

Mass demonstrations by French high school students

Our reporter
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Students demonstrating in Paris

Half a million high school students on October 15 and 300,000 on October 20 demonstrated in towns and cities throughout France to demand educational improvements and protest overcrowded classrooms, deteriorating school buildings and the lack of teachers. The movement, which started spontaneously in different regions in France two weeks ago, has swelled to enormous proportions. On October 15 no fewer than 350 separate demonstrations took place.

In Paris the demonstration was punctuated by incidents of looting and violence, but these involved a relatively small number of youth on the fringe of the demonstration. The Paris area has a high concentration of youth unemployment. High school and university student demonstrations in previous years have provoked similar incidents.

The movement has emerged from the worsening conditions confronting high school students. Many classes contain up to 45 students. Often schools do not have teachers for a number of courses and students are left to their own devices. Even if there are teachers available some high schools have so little space that courses are held in corridors.

The French education system is extremely centralised and bureaucratic. All teachers are assigned positions from the Education Ministry in Paris. Due to this enormous bureaucracy many teachers are left without an assignment whilst schools are left to cope with unfilled posts.

The Jospin Socialist Party government and Education Minister Claude Allégre have been counting on the spontaneous movement losing steam. The day following the latest demonstrations Allégre announced some minor concessions amounting to less than \$1 billion in further funding.

At the same time different organizations linked to the ruling Socialist Party and their government partners, the Communist Party, have been vying with each other to take control of the movement. Last Saturday, between the two demonstrations, there were two meetings organized in Paris. The first, called by the FIDL (The Independent and Democratic High School Federation) and the UNL (The National Union of High School Students), both closely associated with the Socialist Party, styled itself as a meeting of the 'national coordinating committee' of high school students. Between 150 and 200 delegates from all over France met at the Victor-Duruy High School.

The meeting turned into a shouting match between FIDL representatives and a Young Communist-dominated (JC, the Communist Party youth movement) student group. Many delegates left the meeting in disgust. The JC group tried to get delegates to go to a second meeting being held on the Jussieu University campus in another part of Paris.

This other meeting had been organised by another self-styled coalition, the 'coordinating committee of the Paris region.' The group has been set up by the JC along with the Pabloite LCR (Revolutionary Communist League) of Alain Krivine and the anarchists of the CNT (National Labor Confederation). There are, however, no noticeable differences in the demands formulated by the movements represented at these two meetings. Both limit their demands to those already expressed spontaneously in the high school

demonstrations.

See Also:

Strike by secondary school students in France

[15 October 1998]



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