

France: Teachers strike against government cutbacks

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On 12 March an estimated 30 to 40 percent of France's teachers struck and many demonstrated in all major French cities and towns against the Jean-Pierre Raffarin-Jacques Chirac government's accelerating programme of cuts and the deterioration of working conditions in education. They were called out by the FSU, the largest teacher and civil service union federation, and the education sector of the CGT (both with links to the moribund Communist Party), and the Sgen-CFDT and UNSA (education unions both with strong links to the Socialist Party). This was the first national strike of teachers since the massive movement of last spring.

The main demands included: restoration of the 4,300 teaching positions eliminated; the addition of 6,000 new teaching jobs for those who pass the competitive examination for entry into the profession (known by its acronym CAPES); the recruitment of 20,000 *surveillants* (teaching auxiliaries); the ending of short-term contracts and their replacement by a proper full-time status; and the dropping of plans to decentralise and dismantle the national public education service.

The extent of the mobilisation took the union leaderships by surprise and exposed their lack of any perspective for taking the action any farther. The unions involved are only due to meet again on March 22, a full ten days later. Between 60,000 and 100,000 teachers turned out all over France in well-attended demonstrations, in many cases braving heavy rain to make their protest. This was the case in Paris where 15,000 marched from Sèvres-Babylone to the university of Jussieu, with research workers given pride of place at the front, bearing a banner: "Save research and the universities." Some 10,000 took to the streets in Toulouse and Marseilles, and about 5,000 in Rennes, Lyons and Lille and between 1,500 and 4,000 in towns such as Poitiers, Bordeaux, Quimper, Amiens and Strasbourg.

In Paris, as in the demonstrations which took place in all

of France's major cities and urban centres, the teachers were joined by large contingents of researchers, university teachers and students preparing doctorates, who were protesting against budget and job cuts in research. Their long-running struggle reached a high point last week with the collective resignation of over a thousand section heads and leaders of research teams and laboratories. [See *World Socialist Web Site*, March 11, 2004, "France: researchers protest Raffarin government with mass resignations"]

Many students were also protesting against the outright elimination of the category of *surveillants*—education auxiliaries in school, by which the less well-off can finance their studies, and most particularly the cutback in teaching posts available through the competitive exams (CAPES). High school students were opposing the elimination of minority subjects and options as a result of education budget cuts.

The scale of the movement is particularly noteworthy as it comes after the failure of the enormous mobilisations of last spring to force the government to abandon its programme of destruction of pension rights and the dismantling of the national education service. The protests reflect a deep anxiety at the continuing reactionary agenda of the Chirac/Raffarin government: stripping over 200,000 unemployed workers of their benefits; forcing through parliament, over the opposition of civil rights organisations and most of the magistrates, a criminal justice bill, Perben 2, which greatly increases the repressive powers of the state; ending state reimbursement for hundreds of medicines; and preparing further drastic cuts in health care and sickness benefits.

A CGT teacher from a vocational high school in Picardy told the *WSWS*: "Here we go again. The unions are dividing the movement against the government. Yesterday they called out the hospital workers and today it's us. FO [the third largest French union federation] is going it

alone.” A colleague recognised that the unions had led the movement into a rotten deal and defeat last spring but said: “What else can we do? We must just hope that the movement snowballs and forces the government to retreat.”

A good contingent of physical education students studying Staps (the sciences and techniques of physical and sporting activities) in preparation to be gym or sports teachers led the Amiens march. Two of them, Fabien Ketels and Nicolas Normand, students at Jules Verne University in Amiens, spoke to the WSWs.

Fabien said that they had been informed only recently, shortly before the competitive examination, that the places on offer for sports teachers had been reduced by 42 percent. There were now only 780 places for 10,000 candidates. “If we let them get away with it, they’ll reduce it to 300-odd next year. Before going to university there had been a government campaign urging students to consider a career as a teacher, as there would be plenty of openings with a large number of teachers going into retirement. But now out of 18,000 teachers retiring, only 12,500 are going to be replaced.”

Nicolas added that the government claim that student numbers were declining was no justification at all. “The classes are too big and something has to be done about students failing in school. Ten percent of school leavers are functionally illiterate.”

Fabien accused the government of having a policy of “deintellectualisation” and “anticulture.” This was shown by running down subjects like physical education (PE), music, Latin, and art. The refusal to finance research was another aspect of this.

Nicolas pointed out that the Ministry of Health was putting out commercials showing the need for exercise to keep people healthy. PE teachers taught for a healthy life, a hygienic life. There was also the aspect of social skills involved in team sports—the ability to work with and respect others.

They both thought that the movement would put pressure on the government as the regional election is being held on March 21. It was necessary to unite all the movements fighting against government policies, they said: “The left is not unified enough against the right.” They ruled out abstention as it would allow the neo-fascist National Front in.

Several demonstrators, disenchanted with the parties of the former “Plural Left” government of the Socialist Party’s Lionel Jospin, said they would be voting for the “far left” alliance of the Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and Ligue

Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR).

The trade union bureaucracies did not believe their one-day strike would produce any results. They made this clear in statements to the media in the days leading up to it, declaring that they did not expect the strike to be a success. Afterwards, the union leaders pleaded for Raffarin to hold talks. Patrick Gontier, leader of UNSA-Education, declared, “The government cannot go on turning a deaf ear now.” But Prime Minister Raffarin has refused a written request from the unions for a meeting and has referred them to the education advisor at Matignon, the prime minister’s residence.

This is the same policy which deliberately broke up the movement of May-June 2003 against the government’s pensions legislation, spearheaded by education workers, which involved up to 6 million workers in strikes and demonstration. The Sgen-CFDT accepted Raffarin’s pension proposals and withdrew its opposition on May 15, two days after the highpoint of the strike movement in education when 70 percent of education workers were on strike and at least a million others joined them on the streets;

The final act of sabotage came on June 10, 2003 by FSU leader Gérard Aschiéri’s decision, with the agreement of the other union confederations—the CGT, FO and UNSA—to guarantee the smooth running of the *baccalauréat* examination, given to graduating students, and calling on non-striking teachers to scab for that purpose. The unions also accepted the transfer of 90,000 non-teaching staff out of the national education service into local government—decentralisation. Aschiéri and CGT leader Bernard Thibault were duly publicly thanked by president Chirac and social affairs minister François Fillon for services rendered. [See: “*After the mass protests and strikes: What way forward for working people in France*”, March 11, 2004]

The result has been a sharp drop in membership of the main teacher unions: 7.5 percent in the case of the Sgen-CFDT; a 6 percent loss for the SNES, the secondary largest teachers’ union and the main FSU organisation; some 4 percent in the case of UNSA.



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