

French student mobilisation at an impasse

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Student protest marches throughout France November 27 against the new law on Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities (LRU) reflected a decline in the weeks-long fight for the abrogation of the law, passed by the National Assembly in August.

Although 43 out of 86 universities were still affected by blockades and strikes last week, only 4,000 university and high school students took to the streets in Paris. A few thousand in Toulouse, Lyon, Lille, Nantes, Marseille and Tours also demonstrated their determination to see the law repealed. Classes in around 200 hundred high schools (*lycées*) are still disrupted or blockaded, 20 of which are in Paris.

The weakening of the student fight to defend public higher education is a direct result of the betrayal by the unions and the left parties of the rail workers' fight to defend their pension rights. The rail workers were left with little choice but to return to work after all the unions entered into negotiations with the employers for 'concessions' in exchange for extending their members' working lives to 40 years of pension contributions from the present 37.5.

The student unions led by UNEF (National Union of French Students) have played the same role from the start in undermining student unity and determination to get the LRU law abrogated. UNEF had already abandoned opposition to the law in July when it got 'guarantees' from President Nicolas Sarkozy that no selection process for masters students was envisaged.

Since the new university year began, UNEF has been trying to keep a grip on students who have mobilised independently in General Assemblies (AG) on the campuses. While UNEF continued talking to the government to get more money for higher education, the student AGs elected delegates to the National Student Co-ordinating Committee and refused any negotiations with the government on amending the law.

After talks with Higher Education Minister Valérie Pécresse, UNEF president Bruno Julliard—associated with the Socialist Party—announced November 27 "important advances" and called on the AGs to take those "into account." There were "new guarantees and safeguards on student fears," he said. Julliard intends to push acceptance of this at the assemblies this week throughout the country. Two days later Julliard called for "the blockades to be lifted and the strike suspended due to the advances obtained for the students."

This climb-down is linked to promises by Sarkozy to invest an extra billion euros a year over five years in universities and sell off 3 percent of government holdings in the EDF electricity company to improve student accommodation.

The National Student Co-ordinating Committee has posed as the most militant opponent of the law and refused entry to UNEF representatives to its weekly meetings because the latter body refused to call for abrogation of the law.

However, this tactic, combined with the blockading of campuses, has served to divide the student body and hand the initiative to UNEF, which poses as the defender of democracy. Decisions by AGs to blockade universities at all costs have reflected in many cases a minority opinion of students. A majority of students have thus been forced to choose between 'blockading' or 'anti-blockading' as a means of opposing the LRU law. University authorities supported by UNEF seized on the occasion to organise "secret" ballots on the issue. Such "secret" ballots, however, are a fraud, as electronic votes reveal personal details, according to the National Council of Liberty for Computer Data.

The central political issues of how to defeat the government and convince and mobilise the undecided students against the LRU have not been posed. This lack of perspective led the high school student leader Tristan Rouquier of FIDL (Independent Democratic Federation of High School Students) to denounce "the attitude of certain extreme left-wing groups, which after having sabotaged the student movement, are attempting to fall back on the mobilisation of independent high school students."

The refusal of the National Student Co-ordinating Committee to take up a political fight against the capitulation of UNEF to the government came to a head November 25.

The fourth national meeting of the committee in Lille comprising 300 delegates banned entry to a few UNEF representatives without bona fide credentials. Some 50 UNEF members then quit the meeting "in anger and frustration." A spokeswoman declared: "The breaking point is on the recognition of representative student unions [such as UNEF] and on the fact that these unions negotiate with the government to obtain better conditions for students. ... UNEF refuses to sanction this atmosphere of tension and violence as regards both the student delegations and the press." (*Le Monde*, 26 November)

The lack of political perspective to carry forward the fight

against the LRU was expressed in the Committee's resolution voted at Lille. The militant non-political protests of the Committee are to a large extent influenced by SUD Étudiant (Student Solidarity Unity Democracy), the LCR (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League), and anarchist groups.

SUD Étudiant belongs to the same union confederation as the SUD-Rail union, which participated in the capitulation of the main trade union federations, particularly the Communist Party-led General Confederation of Labour (CGT), to government intransigence on the 'pension reform' issue.

The National Student Co-ordinating Committee resolution makes no reference to or analysis of the betrayal of the rail workers' struggle.

Turning reality on its head, the resolution states: "It is possible to win and make the government retreat on our demands. ... Sarkozy can try as he much as he likes to say he won't retreat in the face of us, he and his government have been weakened by the strikes. ... The rail workers in particular showed that fighting Sarkozy and his policy was possible." A similar perspective was offered by Olivier Besancenot of LCR who also takes his dreams for reality. According to AFP press agency, "he thinks 'the government is all talk' and that a retreat by the government is 'a real consideration.'"

However, the retreat has been made by the trade union leaders, SUD-Rail amongst them, thus isolating and weakening the students.

SUD-Étudiant, backed by the LCR and anarchists, is leading the National Student Co-ordinating Committee in the same direction. The resolution continues: "Without blockades voted for by massive AGs, the students don't have a real right to strike. Without occupation of premises, they don't have a real right to assemble. Faced with attempts to get lectures restarted by means of referendums, we reaffirm that only the General Assemblies have the legitimacy to decide the next course of action." The resolution calls for "a massive re-engagement of the state in the financing of higher education," the same state that is destroying all social gains.

Militant protest separated from a socialist political perspective has brought the student struggle to an impasse. Great issues of perspective and history have to be worked through. The National Student Co-ordinating Committee has been unwilling or unable to launch an open political fight against the Socialist Party and Communist Party and to expose their allies in the student unions such as UNEF. This is the role of centrism, which tips its hat to all sorts of radical phrasemongering, but adapts itself to the big bureaucracies at every critical moment. This has a long history in France.

The argument that politics and political tendencies should be kept out of the student movement is an argument advanced by the right-wing, which wants to see the students remain under the sway of *official politics*, i.e., bourgeois politics. In the face of the confusion and squabbling of various left tendencies, a

section of honest students may also incline toward this view.

In fact, this would be a major step backward. On the contrary, the politics and histories of the different left tendencies at work in the student movement must be examined, studied and seriously debated in the search for a perspective and programme that can unite youth and all sections of the working class for the defeat of Sarkozy's entire project, supported by the French and European bourgeoisie, of turning France into a speculator's paradise.

Certain leaders, who don't want their own history and perspectives looked at too closely, will claim that such an undertaking undermines unity. However, unity based on a lack of principle and lack of understanding is no unity at all. It leads, in the end, to fracturing, isolation and weakness.

The same argument about "unity" at all costs was made during the anti-CPE (First Job Contract for youth) fight and the result was that the UMP conservative government remained in power and paved the way for Sarkozy. The survival of President Sarkozy's Gaullist regime today depends entirely on the trade union leaders and their allies on the 'left' or "extreme left."

The one fundamental truth that the National Student Co-ordinating Committee, SUD Etudiant and the LCR will not face is that the abrogation of the LRU means to campaign to bring down the government and defeat its props in the trade unions and the official left. To take on and ideologically defeat the UNEF bureaucracy (close to the Socialist Party) means breaking with it *politically* and creating an alternative based on a revolutionary socialist perspective.

Trade union militancy and the most extreme actions and rhetoric cannot replace the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. The role of students cannot just be to defend students' rights: outside of a struggle to mobilise the entire working class, this will remain sterile protest.

The fight for a better future free of war and social regression means taking up the political fight for socialist internationalism. We urge students to join the International Students for Socialist Equality, the youth wing of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and to participate in the building of the socialist alternative in France and Europe.



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