

French teachers, parents march against government cuts

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On December 8, the latest in a series of mobilisations of workers in opposition to the policies of the Raffarin government took place in Paris in protest against the government's attacks on education. Between 25,000 and 40,000 teachers and non-teaching school staff, parents, high school and university students came from all over France, with the provinces particularly well represented.

Called by the main education trade unions, the FSU, UNSA, CGT, CFDT, FAEN (but not the more "left" FO and SUD), the left and largest parents' association the FCPE, the university students union, the UNEF, and the two high school students unions, the UDL and the FIDL, and officially supported by the Socialist Party, the demonstration focused on opposition to the Raffarin government's planned staffing cuts.

The slogans on the demonstration showed concern for the broader context, in particular disquiet about the socially repressive measures of Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and the growth of militarism: "Cash for the rich and cops for the poor," "Schools not prisons," "The students want the *bac* [school-leaving certificate]. Sarkozy sends them *la BAC* (the crime squad)," "Schools not aircraft carriers."

The organisers had hoped for at least 50,000, and indeed the turnout was a pale reflection of the profound anxieties over the situation and perspectives for education in France. This is due to disillusionment with the main teachers unions, which played a large role in holding back the massive movements against the education policies of the previous Socialist Party-led Jospin government. Those protests led to the sacking of the deeply unpopular education minister, Claude Allègre.

Raffarin's programme for education is merely a continuation and deepening of Allègre's agenda. Many on the demonstration were also unhappy that the main teachers unions did not call the education workers out with the rest of the public sector on November 26, claiming that this would undermine the December 8 protest, called on a Sunday to facilitate the participation of the parents.

Prior to the most recent demonstration there had been a series of anti-government mobilisations—October 3: the almost total strike of gas and electricity workers in defence of their conditions and against privatisation; October 17: a strike of all sectors of the state education system supported by over half the workers; November 24-25: the lorry drivers; November 26: a strike of the railway, postal, air transport and other public and civil service workers. A further strike in the education service has just been announced for

December 17.

The government's education budget for 2003 entails the reduction by 5,000 of the number of teaching posts to which the previous government had committed itself. The posts of 5,600 *surveillants*, affectionately known as *pions* [literally, pawns], education auxiliaries, are to be lost through attrition and the very existence of this category is in question.

The *pions* are students working their way through university and the category was created in 1937 for this purpose and has enabled generations of young people from low-income families to study. They work 28 hours a week and are paid 900 euros a month and may work as *surveillants* for seven years, these years counting towards their pension rights and seniority if they subsequently become state teachers. Their timetables are adjusted so that they can attend lectures and take exams. Being young, involved in education and working as a team under full-time teachers, they perform an invaluable task of helping and guiding the pupils and in general have a deep commitment to them.

The government, designating the auxiliaries obsolete, plans to replace them with a new category, the *assistants d'éducation*, on three-year dead-end contracts. They will not necessarily be students, they will work a full week and be paid the minimum wage. Student *assistants d'éducation* will be offered half timetables of 20 hours on half wages, on which they cannot live.

This new category is also intended to replace the 20,000 *aides-éducateurs* (educational aides), recruited by Allègre on a five-year contract with vague and unfulfilled promises of further training and opportunities for real jobs. These are mainly unemployed graduates or people with higher educational diplomas, who are paid minimum wages and enjoy no civil service rights or seniority. The *aides-éducateurs* contracts are due to start running out in 2003 and the government has said it will not extend them. While suppressing 5,600 *pions* and 20,000 *aides-éducateurs* the government will only create 11,000 *assistants d'éducation*—a shortfall of some 14,000 posts.

The government plans to decentralise non-teaching staff, thus making them employees of local government and taking them out of the national education service. They will be liable to be placed anywhere that suits the local council. The non-teaching staff had already been deeply angered by the Jospin government's imposition of the 35-hour week in such a way that many found themselves working longer hours and more exploited than before.

Already several campaign committees of education workers

threatened by the government have been set up in several regions and a national coordination committee is being established.

It is noteworthy that Gérard Aschieri, leader of the SNES, majority union for secondary teaching and pastoral staff, and the biggest trade union in the education service and the FSU education federation, when interviewed on France Inter radio on December 8, only mentioned the diminution in the number of “adults” present in school. This was also largely the content of the sound bites from demonstrators interviewed on TV later that day. This represents the relinquishing of much of the ground defended by the 800,000 education workers who struck against the Jospin’s education policies and forced him to sacrifice Allègre.

Some of the key issues in that protest movement were the widespread recourse to casual labour with no career guarantees, and none of the rights enjoyed by civil servants represented by the *aides-éducateurs*, and jobs such as *contractuels* and CES, which are even more precarious and offer no rights. The call of the anti-government movement under Jospin was for a massive increase in educational resources and real jobs with a career in education to face up to the crisis of oversized classes and the increased incidence of unruliness and violence.

Now Aschieri makes the crude call for more “adults,” rather than qualified staff with a proper career status and rights, echoing Allègre and simplifying Raffarin’s task of cheapening staffing costs with even less well-paid and insecure workers. The December 4 issue of *l’US*, the SNES journal, quotes Raffarin’s appeal to submit to the imperatives of global capitalist competition with approval: “faced with globalisation, faced with the concentration of power in the world, France’s reply is intelligence, talent, creation, added value, innovation.” The “added value” can only come from the increased exploitation of the workers and the cheapening or destruction of their social gains and rights. *L’US* only rebukes him for failing to carry out these “fine words” in practice.

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It is a sign of the nervousness of Raffarin in the face of a considerable groundswell of opposition and the spectre of the 1995 mass strikes, which destroyed Alain Juppé’s right-wing government, and the mass movements that destroyed Allègre, that he makes every attempt to avoid any provocative pronouncements and verbally takes a “softly-softly” approach. *Le Monde* afforded Raffarin a full-page interview a week before the demonstration, in which he asserted that “nothing will be done without discussion with the teachers”. But he was nevertheless adamant about pressing ahead with decentralisation, the essential preamble to the breaking up of the national education service and opening it up to market forces. Luc Ferry, minister of youth, education and research, remarked that “a lot of slogan shouting” was not going to deter him from implementing his education policies

Nervous too is the Socialist Party (PS), which is having difficulty attempting to identify itself with the social movement against Chirac and Raffarin. The December 8 issue of *Le Monde* reports anguished heart-searching by the PS leadership as to how to participate in the demonstration, “and the hard time had on November 26 by three ex-ministers, Daniel Vaillant, Ségolène

Royal and Elizabeth Guigou, considered undesirable on the public service workers’ march, only increased the fear of being rejected.”

The newspaper continued: “Although the PS called on people to demonstrate, denouncing the budgetary restrictions and the end of the *emplois-jeunes* [of which the *aides-éducateurs* were a part], the organisers made known that it was out of the question that the Socialists should be at the head of the march, or even that they should come and greet the trade union leaders.”

An unnamed Socialist official is quoted as saying: “We’re walking on eggshells to win back our traditional electorate. We’ve realised that after the 21 April we’ve lost a good third of them.” In the event, at the back were small contingents of the new faction seeking to resuscitate the PS, among them *Nouveau Monde* [New World] of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, an ex-member of the Pabloite Ligue communiste révolutionnaire [LCR] and former minister for vocational education, and Henri Emmanuelli.

Marie-Georges Buffet, secretary of the French Communist Party, part of Jospin’s *Gauche Pluriel* [Plural Left], was handing out leaflets. When she told marchers, “We are here because we defend our schools,” a demonstrator replied: “Yeah, but you were in power for five years.” Olivier Besancenot, LCR presidential candidate, was at the head of the march.

The radical “opposition” (Lutte ouvrière, the LCR, the Parti des travailleurs) to Jospin’s defeated government is encouraging the people disillusioned with the traditional political parties of the left, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, to turn to trade unionism without any political perspectives or analysis of the complicity of the unions with the Plural Left government. All of the trade unions, along with the traditional parties of the left, took part in the campaign to elect Jacques Chirac in the second round of the presidential election last spring when standing against the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen and refused, along with the radicals, to take an independent stand for the working class.

Trade union pressure is incapable of rolling back the free market offensive and social and political repression of Chirac-Raffarin-Sarkozy. For that is required a political perspective aimed at ending the profit system itself.



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