French high school students continue their struggle

Antoine Lerougetel
11 April 2005

French high school students (*lycéens*) in revolt against so-called education reform are organising their own referendums against the Raffarin government's education policy in hundreds of schools throughout France. More than 90 percent of students taking part in the referendums have voted *No* against education minister François Fillon's new law.

According to a count carried out March 31 by the *Coordination lycéenne* (high school student coordinating committee), 180 *lycées* are still blockaded, occupied or closed in France. One week after the Fillon law was voted in the National Assembly, the movement is continuing and beginning to coordinate.

The main Paris demonstration March 31 gathered several hundred striking students between the Place de la République and the Panthéon. The *lycées* in the Latin Quarter, until then on the sidelines, were blockaded, except the Montaigne *lycée* where the parents have opposed the striking students. The teacher unions will join the pupils on April 2 in demonstrations planned in Paris, Ajaccio, Lyons, Marseilles, Metz, Rennes, Toulouse and Clermont-Ferrand.

The government has not been able to disarm the *lycéen* opposition movement, which has expressed itself in massive street demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of pupils, mass meetings in the schools, sleep-ins and blockades of schools. Fillon, after the demonstrations February 15 in hundreds of towns and involving 150,000 students, temporarily withdrew the highly contested section on the reform of the *baccalauréat* considered by the *lycéens* as an attack on pupils' equality of opportunity. Its value as a national diploma would be undermined if certain written exams, which are identical for all, were replaced by continuous assessment included in the marks. This would breach a tradition of equality because marks from schools in wealthier areas would be rated higher.

The *lycéens* fear also problems of discrimination against immigrant pupils since anonymity is not maintained in continuous assessment. This retreat by Fillon only served to strengthen the *lycéens'* confidence in their struggle and their contempt for the minister whose manoeuvre they were well able to see through.

They have continued their struggle and broadened their demands: for the complete withdrawal of the reform, the improvement of conditions in the *lycées*, and a stop to the axing of teaching posts and those of supervising staff and other workers and the closing down of options.

Other points in the law that the lycéens oppose are the elimination of the popular TPE (guided personal work, which provides the opportunity for autonomous research on a cross-subject project directed by the pupil with the aid of teachers). Another bone of contention is the *tronc commun*—the core subjects and knowledge and skills, dubbed the *SMIC culturel*—the cultural minimum wage. This would be an educational minimum that all pupils would be supposed to receive. The *lycéens* fear that the government is planning a two-tier education in which the majority will receive the basic minimum while a quality education will be the preserve of the elite.

The law makes the *Marseillaise*, the national anthem of the French bourgeoisie, obligatory in primary schools. It also gives head teachers the right to impose two extra hours of teaching on top of teachers' timetables to replace absent colleagues.

On March 8, the high school students demonstrated in the tens of thousands against Fillon's law. Then, two days later, they massively joined the general strike and demonstrations of workers from the private and the public sectors called by the trade unions against the dismantling of the 35-hour week and the decline in purchasing power.

As a result of this mobilisation, the government offered the trade unions salary negotiations. The trade unions called off the mobilisation and abandoned the *lycéens*, who had placed great hopes in the joining up of their movement with that of the workers and trade unions.

In this context, the coordinating committee of delegates from the Amiens *lycées* invited the WSWS to observe their meeting on March 30 at the Dewailly meeting rooms in Amiens.

Some 20 pupils and a few student supervisors (*surveillants*) met, representing the majority of the Amiens *lycées* and also the *lycée* of Albert, a town some 20 kilometres from Amiens. They discussed the usefulness of a referendum of high school students on the Fillon law in giving the lie to comments in the media stating that the opposition movement in the *lycées* was just a minority. The results of the only Amiens lycée to have carried one out, Robert de Luzarches, are fairly conclusive: with 56 percent voting, 93 percent of the votes expressed a *No* to the Fillon law. The delegates of several other schools decided to organise a referendum in their school using—as Robert de Luzarches had done—the system of class delegates to set it up, not without some concern about the cooperation of the head teachers in this.

Valentin, an Albert delegate, reported that out of 900 pupils, 600 had been absent on Friday in a joint pupil/parent action and that the action had continued on Tuesday with a slightly reduced participation.

An assessment was made of the sleep-in by some 60 students at the Edouard Gant *lycée* the previous Thursday. Doubts were expressed as to the effectiveness of this action as a means of developing the consciousness of high school students in regard to the seriousness of the stakes in the reform for the future of young people. The action had merited a photograph and a few lines in the local press and a mention on local television. A supervisor delegate said that "it must be constructive" and they had to beware of "sterile activism." Another delegate pointed out that "there must be a conscious understanding first and then an occupation. Most students are not aware of what the law will bring."

Lucie, a member of the FIDL (Fédération indépendante et démocratique de lycéens—Independent and democratic federation of high school students), one of the national *lycéen* unions, said, "We must carry out some actions. It's urgent!" She proposed a blockade of the *lycée* Robert de Luzarches the next morning, which was agreed to. The action, in fact, was a success, despite the intervention of the school administration, and was established by some 200 pupils who stayed outside to demonstrate their

© World Socialist Web Site

opposition to the Fillon law.

A discussion ensued on the possibility of waging a struggle against a law that had already been passed and the problems involved in keeping the movement going despite the pressure from the school administrations, the teachers and the approach of the baccalauréat at the end of May. Jonathan, a student supervisor and a member of the MJC (Movement de jeunes communistes, Young Communist Movement, affiliated to the French Communist Party—PCF), observed that "a reform can be made and unmade." Vincent, the delegate from the *lycée* Delambre, said that the dominant attitude in his school was that since "the law has been passed, there's not much you can do about it."

The possibility of a motorway toll occupation, as had been done in the south of France, was discussed, but the concrete details were left until the next Wednesday's meeting of the committee.

The fact was raised that the ministry of education had authorised the dispatch of brochures supporting the European constitution to schools to be distributed to final-year students. Several delegates expressed their opposition to this unacceptable intrusion by the government into the national education service. They also recognised the direct link between the Lisbon agenda (the European Union plan, decided upon in 2000, to make the EU the most competitive economy in the world by reducing the cost of labour and public services) and the government offensive against the quality of education for all in France. The opinion that prevailed, however, was that of Nicolas from Robert de Luzarches: he insisted that the *lycéens* would neither understand nor accept the broadening of their movement to include the issue of opposition to the constitution.

The determination and combativity shown by the *lycéens* in struggle are unquestionable; however, it is clear that they are presently at a political impasse, a fact many of them will readily admit. The entire political establishment supports the EU agenda. The high school students, as with the whole French working class, cannot proceed without developing an alternative political perspective to both the Raffarin government and the official left (Socialist and Communist parties), rooted in an understanding of the depth of the crisis of capitalism and the need for a socialist, internationalist programme.

The Socialist and Communist leaders seek only thing—the suppression of the students' strike as quickly and painlessly as possible, or its use as a means of putting a certain amount of pressure on the Raffarin government. They have memories of 1968 and even more recent events, when student movements in France have provided a spark to a broader movement of the working population as a whole. The "far left"— the LCR (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire—the Revolutionary Communist League, LO (Lutte ouvrière—Workers Fight) and the PT (Parti des travailleurs—Workers Party)—operates principally to ensure that mass movements never stray beyond the control of the Stalinists and social democrats.

A small group of delegates stayed to take part in an interview with the WSWS, including Vincent, a first-year student from the *lycée* Delambre, Charlotte from the *lycée* Thuiller, Lucie and Morgane, literary second-year pupils from Robert de Luzarches, and Valentin, scientific second-year student from the Albert *lycée*.

The WSWS asked the students what had sparked off the movement. They replied that it was Fillon's law in all its aspects: continuous assessment, the common core of subjects, the axing of options.

WSWS: What have been your experiences in the struggle?

Vincent: Demos, occupations, a referendum.

Lucie: Meeting people, making contacts, realising that we're all in it together. It's very important.

Vincent: We've been in action since after the February holidays, that is since February 24.

WSWS: How did you react to the temporary withdrawal of the reform of the "bac"?

Lucie: We well understood that it was to cool us down, to take the wind out of our sails. They'll quietly get round to it later, during the "bac," for example.

Valentin: The "bac" is the question which affects most people. Being in first year, I myself am very much concerned. The "bac" is France's future, it's a part of France.

Lucie: In defending the 'bac,' we are defending our education, the basis of our education, all future generations. We are not fighting just for ourselves, we are fighting for France and for the future. It's a dangerous reform in the long term.

WSWS: I was impressed by a leaflet in the name of the Amiens and Albert Coordinating Committee that very strongly emphasises egalitarianism.

Lucie: There already exist inequalities in the "bac" between different *lycées*, and continuous assessment in the "bac" means creating a divide and falling straight into the gap. A reform is fine, but a good reform, a reform that strengthens education.

Valentin: You can see it with the *Brevet de collèges* [a state examination taken at 15 at the end of the first cycle of secondary education]; it's continuous assessment and is worthless.

Lucie: We could see it coming. They don't speak about the National Education, now it's just education and a lot of people haven't realised.

WSWS: Would you say that your struggle is for an egalitarian society?

Valentin: Already the common core creates a two-tier society.

Lucie: It's very, very vague, this common core. Already, there's no history in this common core, when the very basis of citizenship is knowing the history of your country.

WSWS: Since the Devaquet reform in 1986, there have been successive waves of *lycéen* struggles against elitism. The government had to back down in 1986.

Valentin: Because of the murder of Malik Oussékine.

WSWS: In 1986, with Jacques Chirac prime minister, the minister of the interior, Charles Pasqua, had brutally repressed the demonstrations and two students were killed by the police. There were also provocateurs who had attacked the demonstrators.

Lucie: We saw the problem of provocateurs who got into the March 8 demonstration. There were a lot of them, nearly a thousand. We wonder if they were not organised by the government. The police let them get on with it, did not intervene. That put a lot of people off.

WSWS: On March 10, there were many people in the street, a million strikers. How did you react when there was no follow up?

Lucie: A big disappointment.

Valentin: There was no follow up, the movement broke up straight away. But there are a huge amount of social movements right now.

Lucie: The fishermen, Eurostar, the Right to a Home organisation had called for a big demonstration. They told the mayor of Amiens, "Don't forget that the poor also have the right to vote." It was a call for a rebellion. The problem is that the media really hide it. Information becomes disinformation. Very little is said about the *lycéen* movement, and they know that this could break the movement and we are afraid that it will work. That's why we are trying to carry out actions.

WSWS: But how do you account for the breaking up of the movement after March 10?

Lucie: The *lycéens* feel isolated in the struggle. The "bac" is our symbol, and that is what we are defending, but at the same time we are afraid of this government, afraid of what it wants to do with coming generations. The *lycéens* need the parents, the families, the teachers to be with us. It is vital in order to continue. We need the parents' support.

Vincent: Teachers, pupils, parents must mobilise.

WSWS: Your movement is part of a movement, resistance on a world scale. Do you think that it's possible to definitively win your demands by fighting at the level of the *lycées* and at a national level?

© World Socialist Web Site

Valentin: We need a wider vision.

Lucie: The *lycéens* have weight, a very great force. They are the future of the country. They frighten the government. We can take advantage of the social situation in relation to the referendum on the constitution, which is bad for us. But on our own, we can run out of steam. There is a lot of discontent, but it's not unified. Everyone organises their own demonstration. We need a call for a general demonstration, not necessarily a strike, we would see what that would do. The problem is that the unions have an enormous power. I don't know if we could make a call independently of the unions so that everyone was in the street for all their demands.

WSWS: What does it mean to win this fight? Can we win if Fillon and Chirac stay or even if they are replaced by the Plural Left?

Lucie: The lycéens want the immediate withdrawal of the reform and not to go towards a neo-liberal Europe. But behind these movements, there is also a desire to overthrow this government and to radically change what has been done.

Valentin: There is no great difference between this government and the Plural Left [Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens].

Lucie: What we want is a radical change. Are we going to achieve it?

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site