

University authorities use police repression against striking French students

Kumaran Rahul, Pierre Mabut
21 November 2007

Over 200 student delegates representing 64 French universities (out of 86 state-run institutions in the country) and three technical colleges met in the city of Tours on Sunday to decide the future of their struggle against the creeping privatisation of higher education. This was the second meeting of the National Student Co-ordinating Committee, which represents students participating in general assemblies at universities involved in the mobilisation.

Students are protesting a new law on Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities (LRU). The new law would open the way for greater private investment in state universities, subordinating university organization more directly to the interests of big business. The main student unions, especially the National Union of Students of France (UNEF), which is close to the Socialist Party, are in favour of the law, albeit with demands for a larger education budget.

As of Friday, 43 universities were affected by strike action, of which 28 have been shut down. Last week, some 22,000 students participated in 33 general assemblies. The meeting in Tours voted a resolution which read in part: "We call on high school students to organise general assemblies everywhere, to prepare a strike beginning November 20. We will do everything to make the strike day of the 20, accompanied by workers in struggle, a success. We propose that students, rail workers, gas, electricity workers and the RATP (metro) organise together on November 21 to popularise their strike with transport users and the population."

It also called for a day of strikes and demonstrations on November 22. A spokesperson for the Committee said, "We call on high school students to join us in the fight by walks outs and blockades, as in the CPE [First Job Contract law in 2006, withdrawn by the De

Villepin government]. We must build a united movement of youth and workers to strike back against the government offensive...The strike will continue until the Pécresse (Higher Education Minister) Law is withdrawn."

The intransigence of Minister Valérie Pécresse is in line with president Nicolas Sarkozy's frontal assault on all social gains of workers in a previous period. Interviewed by *Le Parisien* on November 18, Pécresse declared, "Strikes in universities: I'm not worried. This law on autonomy (LRU) is vital for the future of universities and the success of students...To abandon this law of the Republic, debated and voted in parliament, would be to give up on any reform of higher education."

On Thursday, UNEF, accompanied by four other student unions (Fage, l'UNI, la Cé and PDE), and university presidents met with Pécresse. The National Co-ordinating Committee and the CCAU (the Collective Against University Autonomy), representing students in struggle, were not invited. Pécresse announced: "There will be no disengagement of the state, no selection of university entrants, no increase in enrolment fees and no privatisation." The president of UNEF, Bruno Julliard, said: "the meeting was not at all conclusive, we must extend the mobilisation."

UNEF and other student unions are trying to keep a grip on the situation, which is escaping their control in the general assemblies. Since the law was adopted, UNEF has accommodated itself to it and opposes its abrogation. It seeks "modifications" with "real negotiations on budgetary questions." The president of the Student Confederation (Cé), Julie Coudry, deplored Pécresse's lack of "response" and demanded budgets on welfare, conditions for studying and renovation of buildings.

Meanwhile the riot police, encouraged by some university presidents, were busy forcibly evicting students from facilities at the Sorbonne and Tolbiac in Paris, in Grenoble III, Nantes Lyon and Montpellier 3. In Rouen, six were arrested and face prosecution. At Rennes, 200 hundred students tried to occupy the railway station and were attacked by 16 vans of riot police. There were five arrests. Police intervened at the Rennes II University to evict occupiers after the president, Marc Gontard, said the students were “behaving like terrorists” and continuing the blockade “with baseball bats under their coats.” He claimed the general assembly decision to blockade the university had been nullified by a “referendum.”

An example of the type of “referendum” he was referring to is an electronic vote organised by the president of Paris 1 university, which comprises a bastion of the student strike movement, in order to discredit the decisions of mass meetings of students. The administration claims that 25 percent of the university’s 30,000 students had voted and that 75.8 percent had found the blockades “unacceptable.”

The question of whether to blockade universities has been seized on by supporters of the LRU law to challenge the democratic right of free assembly and collective decisions of students to defend higher education. The National Student Co-ordinating Committee correctly defends the position that the only legitimate vote is one taken in open debate in general assemblies.

The determination of students as represented by its militant base in the general assemblies is right to defend its democratic right to make its decisions on the basis of the collective will of the mobilised students in defence of historic gains. No secret ballot, manipulated by the university administrations and the media, which seek to intimidate the individual voter, is legitimate.

Although the militancy of the National Student Co-ordinating Committee contrast starkly with the attempt by UNEF and others to manoeuvre with the government, it is incapable of politically challenging such manoeuvres and leaves the mobilisation in danger.

The comments of the National Students’ Co-ordinating Committee’s spokesman Kamel Tafer only served to underline its lack of perspective and its reliance on militancy. The abrogation of the law constituted “a pre-condition” to all negotiations, he

maintains. “We must continue the mobilisation, the strike, the blockading ... and above all to establish a balance of power with the government.” The last phrase implies a limited perspective of coming to a deal with a government on the single issue of the LRU, which would isolate the students from the massive movement of workers against all aspects of the government’s policies.

The attack on universities and students is part of a broader program supported by the entire political establishment to more directly subordinate French workers to the interests of big business. Sarkozy’s policies would not be possible if it were not for the collaboration of the Socialist Party (and the UNEF), buttressed by the “far left” parties such as the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR).

The task of militant students is to bring a socialist and internationalist consciousness into the struggle, to oppose Sarkozy’s reactionary policies, backed by the French and European bourgeoisie and world imperialism, and his support for American imperialism’s warmongering in the Middle East. This means placing big business under the democratic social control of the working class in France, Europe and the world, in order to provide for the needs of all.

The WSWs urges students and youth to join the International Students for Social Equality, the youth wing of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and to fight a united movement of students and workers around the world on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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