

French higher education law opens way for privatisation

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On August 1, the French parliament adopted a new law on university reform by a vote of 165 to 46. Opposition Socialist Party (PS) deputies (those present), the Greens and the Communist Party (Parti communist français—PSF) voted against the law. SP leaders, however, have already indicated they are not opposed to a reform of French universities in principle—merely that it should take place at a slower pace. Speaking for the government, Higher Education Minister Valérie Pécresse emphasised that the current measure is “only the beginning ... we cannot invest more without having changed the method of management.”

At the same time, the right-wing Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy is pledged to reduce by 17,000 the number of teachers in secondary education by next year. This is part of its policy to halve the number of government employees.

The main thrust of government policy on the universities is the increased privatisation of public higher education through “autonomy,” giving each university control of its budget and the university’s assets. This autonomy is to be implemented over a five-year period when the government will be investing an extra €1 billion annually, totalling €5 billion.

University presidents will have greater powers. They will be able to veto appointments proposed by commissions of teachers and have greater recourse to staff on short-term contracts, not benefiting from the rights and conditions of regular state employees with civil service status. Another innovation, forging closer links to the private sector, will be the right of universities to create charitable foundations.

University boards of governors will be reduced from 60 members to 20 or 30 made up of teaching staff, administrative personnel and three student representatives. A new element will be the presence of eight external members, probably drawn from business and industry.

Taken together the measures represent a fundamental assault on French state education and a sizeable shift towards an increasingly business-oriented system based on privatisation and commercialisation.

Various trade unions and parent-teacher organizations, led by the university lecturers union SNESUP, held a press conference July 24, a week before the law was passed, denouncing it as an

attack on basic rights. They feared the “competitive mechanisms between universities and individuals” would lead to “a hierarchy of universities and open the door to their unequal development, encouraged by the race for financing and the disengagement of the state.” Jean Fabbri, SNESUP general secretary, called for the law to be defeated and “a dynamic mobilization” after the holiday period, noting that “a strike is not excluded.”

However this mild rebuke from the trade unions was too much for the main student union UNEF (National Union of French Students), which is close to the Socialist Party. Its president Bruno Julliard explained that “in the present state of things, to ask for the law to be withdrawn is for us not a good strategy.... To work for its overturn, we need a student mobilisation and we are at the end of July [the holiday period].” Under these circumstances, Julliard was therefore hoping for “some genuine amendments” before the law was passed to make it more “acceptable.” In reality Julliard and the UNEF leadership have abandoned any opposition to the reform after assurances by President Sarkozy that a selection process for students enrolling for a master’s degree would not be included in the law.

Prime Minister François Fillon, in a statement before parliament on July 3, set out his objectives: “We are going to reconstruct French universities.... For 25 years, through lack of courage, we have accepted selection [at university] by failure rather than by orientation and merit.” The reaction by Julliard was positive. “We finally know why this important reform has been launched, and we share the objectives announced,” he said. The July 4 edition of the pro-Sarkozy *Le Figaro* spelt out these objectives: “The new version of the bill, rewritten last week to calm rising tensions of a section of the university community, retains the essential features of the reform: the reinforced powers for university presidents, and an increased university autonomy.”

The French employers’ federation MEDEF and its president Laurence Parisot have a clear idea where these reforms must lead—more selection and training oriented to the needs of business. The MEDEF wants to see state funds “tied to the employability of students” and an increase in tuition fees encouraging “students to be responsible and obtaining a greater

commitment from them.” The employers seek the creation of charitable foundations “with favourable financial incentives for donors” and “the possibility of universities to conclude contracts with companies enabling them to generate their own resources.”

The government stress on university “autonomy” and the turn towards business are bound up with the European Union Lisbon strategy aimed at making European capitalism more competitive on the world market. The European Commission published a report in 2006 entitled “The Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation.” The report urged member states to press ahead with the ‘modernisation’ of Europe’s universities, which should be implemented by the end of 2007.

“Like France, all the EU member states are facing competition from their rivals, particularly China and India,” the report stated. “The rapid growth of Asian universities is now challenging Europe in terms of the output of doctoral candidates in science and engineering. This will threaten the position of Europe as the most competitive and innovative economy in the world as stated in the Lisbon objectives.” According to the report: “University programs should be structured to directly enhance the employability of graduates and to offer broad support to the workforce more generally.” As for financing, “It should be based on what universities *Do* and not what they *Are*. Universities should take greater responsibility for their long-term financial sustainability, through working with industry, foundations and private resources.”

The fight to defend the right of access to higher education and quality training does not date from the Lisbon agenda or originate in the EU. On two previous occasions the French elite tried to impose “financial autonomy” on universities to reduce state spending and limit the number of students, now standing at 2.2 million. In 1986 the Devaquet reform, under Socialist Party President Mitterrand, was dropped after a student revolt in which student Malik Oussekiné was killed, a victim of police repression. In 2003, right-wing Education Minister Luc Ferry tried again to impose the reforms, but backed down in the face of student/teacher opposition.

The current minister of higher education, Valérie Pécresse, expressed the frustration of the French elite, commenting, “We have waited too long. From Allègre to Lang, everyone has agreed on the necessity of a reform for 15 years.” Claude Allègre and Jack Lang are former education ministers from the Socialist Party. Lang, on radio RTL, applauded the reform, saying it “gave breathing space to universities.” He has recently joined President Sarkozy’s reform commission on state institutions.

François Hollande, Socialist Party first secretary, expressed his support for reform whilst remaining apprehensive and cautious not to rekindle the mass movement of opposition that forced the Chirac/Villepin government to abrogate the First Job

Contract (CPE) law last year. “Everyone should get together to put French universities into the category of excellence without rushing,” he said.

A July 5 article in *Le Point* highlights the frustration and urgent desire by the French ruling elite to privatise higher education, thus making it inaccessible to working class youth. “To bring French universities up to European standards, 10 billion extra euros a year would be needed. The only credible solution for financing higher education at a suitable level rests with a substantial increase of enrolment fees. Because university poverty is a measure of what each student pays to enrol, a little less than 180 euros a year; less than his/her monthly mobile phone bill. Such is the pitiful sum for enrolment at university ... which makes the young believe that virtually free university studies are the key to success.”

The reasons given by Valérie Pécresse for “autonomy” underline the spurious nature of the reform. “Each year 90,000 students leave university without a diploma” and “French universities are lost at the bottom of international rankings.” This situation must be remedied, she said, “by granting reinforced powers to university presidents and a large autonomy.” The projected extra funding is largely to promote the development of elite establishments. Greater public investment to make up for years of neglect in higher education, leading to large numbers of unqualified students, is certainly not an option for this government. The French state spends €6,800 a year per student compared to an average of €9,000 in the developed countries of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development).

The European elite are well aware of the challenges involved in cutting state higher education, especially in France where social gains have yet to be sacrificed in the same way as under Thatcher and Blair in Britain, and under Schröder in Germany.

This priority was spelled out by Richard Lambert, director general of the CBI employers’ organization, who wrote in the *Financial Times* June 5, 2006: “Given the fiscal constraints of Europe, all the big countries in Europe will sooner or later have to introduce tuition fees. The UK has started the process and Germany is moving in the same direction. The political challenge in France will be enormous.”



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