

French students protest university reforms

Antoine Lerougetel
17 December 2003

On December 3, a national day of strikes and demonstrations took place against proposals by the conservative government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to “modernise” France’s universities and bring them into line with new guidelines for European higher education.

The day of action was called by the recently formed national student coordination committee set up in the university of Rennes II. The initial response to calls for action by the coordination committee was limited and only small numbers of demonstrators took to the streets, but on December 3 an unprecedented number of campuses went on strike: 29 of the 80 universities in metropolitan France.

Spearheading the movement was Rennes II university, where on December 3, after five weeks on strike, 5,000 students and staff voted at a mass meeting to continue the action.

The motivation for the government’s proposed changes are clearly stated in an essay published on February 12, 2003 in *Libération* written by the EU commissioner for education and culture, Viviane Reding: i.e., the need by European capitalism to compete with the United States on the world arena. “It is the course taken by some 30 European states [the education ministers of the states involved in the Erasmus university exchange scheme], by signing in 1999 in Bologna a statement in which they committed themselves to the construction of a European university area...”

She asserts that it is necessary to win “the best students of Asia, Latin America and Africa” and enable them to do their master degrees in Europe instead of the US. “Higher education has become a world market” and “these masters degrees with a European dimension will also be open to the best students from other continents. In order to encourage them to choose Europe, they will be offered study bursaries.”

Reding asserts, however, that the “economic situation does not permit further significant public money to be invested in this sector,” to which the EU already devotes 1.2 percent of its GNP. “It is by reforming the universities, by making them more competitive, by opening them up to the world that we will attract more investment from business.” She goes on to point out that “while in the US private investment in education represents 1 percent of the GNP, in the EU it only amounts to 0.2 percent”.

She admits that she is “conscious of the obstacles: the higher education reforms are potential ‘political bombshells.’”

The movement in the universities reflects the profound anxieties of students regarding their studies and future employment. France’s unemployment rate is edging up to 10 percent, with those under 25 years of age among the hardest hit. None of the student representative bodies have any perspective for overcoming these problems.

The reform—laws “on university modernisation,” which have been temporarily withdrawn by the government, and on European harmonisation (LMD)—are being put forward by Education Minister Luc Ferry. He claims these will enable students to move freely in Europe with the European harmonisation of degrees and diplomas called LMD (*licence, master, doctorat*—degree, masters, doctorate) representing three, five and eight years respectively of university study. These qualifications will be made up of European credits or study modules known as ECTS

(European credit transfer system), which will be recognised Europe-wide. The students will be required to obtain 30 credits per semester (half academic year), and a total of 180 for a degree. The reforms will not be accompanied by any increase in funding or staff.

The main student union UNEF, in its pamphlet “Réforme LMD,” points out that the proposed harmonisation of European qualifications is a pretext “to undermine the essential principles of higher education as a public service and the rights of students.” Without student grants and financing, only the most well-off students would be able to study in centres of learning abroad. Forty-eight percent of students in France, some 100,000, already live below the poverty line.

Indeed, one of the main means for students to pay their way through university studies—working as *surveillants* (auxiliaries in schools)—is already being phased out by the Raffarin government, completing a process begun under the previous coalition “left” government of Lionel Jospin. At the same time, many European universities practice intense selection.

The government’s attempt to avoid a major confrontation with students by temporarily shelving the modernisation bill in May at the height of the education workers’ and pensions struggle means that the proposals have been presented as provisional. However, student and university teacher organisations complain of a lack of meaningful consultation and point to the experience of pilot operations in universities to prove it.

Objections to the reforms are many. Enhanced autonomy for universities and new powers for university chancellors will lead to the raising of tuition fees or the introduction of enrolment fees. French students are aware that Prime Minister Tony Blair in Great Britain is steamrolling through parliament proposals allowing universities to impose fees of 3,000 pounds (4,500 euros) and that fees of up to 1,500 euros are planned to be imposed in Italy.

The expansion of the principle of selection in the first year and after taking a degree will intensify unhealthy competition amongst students. Students who have failed in parts of their courses will face increasing problems catching up in their studies.

Competition between universities and the creation of local degrees will lead to inequality between universities and between students, resulting in the devaluation of qualifications in less recognised and poorly financed universities. This is summarised by the phrase “*pôles d’excellence et facs poubelles*” (centres of excellence and sink universities). The attachment of a descriptive note to each person’s degree detailing the elements of the course and the dates of passing could be used to filter candidates for courses and facilitate selection, placing at disadvantage students who may have experienced difficulties in completing their courses, thus undermining the universality of qualifications.

The abolition of the national framework of qualifications threatens “the only guarantee of their being recognised in collective agreements.”

The regionalisation of financing and studies and the incorporation of local employers into university decision-making and advisory bodies, together with the tendency for universities to adapt to short-term and local needs, will mean that degrees stand to lose their universal recognition and applicability.

These proposals are steps towards the increased involvement of local business interests in the universities that would be tailored to serve their requirements. Despite Ferry's protestations to the contrary, students and staff rightly see the proposed changes as moves towards the privatisation of higher education.

The general level of debate on the government offensive is abysmal—the legacy of years of control of the UNEF by the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), various tendencies of the Socialist Party and the pseudo-Trotskyists of the PT (Workers Party) and LCR (Revolutionary Communist League). The majority national leadership of the UNEF is affiliated to the Socialist Party grouping Nouveau Monde led by Arnaud Montebourg, with minority representation of PCF and LCR supporters. Only 1 percent of students in France are in unions and less than 10 percent participate in elections to representative bodies.

The UNEF pamphlet declares: “Only a big national mobilisation with clear demands will be able to force the government to reverse its free-market orientation aimed at deregulating our higher education public service and take into account the demands of the students.”

It is hard to imagine that the authors of these words themselves believe in what they wrote. In May and June of this year France witnessed some of the most determined strikes and massive demonstrations since May-June 1968. The protests involved up to 6 million workers, demonstrating in defence of pensions, against the decentralisation and dismantling of the national public education service and the reduction of unemployment rights for entertainment workers. The protests were ignored by the government, which is pressing ahead with its plans. The unions, some of which openly supported the Raffarin government's plans, made it clear that they had no intention of waging a political fight against the government and were supported by the entire left establishment in France.

One element of the betrayal by the trade unions of the education workers struggle was the agreement, in the June 10 deal announced on television by Gérard Aschiéri of the main education federation (FSU), to accept the transfer of the main body of non-teaching staff (ATOS) from the national education system into local government. The same is now being proposed for university non-teaching staff (IATOS).

The UNEF document presents Europe as a desirable abstraction rather than in its concrete form as a representative of capitalist interests. There is no analysis or attention paid to the general assault on social gains and rights of workers being orchestrated by the EU and the OECD, which has been initiated and pursued by left and right governments in France and other member states. The pamphlet “Dossier Réforme Descoings” produced by UNEF maintains that the globalised capitalist system and international competition leaves open alternatives apart from drastic “reforms”. The document asserts that budgetary restrictions based on the Maastricht criteria can be cast aside: “the stability pact is not carved in stone,” and thus wilfully ignores the fact that these restrictions are an essential part of European imperialism's attempt to compete in the global economy, particularly with the United States.

The UNEF document goes on to inform students that “a European model of higher education could be drawn up. This would not be based on the free-market model but in conformity with the principles of solidarity and equality which are the basis of the European Union.”

The document trivialises the market forces at work and says that the assertion by the administration that “globalisation creates a sharp competition between institutions of higher education and research” and “it is necessary to adapt or die ... borders on the ridiculous.” This situation “is not the only one that can exist in the context of globalisation.” Thus social gains and rights, they imply, can be preserved under the conditions of globalised capitalist production.

The UNEF opposes the raising of registration fees but does not rule out a graduate tax, which, it claims, does have “a certain social solidarity rationale.” Thus the UNEF, in Blairite fashion, accepts that students

should bear an additional tax burden after their studies—a measure which amounts to covert tuition fees.

The UNEF document on LMD states: “In order to create European harmonisation (of qualifications and diplomas) without breaking up our public service, it is indispensable to reconcile the adoption of a common European architecture/structure for studies and a system of equivalents with the maintenance of students' rights and strong national rules guaranteeing the cohesiveness of the state higher education service.” It demands “the drawing up of regulations ... fixing some national rules guaranteeing the national character of degrees and diplomas and the rights of students.”

Along with the rest of the established French “left,” they claim that national capitalist institutions and frontiers can protect living standards and social services and rights from the consequences of globalised capitalist production, markets and transnational companies. The reliance on national governments and the nation state leaves the door open for the most reactionary forces.

The Attac Campus (Attac's university section) statement of December 12 criticises “the absence of a national or European framework for degrees and diplomas” without any critique of the free-market agenda of the EU in education and all other spheres.

The radical left organisations only add to the political confusion. The lack of any political perspectives in the student movement beyond pressure on the government is encouraged, even idealised in *Lutte Ouvrière* statements, such as the following: “University has become a forum where everyone can defend their point of view and compare them with other people's, in a friendly atmosphere” (November 28). This pseudo-Trotskyist organisation suggests: “Staff and students must prevent this regression and the government's plans. Are the present student actions the harbingers of a bigger movement? It is to be hoped for, because there is certainly an emergency.”

The LCR's statement in *Rouge* of November 20 declares “there is only one solution: the most massive mobilisation with strikes and demonstrations to make the government give way.”

The position taken by the PT in its weekly paper *Informations Ouvrière* (December 3) advances no perspective for struggle or political change but instead calls for the withdrawal of the LMD and the modernisation laws, claiming that rights and standards can be defended within the national framework: “The European harmonisation of our diplomas and qualifications means the destruction of our national diplomas and qualifications,” and that the essential question was “the maintaining of our national diplomas.”

In its statement issued in July, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew very different conclusions from the struggles of 2003 and declared: “The experiences of the last two months have shown that the old forms of class struggle are exhausted and that a new perspective and a new party are necessary. Pressure from the streets and isolated strikes are not enough to force the government to retreat. What is necessary is a political struggle that forces the government to resign, replacing it with a government that represents the interests of the working population.”

The statement called for the working people to “unite European-wide in a single party and fight for a united Europe that is based upon social equality and democracy—for the United Socialist States of Europe.” [“After the mass protests and strikes: What way forward for working people in France?”]



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact