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CUPE National Meeting of University Workers

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I would like to begin by thanking you for inviting me to speak during this national meeting.

I am particularly happy to be with you this evening and to be able to share our intense joy following our social victory in making the Government withdraw its proposal for the CPE, the first employment contract (*Contrat Première Embauche*).

I am particularly pleased since, I am discovering Montréal for the first time and, to be honest, ever since I was a child, I have always dreamed of visiting your country, an added incentive to accept your invitation!

But, it was not just that. I believe it is important to spread the word about what happened in my country this spring. The *Contrat Première Embauche* was a real insult to our youth. This contract, with its two-year trial period, was a new measure of exclusion which would have created a dramatic situation of even greater insecurity for our youth. Without any justification, employers could have dismissed young employees under the age of 26 years from one day to the next.

The consequences of this departure from the Labour Code would have been devastating. How can you rent a home when you are not certain of having a job tomorrow? How can you build a future when insecurity is part of your daily life? How can you dare join a union when the employer can dismiss you without cause?

The Government claimed that increasing the employment contract's flexibility would automatically create jobs. I do not believe this. I am convinced that it is primarily by improving the economic vitality of a country and the distribution of wealth that we reduce unemployment. The CPE would not have created jobs and would have been the first step in destroying the right to work in France. Once workers under the age of 26 years had been dealt with, all the other workers would have come under the gun.

This proposal came up against a massive, united mobilization. From the beginning, all the labour and youth organizations worked to ensure the movement was as widespread as possible. Everyone was aware that dividing the labour movement

would have served the Government's purposes. But in addition to all the unions standing together, this movement was exceptionally intense: massive demonstrations involving up to three million people and strikes in the universities for close to eight weeks.

In the beginning, few believed that we could force the Government to retreat. We did not want the Government to resign any more than we sought its humiliation. On the other hand, we refused the law it wanted to impose, without any discussion with the unions. Opinion polls did not support us and everyone expected us to be defeated. We had a true challenge in working unflinchingly in the universities with the staff and labour unions, convincing the students, one by one, that this new employment contract was not good for them.

The unions' solidarity was, undoubtedly, an important factor in our common victory. Solidarity among youth, who are regularly accused of being individualists, combined with seamless solidarity between the generations. This bridge between the generations was not self-evident. Today, it is commonly considered that generations should oppose each other, that they have opposite interests. Youth are set against their elders, students against workers, workers against retired employees, the unemployed against the employed. We managed to overcome these antagonisms thanks to a deep conviction that what was bringing us together was stronger than our differences, because what brings us together is solidarity, defending the rights of individuals, and the struggle for a more just society.

While the union movement in France is much divided, with eight large labour unions and four student unions, all 12 rallied together... And 12 unions signing joint press releases for more than two months will certainly go down in the annals of the social movement in France! I will not go into the details of the many long hours of negotiation between these 12 unions.

I would, however, particularly like to emphasize two points, which allowed this partnership between students and workers to persist. Firstly, during this mobilization, the large labour unions considered us as spokespersons who deserved recognition equal to their own. For example, there was no difference between the influence of the UNEF and that of the CGT, the largest union in France. We decided on dates for demonstrations and strikes together, according to the interests of the students and workers.

Secondly, I would like to salute the immense support provided by the unions of university teachers and staff. We made all our decisions together, focussing on the working conditions of the students as well as the administrative and maintenance employees.

We managed to reverse the trend; a vast majority of the population joined us in demanding the withdrawal of the CPE. One last time, the Government tried to divide the union front by attempting to negotiate with certain unions. Together, we refused and maintained our position until, after ten weeks of confrontation, we won the battle.

This partnership between youth and labour organizations offered an opportunity to embark on a joint reflective process and to come up with common solutions. Too often during past years, youth and labour have fought separately without supporting each other and without achieving any significant victories.

We believe that this cooperative effort must continue and even increase in the future. Firstly, because, as young workers in training, students and their union, the UNEF, must be included when employees are battling to defend their rights and, secondly, because our organizations often face common issues. For example, the professional integration of youth concerns both our organizations and the significant number of students who work to finance their studies calls for a common response by our unions.

Periods of mobilization are privileged moments for union solidarity. There is an evident complementarity between the mobilization of students and the mobilization of employees. I hope that each of us will have learned from the lesson which brought us this victory. United, we are stronger. There are so many other battles to be fought that we have a duty to maintain this unity.

Far from any corporate or youth orientation, the UNEF, as a student union which wishes to get involved to transform society, considers its activities part of our country's union movement. Youth, and particularly students, have often contributed to France's greatest social victories.

Students are young intellectual workers and the UNEF defends their material and moral interests. But, even though these interests may differ, they are not opposed to the employees' interests. Today's student is tomorrow's employee. Our struggle goes hand in hand with that of the workers and their organizations.

This mobilization has touched our hearts and minds and will not be forgotten. It was an uphill battle. The Government thought that, due to their increasing poverty, employees and youth would no longer be able to join together to struggle.

It counted on inter-generational rivalries and on division between the unions; it lost.

The Government counted on the misery that is taking over in our developed countries to ensure our subjugation, and it lost.

Not only did it lose, but, together, unions of young students and unions of workers, teachers, retired workers and the unemployed all stood with their heads held high to make new conquests in a common struggle.

Over and above the *Contrat Première Embauche*, our citizens mobilized against policies which quash the right to work, dismantle joint solidarities and break down the most fragile living conditions.

This mobilization reveals a basic ground swell moving throughout society. It is a wave of opposition against the mercantilism of all social activity. It is a refusal of the primacy of money and profit over Man and the human condition. It is anger against injustice and the social order imposed on us.

This victory against the CPE must lead to others and as quickly as possible.

This will not change as long as the social situation in my country is troubling and the urgency for change increasingly pressing. Day after day, we see that the organization of our society, based on a never-ending competition between individuals and the search for profitability, does not allow the peaceful resolution of differences between individuals. On the contrary, these factors instigate increasingly violent crises.

So, yes, we refuse this world of violence that is being prepared and we want new social rights for youth and employees. We refuse to allow the human being to be reduced to the state of a dispensable commodity and, yes, we want stable jobs. Yes, we want the means to enable our schools and universities to prepare a decent future for all children in our society.

And, yes, together, we want a society which considers solidarity, education and social progress to be its priorities.

Thank you.