

Strike by secondary school students in France

Our reporter
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A large movement of school students has broken out in France. Last Monday, October 12, over 60,000 high school students demonstrated in the streets of most French cities. The students are protesting against overcrowded classes, the lack of teachers, run-down buildings and the lack of space. Monday's large demonstrations were preceded by smaller spontaneous outbursts in different parts of the country. In the Montpellier region, where there had been strikes and demonstrations over the previous 10 days, the regional Education Authority closed all the high schools on Saturday and Monday in an attempt to dissipate the students' mobilization.

The movement has taken the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin by surprise. Education Minister Claude Allègre broke off all his official engagements last weekend to deal with the snowballing movement. In a hastily organized press conference on Monday morning Allègre said he sympathized with the students' demands but he 'wasn't a magician.' Allègre, who had marked his arrival at the Ministry of Education over a year ago with a questionnaire sent to all students asking for their input, claimed, 'following the Meirieu consultation, the high school students want everything and straight away!' Students had to be patient, pleaded Allègre, because 'the time needed by the Ministry to react is long.'

Many of the protesters cite classes of 40 to 45 students, courses given in the corridor for lack of classroom space and schools with twice the number of students for which they were built. Students complain that it is impossible for them to follow many course options because of a lack of teachers for the classes. But the upcoming reforms announced by Claude Allègre include the official elimination of many of these very same course options demanded by students.

Along with last year's questionnaire, Allègre made demagogic statements about 'slimming down the

mammoth' with reference to the National Education system and the Education Ministry. During the last year he has publicly criticized teachers on a number of occasions accusing them of too much absenteeism and being paid for overtime that they have not worked. Not long after he announced the reduction of paid overtime, earning him the ire of the teachers and their unions. There have been a number of protest strikes. Only a few weeks ago, Allègre had to give a number of concessions to avert a new national strike by the SNES, the main high school teachers union.

Until now the student movement has developed largely on a spontaneous basis. On Monday, however, a national coordination committee was formed by a number of organizations. The main two groups are high school student unions that emerged in previous student movements. The FIDL (Independent and Democratic High School Federation) emerged during the big student strike against the right-wing government of then prime minister Jacques Chirac during the winter of 1986-87, while the UNL (National Union of High School Students) was established in 1994 to fight against the attack on secular education by the right-wing government of Edouard Balladur.

These two organizations have both since come under the influence of different currents of the ruling Socialist Party. The UNL is close to the MJS (Young Socialist Movement), the official Socialist Party youth movement. The FIDL meanwhile has been dominated by the UNEF-ID student union and the Gauche Socialiste (Socialist Left) tendency in the Socialist Party.

The coordinating committee has announced a national day of protest on October 15.



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