

# French government orders police crackdown against high school protesters

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The mass protest movement of French high school students, *lycéens*, against education minister François Fillon's education law, now well into its third month, is being met with increasing state violence. The students are up in arms against a measure which they consider undermines equality of opportunity for youth, has a built-in bias against children from poor backgrounds, and degrades the general quality of education for all. They are also campaigning against the under-resourcing of the school system.

The existing high school student unions, the FIDL (Independent and Democratic Federation of High School Students) and the UNL (National Union of High School Students), have now been somewhat marginalized by the emergence of coordinating committees or collectives made up of delegates from the different *lycées* in an area.

The failure of enormous strikes and demonstrations, involving hundreds of thousands of *lycéens*, to force the government to abrogate the law, as well as the conscious isolation of the movement by the teacher unions, has led the committees to adopt a tactic of picketing and blockading schools and carrying out spectacular actions such as occupations of schools and education administration buildings.

François Fillon has reacted with characteristic cold ruthlessness. He has issued "extremely firm instructions" to clear pickets from the schools. He declared in the Senate on 9 April that "Each time there is a blockade, there will be an intervention with all the necessary means."

He attempted to minimise the depth and extent of the *lycéen* movement. "I will not allow a tiny minority to block the functioning of the education system a few weeks from the 'bac' exam." The minister also declared: "The law has been passed. I will never accept

that the work of universal suffrage be undermined."

Dominique de Villepin, minister of the interior and France's top cop, justified his brutal deployment of the police: "I did this at the request of François Fillon. We must ensure the respect of our entire national territory and the freedom of access to *lycées* and schools." Referring to clashes the previous day between *lycéens* and the police, the minister claimed that he had acted against "several violent and aggressive small groups who attacked public buildings and the police."

The police are reported to have intervened in the early morning of April 8 at the Charlemagne *lycée* to dislodge the occupation there. "The students, who thought that it was illegal to beat people carrying out a sit in, were in for a surprise," said Raoul Salzberg, the chairman of the school section of the FCPE (Federation of Students' Parents Councils), a parents' association which was itself taking part in the blockade.

According to an Agence France Presse estimate April 7, about one hundred high schools—including approximately 50 in the Paris region, some 20 in Midi-Pyrénées and 9 in Franche-Comté—have been closed, blockaded or were not functioning normally due to demonstrations or partial blockades.

The FIDL student union, which had called for blockades, calculated that 370 *lycées* had mobilised in France. Trouble broke out between students and the police, notably during a demonstration in Lille where two people were slightly injured and about ten arrested, and at Béziers during an attempt to occupy a *lycée*, which resulted in the arrest of seven students.

In Paris, a girl student from the Balzac *lycée* (XVIIth arrondissement) was injured and had to go to hospital after being struck by a car which was trying to force its way through a student sit-down in front of a group of CRS riot police which was trying to shift them.

At the Voltaire *lycée* in the XIth arrondissement, blocking the school just for fun but we must be heard,” explained Sabrina, who added, however: “Tomorrow I’m going back to my lessons, I’ve got the ‘bac’ in June.”

*Libération* reported April 8 a scene at the Paris *rectorat* (education administration) showing both the popular sympathy enjoyed by the protesting *lycéens* and the rejection of Fillon and de Villepin’s attempts to criminalise them.

“A member of staff of the Paris *rectorat* screamed to her colleagues upstairs: ‘Come down! Your kids might be there ... You’re not going to let them get beaten up, are you?’ It was 1 pm yesterday and the police had just entered. Five hundred pupils had been occupying the *rectorat* for over an hour, on the ground floor. The CRS dragged them away to the accompaniment of boos: ‘We are peaceful!’ A cordon of *rectorat* staff tried to protect them. Pulled up by their legs and dragged by their arms, the girls and boys were hauled along the ground, some with their arms violently bent behind their backs.”

The account continues: “‘What do they think they are doing?’ shouted the *rectorat* workers. ‘We’ll have to take Fillon to court!’ They photographed the scene with their mobile phones. A woman, close to tears, said: ‘It’s horrible...’ In the street the youth held their hands to their backs and heads. Many are in a state of shock. There is talk of a broken arm. Régine Gallet, a delegate of the teachers union SUD Education on a visit to the *rectorat*, is boiling: ‘There’s Fillon’s response to the legitimate worries of the *lycéens* about the future they’re preparing for them: brutality and police batons. It is intolerable.’ During the afternoon, 200 students demonstrated near the ministry of education. They get clubbed. Then, at the Sorbonne university the CRS beat even harder. The *lycéens* sit down brandishing their school books.”

The press reported April 9 that at the Claude-Bernard *lycée* in the XVIth arrondissement of Paris lessons had been blocked for a week. “Look at the flag flying over the gate: liberty, equality, fraternity. The law does not respect equality,” protested Magdalena. She’s a scientific final year student and she fears that the plan to change the ‘bac’, with an element of continuous assessment, may not be completely dropped. “The ‘bac’ is sacred,” affirmed Jérémie. “We are not

The teacher unions and the opposition have denounced the use of force and called for dialogue. According the FIDL, the police “literally beat up” students, notably in Paris, Lille and Béziers. “The minister has no arguments, so he batons the *lycéens* to shut them up,” complains a FIDL communiqué. “We *lycéens* will defend our education to the end and we condemn a minister who uses batons and tear gas to keep us quiet.” “The incidents which have marred the *lycéens*’ actions are worrying,” declared a UNSA-Education teacher union communiqué. For its part, the FSU education union federation denounced the “police repression” and Fillon’s “rejection of dialogue” which “gives the worst of lessons in democracy” to the pupils. The minister “is, in this way, creating the conditions for worsening the crisis.”

Julian Dray, for the Socialist Party, deplored “a “worsening” of the situation and stressed “the urgency of starting real discussions.” The Communist Party denounced the government’s “provocations.” “Strong arm tactics will only exacerbate the situation and the Raffarin government will be to blame,” it said in a communiqué.

The Socialist Party and the Communist Party were partners in the former “Plural Left” government of Lionel Jospin, whose education minister Claude Allègre was forced to resign in 1999 following mass movements of students and teachers against his austerity measures.



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