

France: Day of action greets new school year

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The first national day of action of the school year on September 10 saw demonstrations in cities and towns across France. The action was a continuation of the massive strike and protest movement in the spring that mobilised some 6 million people against the government's programme of pension cuts and the "decentralisation"—or dismantling—of the national public education system.

The day of action was called by the national joint union committee, or "*l'intersyndicale*," comprising the five main education unions (FSU, UNSA, SGEN-CFDT, FAEN, CGT), and the turnout was relatively small: 4,000 in Paris, 800 in Lille, 600 in Toulouse, 550 in Marseilles, and hundreds more in dozens of other urban centres.

The demonstrations were joined by delegations of entertainment workers who had been fighting throughout the summer festival season against a deal reducing their unemployment benefits between jobs. The deal was signed by the government, the Medef employers' association and minority unions, including the CFDT, which had also supported the government's pension cuts. The refusal of the unions to coordinate these struggles and take on the government in a general strike led to the June 10 sellout of the strike by the main education unions organised in *l'intersyndicale*.

These assaults on the rights and conditions of workers—to be followed by attacks on the health care rights and sickness benefits of *la sécurité sociale* ("*la sécu*")—were clearly part of a calculated plan by the government targeting the welfare state. However, the union leaderships, supported by the entire spectrum of the left, refused to take on the conservative Raffarin/Chirac government as such, but merely expressed disagreement with some of its policies.

On June 10, two days before the start of the national final exam, the unions made a deal with the government over decentralisation. The deal "saved" the

20,000 more qualified non-teaching staff from transfer to local government but abandoned the 90,000 lower-paid staff. This served as a sop for guaranteeing the undisturbed running of the "*bac*"—the *baccalauréat* exam. It also destroyed any prospect for a general strike.

The unions proclaimed the fight would continue after the holidays—this even as the government passed the pensions bill through parliament in June and July.

Mass meetings, held before the start of the school year and in its first week in town assemblies and in individual schools all over France, reported a sense of frustration at the way the movement had faded, but also a desire to continue the fight. At these meetings, union bureaucrats, as well as PCF (Parti Communiste Français) and PS (Parti Socialiste) members—working closely with the pseudo-Trotskyists of the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), the LO (Lutte Ouvrière) and the PT (Parti des Travailleurs)—claimed a moral victory over the government, asserting the pension bill had been imposed against the will of the people. They did everything to avoid a debate on their complicity in inflicting this defeat on government employees and other workers.

A WSWs team interviewed teachers and entertainment workers demonstrating in front of the Picardy region education office—the "*rectorat*"—in Amiens, where about 150 participated. Roger Bontemps teaches physics and Denis Goeringer teaches biology, both at an Amiens *lycée* (secondary school). Denis expressed his disappointment "that such a vast movement really ended up with nothing. So I would say we're a bit despairing on returning to school and asking ourselves what we could do to get things going now. We've already seen a big movement fail. We are a little disappointed."

Denis could not say exactly why the movement had failed and suggested it was perhaps due to "the lack of

solidarity between different categories of workers, even within education... Everyone is trying to defend their sector.” He also thought that while the grass-roots trade unionists had done their job, this had not been carried though by the leaders. “This leads to a lack of cohesion,” he said.

When asked what he thought of the role played by the parties of the *Gauche Plurielle* (the Plural Left government of former Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin), Denis said that he felt they proposed no alternative: “You get the impression that everything is based on the economy. They have the same logic as the right. As long as the economy dominates politics I don’t think a real reform can be achieved. In the end, it’s the same free market politics for the right and for the left. Of course the left is a bit more social, but fundamentally I think it’s the same policy—there is no will to change things politically.”

Denis expressed scepticism that the unions were capable of holding back the government, adding, “Up till now they’ve shown their ineffectiveness.”

Roger said workers felt they were up against a brick wall: “We went on strike for a month and a half and got nothing. What can we do? We are not going to start another indefinite strike that will achieve nothing. I don’t think anyone is ready for that. I was disgusted on the evening of June 10 when I saw Aschieri [Gérard Aschieri of the FSU] all pleased with himself, as if he’d won the jackpot, smiling next to the minister. I was sickened. We are angry.”

Audrey and Virginie, two unemployed *contractuel* teachers, came to the Amiens demonstration with their full-time colleague Agnès. Virginie explained that a *contractuel*’s contract could, at best, be renewed each year, and they often work for periods as short as a month. Then, on August 31, they were not re-employed. “In this region I’ve read that out of 1,130 of us, more than 650 have not been re-employed. They take us and then discard us as soon as they no longer need us, to put it bluntly,” Virginie complained.

The WSWS interviewed two actors, Frédéric and Marianne from the “Théâtre du Lin.” They were accompanied by their friend Véronique, a teacher involved in the theatre. They said that entertainment workers who are not on a long-term or indefinite contract have up to now been able to obtain benefits for the days they are not working.

Marianne pointed out that “the change in the scheme will mean a sharp decline in our income that derives in part from these benefits but also takes into account the fact that we are not on stage every day. Between shows we have a lot of work, but we are actually paid only for the days we are on stage in front of the audience. Anyone would be ill at ease at having to tighten their belt by 30 percent.

“It’s a social anger, too,” she added. “In my opinion, it’s part of a free-enterprise desire to make all human activity profitable and to cut out all so-called ‘dead periods.’ I don’t feel I’m a dead period. Actors between jobs who are not making a profit for a producer or an organiser are considered as parasites.

“This links up with what is going on with schools, hospitals, pensions.”

Frédéric added: “I’ve just heard that they are going to create a special branch of the social security system for the aged. I fear the worst because, in exactly the same way as with the entertainment scheme, they are starting to create a specialised branch to guarantee the particular rights of a particular section of the population that is more vulnerable. Then, a few years later on, they claim that those people cost too much.”



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