

France: high school students demonstrate against education “reforms”

A WSWS reporting team
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One hundred thousand French high school students struck and demonstrated on February 10 to oppose the law on education reform introduced by François Fillon, education minister in the right-wing government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The number of students participating is even more significant given that nearly half the high schools in the country are currently closed for vacation.

The issue highlighted by the students, a reform of the high school graduation diploma, the *baccalauréat* or “bac,” is just one element in a package of measures that was to be placed before the National Assembly on February 15.

In response to the mass demonstrations, Education Minister Fillon immediately suspended the reform of the “bac” and withdrew it from the parliamentary debate. He confirmed, however, his determination to go ahead with the rest of his proposals.

The student protests followed on the heels of a one-day mass action called by the unions on February 5, in which more than 500,000 people demonstrated throughout France against the deepening attacks of the government of Prime Minister Raffarin and President Jacques Chirac. The February 5 mobilization was directed against legislation to extend working hours beyond the current 35-hour week, as well as other attacks on jobs and democratic rights.

The *World Socialist Web Site* issued a statement to the February 5 protests advancing a socialist strategy to unite workers, pensioners and students against the attacks of the right-wing government and the ruling elite it represents. [See “French workers need a new political perspective: Political issues in the fight against the attacks of Chirac and Raffarin”]

One of the education “reforms” which Fillon has pledged to push through is the suppression in the *lycées*

(high schools) of the popular *travaux personnels encadrés*—guided personal projects that combine different school subjects, free study and research.

Another measure is the institution of a minimum core curriculum, from which artistic subjects would be excluded.

Teachers are also mobilising against an increase in their teaching load in the form of compulsory cover for absent colleagues, with instructors being compelled to teach subjects outside of the fields for which they are qualified.

Other long-standing grievances include excessive class sizes, lack of teachers, the non-replacement of retirees, and a drastic decline in supervisory staff.

The *baccalauréat* is the passport to higher education and should be the guarantee of a good and secure job. But it is increasingly difficult to find decent, stable employment even after several years of higher education. This is because the unemployment rate has hovered around 10 percent for decades, with much higher levels in working class areas and on council estates. High unemployment has been coupled with an enormous expansion of short-term contracts.

For many *lycéens*, the idea that the “bac” will be partially made up of assessments from teachers increases fears of discrimination. If one’s “bac” diploma is awarded to some extent by one’s *lycée*, and this school does not enjoy a good reputation or great prestige, one’s qualification no longer has equal value to that of a student from a top-ranking school. This poses a particularly acute threat to minority students and those who attend schools in working class communities.

The belief in the “bac” as a means of equitable access to further education and employment on the basis of merit has received a severe shock from Fillon’s

proposal to base 20 percent of the grade on the ongoing assessment of teachers.

Youth increasingly feel they live in a society that provides no assured future and which, having creamed off a technical and managerial elite, values them only as a source of cheap and dispensable labour. However, the recurring movements of *lycéens* have been characterised by an avowed hostility to politics. By and large, these protests have not questioned French capitalist society, but rather have sought an answer to the anxieties of students within the present social and economic system.

The WSWS interviewed a number of students on the February 10 demonstration. Thibault, from the Georges Clémenceau Lycée in Villemomble, near Créteil, said: “We are demonstrating today because of the government, who take us for idiots!

“They want us to be sheep, just future workers. There’s no broad perspective in education. It’s just, ‘You will be a worker, you will be a boss,’ you know? We are here to show that we’re aware, that we think, that we’re not going to lie down with everything that’s happening. We’ve seen this before.”

Soza, a classmate, said: “It’s a general revolt. I think today the police are really vicious towards the youth. There are some really repressive laws, the Sarkozy laws and the Perben laws. Next, we’ll all be branded delinquents. We’ll have no more freedom. We’re against France becoming like the US, where teenagers spend years in prison for juvenile offences.”

Florian, Soza’s friend, added: “We go to school to study, not to be frisked!”

Thibault said: “The high school diploma from our area will be worthless. We go to school in an area and our education will be for the labour market in that area.”

Samuel, 15, from the Louis Bascan Lycee in Rambouillet, told the WSWS: “The conditions in our school are OK for the moment, but with the Fillon law, that’s going to change. They want to eliminate the TPE—student personal study projects which allow us to experiment. It’s not good for students to eliminate them.

“It’s scary. They’re going to cut dance, drama and the rest. It’s ridiculous, because these courses are good, and it’s all because there’s not enough money. There’ll be even fewer jobs, even fewer teachers.

“Currently, the examinations ~~will~~ ^{at} the anonymous. Someone who comes from a school in a poor area will be judged the same as someone who comes from a very expensive and private school. They are judged by the same standard. With the continuous assessment proposed in the reform, if you have some bad teachers who give bad marks, you won’t get your diploma. It’s no longer anonymous.”

Fanny, 17, from the *Jean d’Albret Lycée* in Saint Germain en Laye, told the WSWS: “We are demonstrating against the bill to reform the high school diploma, against the elimination of the anonymous exams and against the elimination of some subjects and options. This reform means discrimination by inequality because of schools which are not all of the same level—two-tier education.

“I don’t know if the minister will have to withdraw the bill because of the student mobilization. They don’t think about the future society—they think only of money and their own personal wealth. We should leave the system as it is now if we don’t want France to deteriorate. Otherwise, it’s going to get worse everywhere ... we won’t be able to live in solidarity—there will be inequalities all the time.

“I don’t know if other political parties offer an alternative. I think the most important thing now is for young people to mobilize so the government sees that young people are not at all in agreement with this, that we have a right to our opinions, and I think that certain parties want to propose some alternatives, but you also have to let young people express themselves.”



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