

French students mobilise against university reform

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On Thursday, November 8, about a thousand students from Paris universities took part in a demonstration to protest against the university reform known as *La Loi Pécresse* or *LRU* (*Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités*—Law concerning the Freedom and Responsibilities of the Universities, also known as the Law on the Autonomy of the Universities).

They marched from the Place de la Bastille to the Ministry of Higher Education, situated in the Latin Quarter. Their banners read: “Against the privatisation of education,” “Tomorrow studying will mean getting 10 years into debt,” “Culture is expensive. Not as much as lack of it [*inculture*].” *World Socialist Web Site* supporters handed out leaflets of the WSWs statement “France: The struggle against Sarkozy requires a new political perspective” and the article “French higher education law opens way for privatisation.”

On the same day, a number of demonstrations took place in other cities throughout France: in Rennes, Toulouse, Lille, Perpignan, Aix-en-provence, Caen and Nancy and others. On the banners of the different protests were such slogans as: “We got you on the CPE, Pécresse we’ll get you too” (referring to the movement in 2006 against the First Job Contract and Valérie Pécresse, the minister for higher education), “Withdraw the Pécresse Law, student-worker solidarity,” “With the Pécresse Law, university distress.”

Protests and blockades are developing throughout the country. More than 50 of the 84 universities have held mass meetings and about 30 have voted for abrogation of the law.

The law, adopted by the French parliament in August, allows universities more autonomy to manage their assets and budgets, recruit staff and design courses, create partnerships with business and look for additional funding from private financial corporations. It also gives special power to university heads.

The demonstrations in Paris was organised by the *Collectif contre l’autonomie des universités* (CCAU—The Collective against the Autonomy of the Universities) which comprises *la Fédération syndicale Etudiante* (FSE—Student Union Federation), *l’Union des Etudiants communistes* (UEC—the Stalinist Union of Communist Students), *les Jeunesses communistes* (JC—the Communist Youth) and the youth wing of the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR—Revolutionary Communist League). A few militants from the UNEF (National Student Union of France—the main student union, close to the Socialist Party) participated in the demonstration. A number of university teachers also took part.

Participants denounced the privatization of higher education, the risks of the diktat of private companies, an increase in subscription fees, and worsening social inequality. They expressed the fear that the integration of private companies in the governing boards and their financing of the universities would allow companies to fund only the subjects oriented to business needs. This means that subjects like literature, history, sociology, etc., may not be funded and could be suppressed.

According to *Liberation*, on November 9, “in some universities the movement had started in the spring, at the time of the negotiations on the university autonomy bill. It had stopped during the summer. It has been given a boost by the worsening of the social climate, with the October 18 transport strike.”

The government is denouncing the student protests and blockades as an essentially political movement fomented by the far left, which is pursuing its own aims to the detriment of the interests of the students. The university administrations are falling into line with Sarkozy. According to Jean-Pierre Finance, the first vice president of the Conference of University Presidents, small groups of far-left students “are taking advantage of the current social tensions to come out of the woodwork and to

mobilise the students. Also adding to this are the students who resent the wide gap between the government's announcements of reforms and their daily life."

Valérie Pécresse met with the students' unions on November 7 and 8 for discussions. She reminded them that the law had been negotiated and that it was out of the question to modify it. Concerning accommodation, she supported an amendment from the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) deputy Laurent Hénart proposing to add €11 million to the proposed 2008 budget.

At the end of the meeting with Pécresse on Wednesday, November 7, Bruno Julliard, the leader of UNEF and a close associate of the Socialist Party, claimed that this proposed increase was "a clear concession to the mobilisation." He told the press that this extra funding was "a good sign," though "insufficient." He added, "The first lesson I draw is that the students are right to mobilise. They must continue and build up the mobilisation so as to win other concessions."

This represents a noticeable shift in the UNEF's position. When the law was adopted in the parliament, the UNEF accommodated itself to it. They have not opposed it. Julliard opined: "The abrogation of the law cannot be attained, above all, on its own, it won't get the students mobilised." The UNEF denounced the excessive firmness of the government, fearing that it would provoke a radicalisation of the movement.

Granting more autonomy for universities is part of the European Union's Lisbon Strategy, set out by the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 "to make Europe, by 2010, the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world." Such a reform has been an objective of the EU bourgeoisie for many years and has already been implemented in many EU countries.

The main concern among French business circles is that France is behind in making such reforms to compete in a global knowledge-based economy. They argue that making such a reform is vital for French capitalism, which is falling behind its rivals.

In the face the mounting wave of opposition developing against his policies, Sarkozy insists he will pursue his reform programmes. "Don't worry," he declared on November 6 in Washington to the big business bosses of the French-American Business Council, "France has retreated too much in the past, she can't retreat anymore."

The Socialist Party has given no support to the student protests and its position is similar to that of the UNEF. It expresses its support for the principle of the law and

concentrates on the highly divisive question of the blockades. The conservative daily *Le Figaro* of November 9 quotes Antoine Détourné of the MJS (Movement of Young Socialists, the youth wing of the SP): "The blockades may be a means of enlarging the movement, but today it is not necessarily by blocking a university that one can convince the students."

In fact, spectacular actions like the blockades—and, in this case, a false intransigence imposed by anarchist and petty bourgeois radicals—are to the detriment of a real debate over the political perspectives needed by students and workers to overcome the offensive of the French and European bourgeoisie against their rights and living standards.

Students are left unprepared politically and isolated by their unions. All the students' unions, as well as the Communist Party and the LCR, are supporting blockades and limiting the movement to the abrogation of the LRU. The political questions are buried in the concept that the government can be pressured to concede on this or that element of its overall programme under the slogan: "*C'est dans la rue que tout se joue*" (It's all decided on the streets).

Last year, the unions acted to stifle and contain the struggle against the First Job Contract (CPE), which had become a head-on contest with the prime minister, Dominique de Villepin. They limited it to the single issue of the CPE and avoided opposition to the drive by the government to destroy social and democratic rights. They thus paved the way for the election of Sarkozy and his administration and the present acceleration of the government's offensive against workers and youth.



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