

French high school students protest poor conditions and teacher shortages

Richard Tyler
30 September 1999

Less than one month since the beginning of the new school year, thousands of *lycée* (high school) students took to streets of southern France on Tuesday in protest against the poor conditions in many schools. They also complained that teacher shortages meant classes were dropped or overcrowded.

The largest demonstration was in Toulouse, where over 2,000 students protested; there were 700 in Muret, 400 in Metz and 300 in Montpellier. Students from the *lycées professionnels* (vocational colleges) also supported the demonstrations.

In Toulouse, 100 students from the *lycée de Saint-Exupéry* in Colomiers raised a banner saying: "We have a teacher but no classroom!" The poor state of many school buildings was the subject of numerous protests.

On Monday, 800 students in Avignon began protesting at 8 a.m. on one of the city's main roads. By the end of the morning their numbers had swollen to over 3,000. The students were demanding an improvement to the timetable and more teachers. Teacher shortages mean that class sizes often exceed the supposed limit of 35.

In the Toulouse region, particularly in rural areas, there are a considerable number of classes without teachers. School authorities have put this down in part to an above average number of women teachers taking maternity leave.

Last October, over 60,000 high school students protested throughout France against overcrowded classes, the lack of teachers, run-down buildings and the lack of space. Those going on the streets this year complain that the promises made by the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin to remedy these problems have not been kept.

Olivia Jean, president of the FIDL (Independent Federation of High School Students), told the press that

"practically nothing has changed" since last year. "We are again too numerous in classes, our timetables are empty, and there's a shortage of teachers," she said.

The National Union of High School Students (UNL) said that if its claims "remain a dead letter on the streets of Grenelle" they will call on students to take more widespread action. UNL said it would not accept any further "retreat or compromise" on the implementation of last October's emergency plan.

SNES, the main teachers union, reports similar complaints. The "majority of colleges" have more than 35 pupils per teacher. At the same time, the number of subjects being offered to students has been reduced. The union added that time-tabling problems are often exacerbated by the poor condition of school buildings.

In Toulouse, protesting students complained that "there are not enough tables and chairs." Some reported they had to stand up throughout certain lectures. Another complaint was the chaotic time-tabling. One student said his had "changed three times already since the beginning of the new term". Another student said that on Tuesdays he had 10 hours of classes, and even had to come to school on Saturday mornings.

Students from the *lycées professionnels* protested the lack of proper equipment and facilities for their courses. A common complaint is the poor state of school buildings and classrooms, which are "dirty and old". Pupils from Saint-Exupéry said their gymnasium was falling to pieces; those from a boarding school in Déodat complained that the toilets were "unusable".

Students from Muret told how their school was built for 1,500 students, but now there were 2,200.

For its part, the Jospin government has tried to minimise the scale of the problems. Pierre Ulrich, an adviser to the education minister, claims only 140 out of 9,000 colleges and high schools in the country were

affected.



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