sufficiently emphasised, for it is only by working, earning money, and being financially independent that an immigrant can develop the self-respect and dignity needed to be a productive member of society. While France has insisted upon the cultural integration of immigrants, it has offered little opportunity for economic assimilation.

If the November riots brought these questions to the forefront, they also saw France moving further to the political right with a radicalisation of centrist voters. In a survey conducted just after the riots, 71 per cent of those questioned approved the tough measures adopted by the conservative government, while the popularity of Mr. Sarkozy soared. Another opinion poll indicated that the ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the nationalist, xenophobic extreme right National Front, were gaining currency at the centre.

A well known right wing Jewish thinker Alain Finkielkraut further set the cat among the pigeons by declaring in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that the notions of political correctness and anti-racism were becoming as totalitarian as communist ideology. This, he said, was preventing a clear identification of the problem – that there was a group of individuals within French society Muslims and blacks, who were leading pogroms against the French republic.

His analysis triggered a heated debate in France, with anti-racist groups threatening to take him to court.

The controversy generated by Mr. Finkielkraut also trained the spotlight on another aspect of the problem: the deep sense of hurt and discrimination felt by people from France's former colonies in the West Indies. Eighteen months ago, right wing legislators whose constituents were mainly former French colonials in Algeria, inserted an amendment to a law on colonialism that called for a positive portrayal of France's presence overseas.

But the law, which sailed almost unnoticed through France's centre-right dominated parliament in February 2004, has been increasingly criticised by residents of overseas territories such as Guadeloupe or Martinique. Partly aimed at garnering support from far-right voters ahead of the 2007 presidential elections, the legislation has boomeranged and the government now appears to be backtracking. Historians said it was not the role of parliaments or schools to re-write history, a view belatedly echoed by Prime Minister de Villepin.

With the Socialist party in disarray and a bitter struggle under way between Mr. Sarkozy and Mr. de Villepin, Mr. Chirac appears increasingly ineffectual. He recently announced a flurry of measures to fight the malaise in the suburbs insisting that public service should be open to all. But Mr. Chirac is now seen as someone on his way out, and, in the light of the decade gone by, as someone who talks big but does little.

The disenchantment with Mr. Chirac became all the more evident when the French public recently adjudged Francois Mitterrand the best President ever to have governed France. It is a measure of their disappointment with Mr. Chirac that leads them to acclaim a leader who was vilified a decade ago.

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