

# French teachers speak on the crisis in education

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12 July 2002

Didier and Marie-Claire Cottrelle are teachers in Amiens, an industrial town of 132,000 in northern France. Didier works in a *lycée* (high school—students from 15 to 18 or 19 years year old) with a high proportion of pupils from the Amiens Nord housing estates where much of the city's working class immigrant population lives. Marie-Claire teaches in a *collège* (11-15 years). Both are active members of the teachers federation of SUD [Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques], the union founded and led by middle class radicals.

The WWSW interviewed Didier and Marie-Claire prior to the second round of the legislative elections, on June 16, which resulted in the election of a right-wing Gaullist majority in the National Assembly under Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

The two teachers clearly aspire to equality in education, an equal high standard of education for all and not just for an elite. They make clear that successive governments of the Fourth and Fifth Republics, particularly those presided over by Prime Minister François Mitterrand and Socialist Party administrations, have betrayed this aspiration, while demagogically appealing to it in order to maintain a social base.

The expansion in education under De Gaulle, Pompidou and Giscard d'Estaing during the post-war boom, known as “les trente glorieuses,” gave way to austerity and cuts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Under Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's administration and his education ministers Claude Allègre and Jack Lang the austerity measures reached a new height.

Untrained and poorly paid individuals were mobilised to make up for deficiencies. Allègre and Lang introduced a series of gimmicks whose main advantage was that they added no extra cost to education provision, but which came at the expense of regular teaching. These gimmicks were imposed without proper consultation and varying degrees of approval, tacit or explicit, or passive opposition from the unions. Allègre systematically abused and insulted teachers in an attempt to isolate and turn parents against them.

The Communist Party, partners in Jospin's “Plural Left” government, defended Allègre to the bitter end, even when some 800,000 education workers struck against his policies on March 16, 2000, possibly the largest strike ever in the French state education service. Initiatives for an indefinite general strike in education against the Jospin government's policies were thwarted by the strenuous efforts of the trade union bureaucracies of the FSU (Unitary Union Federation), now the main federation in primary and secondary education (with 180,000 members), Force Ouvrière and the Stalinist-led CGT, and their “far left” supporters in Lutte Ouvrière, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the Parti des Travailleurs. Nonetheless, Jospin was obliged to sack Allègre 11 days later.

The acceptance by the major teachers unions of market-oriented policies and their subservience to the government and to education minister Allègre have led to a collapse in the confidence of the teachers in their unions.

The vacuum of leadership left by the open betrayals of the main teachers unions created a niche for SUD Éducation, which presents itself as a non-bureaucratised and militant alternative. However, the SUD leadership, which has a left reformist perspective, is limited to demanding a seat at the negotiating table and proposing certain cushions against the ravages of global capitalism.

The essential futility of this project and impotence of SUD find expression in the discouragement of the Cottrelles and their sense of impasse. The systematic attacks on education, by “left” and right-wing governments, can only be answered by the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program.

WWSW: What have your experiences in education been with Jospin and Allègre?

*Marie-Claire Cottrelle:* Well, the main problem in education is casualisation and the freezing of recruitment of government workers (these have permanent employment and many job rights as compared with the private sector).

As for us in *collèges* and *lycées*, not enough teachers are recruited. Not so long ago there were floating and supply teachers (*Maîtres Auxiliaires*), who have a degree but no formal teacher training, who had managed to get a certain job security. They were employed year by year, and they have now been replaced by people on short-term contracts, who are only employed for 200 hours per year, and that's it—or “*contractuels*” who have a contract only for the length of a permanent teacher's absence. They can be fired without notice and they have no training whatsoever. In order to get this contract all they have to do is apply and the very next morning they can be put in charge of class, without even having had time to prepare.

WWSW: Was that done for financial reasons?

*M-CC:* Oh yes. In the past, in primary schools, there were remedial classes (*classes d'adaptation* and *classes de perfectionnement*) for all the children who had serious learning difficulties. Now all the special needs teaching posts have been cut and those children have joined the mainstream classes and move up the school despite their difficulties.

In *collèges* we also have special needs education (SEGPA) and here again they don't recruit trained teachers, but use floating teachers and teachers on short-term contracts. And when before, in the SEGPA, the teacher had a group with a maximum of 15 children, now there are up to 20 children.

*Didier Cottrelle:* This maybe is the problem with the “*Collège Unique*”. In the 1970s and '80s the idea was that all the children from the first year of *collège* to the fourth were in a common educational structure, within which they were taught, more or less, the same thing. This was called the *Collège Unique*. But, in fact, this meant that huge numbers of children arrived in *collèges*, and providing them all with quality teaching was never achieved.

The decision to give all children in *collège* quality education should have been accompanied by a real financial investment, whereas the exact

opposite took place. All sorts of strategies were devised by middle class parents (like choosing optional lessons like Latin which attract more academic pupils), so that their children end up in the same schools and in privileged classes, where there are more resources, where they are taught by the most experienced teachers and the classes are smaller. This means that the best resources are diverted and concentrated on the children from the middle classes, whereas children from more deprived backgrounds who often need more support do not benefit from these resources. They end up with the least experienced teachers and in big classes.

WSWS: Did all this take place under the Jospin government?

M-CC: No. It had started before, but it carried on. Ten years ago the maximum number of children allowed in a class was 24. Now the limit is 30. It was under the successive governments of Mitterrand that everything got worse.

DC: There is also the introduction of the Discovery Programme [*Itinéraire de Découverte*—two hours are taken from core subjects for children to “discover” their world and each school decides on the content of these two hours]. In some areas children will be studying Latin and ancient history, while elsewhere they will be “discovering” the world of work, visiting local factories and businesses. This is a means of reintroducing, almost officially, a tiered system of education in the *collèges*. This is what the Jospin government did, claiming “we are finding a solution.”

WSWS: So what’s the role of the new government and what is it going to do about it?

M-CC: Young offenders, basically from the age of 13 or 14, will be kept in detention centres (*Centres Fermés*), they are a kind of borstal [reform school]. It’s those children we have in *collège* and who create trouble. True enough, some of them are already known by the police. They will spend half their time with instructors and the other half with police types. Those places are like prisons, they’re shut in. All previous experience has shown that within two years those youngsters will end up in prison. All the instructors are against this project, but it’s all part of the law-and-order policy.

DC: You have to say that this idea is the criminalisation of the youth. You can’t put children of 14 in prison, so you put them in *Centres Fermés* until they come of age. Then you have disruptive pupils who are not delinquents and for them you have the *Classe Relais*, where they stay for three or four months. They may be looked after by specialised teachers, but they are also looked after by people from the Ministry of Justice. It’s all coming under police control, that’s how I see it.

Curriculum and subject orientations, in fact, create a very selective tier system, which enables the best pupils to congregate in the most academic classes and all the rest have to grin and bear it—to a point where those who are disruptive are put away, and those who are less disruptive are put into vocational classes so that they can be shunted off to the job market as soon as possible.

Up to the present, within the framework of vocational studies, you could hope to advance and even get back into mainstream education. Whereas now this is over. Pupils directed to vocational schools will only be able to apply to an employer after their two-year course. That’s it, no chance to continue their education. They will be entirely dependent on the local labour market because employers will have the right to decide on the content of the curriculum of professional diploma courses. All this in the pipeline.

WSWS: How can this situation be fought?

M-CC: That’s the problem! I know that my colleagues who are teaching the final *collège* year find it very difficult with half of those classes. Nowadays with teachers there is no hard core that wants to oppose streaming. We are very much in disagreement.

DC: Even people who profess left ideas find it so difficult in some schools that they say some youngsters should not be in mainstream

education. In fact, the policies which have been applied have not been resourced. There has been a huge expansion in the intake. The older teachers who are used to teaching middle class children have gradually seen the arrival of pupils of more varied origins. The standards required have remained more or less the same with class sizes about the same, the length of the school day and the elitist teaching methods unchanged. Thirty years ago only 10 percent of the population had access to the *lycée*—the name’s been kept but the meaning has totally changed. Forty years ago you still had to take an exam to enter secondary education. Nowadays between 60 percent and 70 percent of the population studies in a *lycée*. There are reactionary attitudes from certain layers of elitist teachers.

Even me, when for a whole year I’ve found it very difficult with a class and I don’t know what to do with them, sometimes I start thinking: “They really piss me off.” Well, I find myself with children who have been put into academic classes and they can’t cope, they fail the *baccalauréat* once, twice, three times and they leave the education system with nothing, absolutely nothing. They’ve wasted six years in the *lycée* and they have nothing to show for it—so they give us a bad time. There are moments when you really want to bawl them out.

WSWS: What is SUD’s policy for this situation?

DC: In theory we have to mobilise struggles, but in fact there are very few of us.... At the moment our fight has been against the *Lycées des Métiers*, which is one of the contradictions of the left. This is a measure unveiled by Mr. Jean-Luc Mélançon at the Porto Allegre forum and presented as a response to the threat of the privatisation of education. More and more young people have apprenticeships and are educated at the local Trades Chamber instead of within the education system. Mélançon and company say that if we want to maintain a school structure we have to accept this *Lycée des Métiers*, as a way of saving state education.

Basically the vocational courses provided by the education system will be grouped within one structure organising a partnership with the local employers. So in my school, it’ll be with Peugeot and Citroën. They will come in and give supplementary lessons to the pupils, who will systematically do their work experience with them, so within this structure it will be possible at any time for a pupil to become an apprentice; in other words to change his or her status and therefore leave the state education system.

M-CC: There are two things: it’s the bosses who decide what the children should be taught and the bosses take part in their assessment.

DC: If at some stage in the automobile industry there’s a big need for workers, they come for the children when they are still being educated and they haven’t yet got their qualifications, and they get them to work in the firm for as long as they are needed. Then they will be able to get back into the school system, by means of the method of giving diploma status to professional experience. It’s worse than flexibility: they take the children out of school, out of the education system, and when they have to lay them off they just turf them back into school.

WSWS: What can SUD do in this situation?

DC: I don’t know. I’m telling you I don’t know. In my opinion something’s going to happen, but I don’t know what. It’s a total void, a total democratic void. No debate in the presidential elections, no debate in the legislative elections except for law and order, period. In my opinion there’ll be a price to pay for that, that’s for sure.

WSWS: We called for a boycott of the second round of the presidential elections because the working class had no choice in these elections, so both candidates had to be rejected and the fight organised because the vote for Chirac was no way of fighting fascism. The working class needs an independent political programme.

M-CC: There is also a problem with the unions: the big unions have become unions which run the system. The CGT is keeping its head down, doesn’t rock the boat because they want to be admitted into the European Confederation of Unions. If you are a worker or unemployed there is

nobody to defend you. There isn't a union prepared to stick its neck out: that's the main problem.

*WSWS:* There was a reaction to the electoral success of Le Pen. Young people moved. Now they don't any more because it was channelled behind the campaign for Chirac.

*DC:* For me it was just media hype.

*WSWS:* There were 500,000 people in Paris. There were some Socialist Party people who wanted the demonstrations to stop. It wasn't just media hype. What was SUD's position?

*DC:* We more or less said we were calling for a vote for Chirac.

*M-CC:* It's the group of 10 [SUD's confederation] which gave the line: beat the far right in the street and in the ballot box. There was a debate in SUD. We weren't in agreement, like everywhere else. That's why there wasn't a call in the newspapers, we were divided. The G-10 leadership decided without really consulting the member unions.

*WSWS:* The advance of fascism is not an electoral question. Le Pen has advanced because of the bankrupt politics of the left. And there are many people who are fed up with it and who made their protest.



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