

French student protesters: “Everything is directed at the government’s policy of social destruction”

Our reporters

12 November 2007

WSWS reporters spoke to demonstrators protesting in Paris last Thursday against the Law on the Freedom and Responsibilities (LRU). (See “French students mobilise against university reform”) Drawn up by Valérie Pécresse, the minister for higher education, it is also known as the University Autonomy Law.

The student protests are part of a wave of opposition movements involving all sections of public sector workers, as well as workers in private industry, against the policies of the right-wing Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy. Students fear that the government’s proposed university reform will seriously erode student rights and conditions.

Hibert and Granger, geography students at Tolbiac University in Paris, said that the central question of the movement student is opposition to the Pécresse law. “Fifteen universities are blockaded,” one said. “We don’t think that a day of action will get the law repealed. I think that the mobilisation will grow with the support of student unions like UNEF and SUD.”

The WSWS asked what they thought of the support by UNEF (National Student Union of France, close to the Socialist Party—SP) for the law in the summer and its decision not to oppose it.

“We didn’t know about that. The unions are trying to rally the students after returning to the campuses, but in the summer students were on holiday. The university students must concentrate on the [Pécresse] law. The rail workers and the retirement ‘special pensions’ are independent issues. They want to link them together. They are two completely different things.”

Morgan, a political science and history student at Tolbiac University, said: “University autonomy equals privatisation of higher education. With a mobilisation,

blockading and demonstrations, we hope that it’s possible to repeal the law.”

She went on: “Most students support continuing the mobilisation and we are organising general assemblies (mass meetings) to check that. We don’t want to go against student wishes. The problem is method because there are people who oppose the blockading of universities who are in favour of the law, conservatives and right-wing unions.

The WSWS asked whether it was important for students to unite with workers defending their ‘special pension’ rights and the public sector.

Morgan said, “We have demonstrated with them, however, we can’t mix things up.

“Personally, I’m not in a union. We are worried that the unions might take over the mobilisation. The main UNEF union is very popular and tries to manipulate the movement now that it has grown. Now they are opposed to the law that they voted for and negotiated. Now they are changing their minds. There are many non-unionised students in the mobilisation and we are trying to extend it and prevent the government from purging the movement by closing faculties [lockouts] preventing us from debating with people, explaining why this action is necessary.”

Mathieu, a maths student at Caen University in Normandy, said: “I haven’t been to the general assemblies, I’m not very informed but in solidarity. We oppose the LRU reform that was rushed through in the summer.

“The political significance is the context. A lot of things are coming together. Next week rail workers are striking, then the public sector, so everything is directed at the government’s policy of social

destruction. I'm counting on the student unions because that can give the mobilisation a framework."

The WSWS pointed out that Bruno Julliard [leader of UNEF and close associate of the SP] supported the law and asked why he now calls for strike action.

Mathieu said: "That's odd, but yes, that is right. Perhaps it was his strategy. With the fear of losing credibility, they are now obliged to follow the movement."

Giro, a sociology student at Paris VII university, said: "In general, we have a very bad government, along the American lines. I don't count on the student unions. They are not well known enough. They are not even united. We have a problem of unions in France."

Asked what he thought of the complicity of the French government with the Bush administration, the Iraq war and the preparation for war against Iran, Giro answered: "Sarkozy is something different for the French. We have a pro-American president. Sarkozy is making an error in this. A big majority of French people are anti-American. They don't like them, (not the people I mean), above all their politics, for example the Iraq war.

"Before the election, I voted for the Socialist Party. After, it is obvious there is criticism of the left. It will take time for it to be reconstructed. There were, all the same, big differences between Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal [the defeated Socialist Party presidential candidate]. But there is no hope for the left in the next few years. Everyone voted for the right. The left is not united. Nothing can be done. I'll vote for the left whatever happens."

Gregoire, maths student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, told the WSWS: "The political significance of the movement, for the moment, is the demand for the abrogation of the LRU law. I think there are also other demands. Clearly it is important to join up with other sections [of workers] to reply to the government attacks on rail workers, public sector workers and students ... and we must all react together against the government's attacks."



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