France's education workers strike against Socialist Party government policies

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On the evening of March 16, the day that 800,000 participated in one of the biggest education strikes ever, French Prime Minister Jospin addressed the nation on TV.

His main topic was how he would utilise the famous "cagnotte"—a revenue surplus of 50 billion francs. The lion's share was to go to tax cuts and the repayment of the national debt.

Jospin's contempt for the 200,000 education personnel on the street that day, and his scorn for the education unions, was demonstrated by the paltry 1 billion francs earmarked for education. He damned his hated Education Minister Claude Allegre with faint praise, thus launching a wave of speculation about his imminent removal from office.

A spokesperson for the SNES secondary teachers' union pointed out that the 1 billion francs would barely provide 100 teachers per department and suggested a still meagre 3 billion francs to resolve the crisis.

The crisis in education goes beyond the insults and denigration of teachers, the refusal to create jobs and the reduction of recruitment quotas. The drive of the Plural Left government—Socialist Party, Communist Party and Greens—to reduce the cost of the social services and their most expensive item, education, involves an attack on time-honoured work practices, standards and working conditions.

The vocational high schools (Lycée Professional-LP) have been hit by reconductable strikes (unlimited strike voted on at every mass meeting of strikers) for over two weeks on the issue of the annualisation of their work schedules and the reduction of education provision for their students. The general senior high schools (lycées) are taking industrial action against the threat of annualisation of working hours, the dumbing down of the curriculum and the reduction of subject teaching in favour of a series of demagogic gimmicks. These include civic education and class discussion hours meant to solve the problem of disaffection and violence, aimed at impressing the public and confusing education staff with a flurry of charters and diktats. They serve to mask the real purpose of the government's education policies: austerity, cutbacks and intensifying the exploitation of teachers.

The most sinister element of all, which Jospin hailed as a triumph in yesterday's broadcast, is the employment of 70,000 education auxiliaries or “youth jobs”. These are highly qualified young people, under the age of 25, paid at the national minimum wage of just over 5,000 francs per month, with no civil service status or rights or job description, often used to avoid employing staff at the full rate. On short term, five-year contracts and with no future they show the true face of liberal economics.

The March 16 strike was a massive success. In Amiens almost 4,000 people demonstrated. At the lycée Robert de Luzarches, with about 100 teachers, only two turned up to work. In many schools, especially the LP, the strike was 100 percent solid. All sectors of education were on strike—primary schools where class closures unite whole communities around the movement, junior high schools, senior high schools, cleaning and kitchen staff, teachers, even head teachers—with the support of parents' organisations.

The question of questions was how to expand and continue the movement to defend the education service. Militants on the left in the main teacher federations demanded a clear call from the national leadership for March 16 to be the start of an unlimited general strike of education, with a perspective of uniting with other sectors of the public services.

The SNES, the majority union in secondary

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education, and the FSU, the leading section of the main education federation, was forced to issue an official statement calling for the reconductability of the March 16 strike. The Picardy regional committee of the SNES met on the afternoon of March 15. After three hours' wrangling over the national text, as to whether “au lendemain” meant the day after the March 16 strike or just some time after it, the regional UA (Unity and Action, majority tendency of the union) leadership was forced to call for a reconductable strike from March 16.

In the event they prepared nothing. There were no official leaflets calling on staff not to return to work the next day and there was no provision for a meeting of strikers that day. The LP strikers were to be left isolated so that the union bureaucracies could have their hands free to tie up the movement and do deals with the government. Only the small left union SUD made a clear and unequivocal call and actively worked for the indefinite continuation of the March 16 general education strike.

The SNES bureaucracy seems to have adopted the strategy of reluctantly accepting calls for an indefinite strike in their official texts, but then giving them such little publicity that they become a dead letter. On the evening of the 16th, no education union leader appeared on TV calling for the continuation of the strike. Instead there is a confusing group of dispersed dates—the 21st (a day of action—whatever that is), a “possible” national strike on the 24th or a “possible” national demonstration in Paris on the 25th with parents.

At the mass meeting after the demonstration, no union leaders except those from SUD fought for a vote to continue the strike and to fix a mass meeting of strikers the next day. It was rank-and-file strikers who made the call for the strike meeting in Amiens the next day.

On the 17th the strike was very patchy: in the Rouen region 30 percent, in the Somme a few surprises. Some schools were out which had not been prominent before. At the lycée Robert de Luzarches hesitation, reinforced by the lack of a clear position from the unions, left only two on strike.

The mass meeting, mostly of LP strikers but with delegations from several junior and senior high schools and primary schools, made a call to continue the strike. Those gathered stressed that the strike's aim should be to force the withdrawal of all the government's education reforms and the resignation of the ministers responsible for them and to work for a national demonstration of all education strikers in Paris on March 21. In Amiens this represented an important step for the LP strikers, because it meant breaking out of their isolation and the limits of their struggle on specific demands in order to fight for the entire education service against the ravages of liberalism.

They set up a web site for the strike [http://perso.wanadoo.fr/fr/p.y/pourcent.htm] and fixed a central strike meeting for the Somme department for next Monday.

An attempt to catch the eye of the media by blocking the TVG train that evening succeeded. The police foiled the blockage, but the strikers were on TV.

There was a debate over whether teachers should call for the resignation of the two education ministers, Ségolène Royal and Allègre, hated for their disparaging and insulting tirades against teachers as well as for the policies they defend. A Force Ouvrière union spokesperson urged that this would confuse the issue, that it was the government's policy which they represented and that if they were sacrificed the policy questions would be lost from sight. He insisted that their departure would change nothing, as the policies would be unchanged if new ministers took their place. In the event the majority wanted the ministers' resignation as a demand and tacked on to it a demand for a change of policy.

This raises the implicit question of whether the Plural Left government could ever be an agent of progressive change in education or anything else. The answer is clearly negative, since the entire political class is wedded to economic liberalism. A call to bring down the government poses the question of what would replace it and places firmly on the agenda what political programme and what political instrument can defend social gains and establish a society based on equality and the provision for the basic requirements of all human beings.

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