

France: Students need a socialist perspective and a turn to the working class

The editorial board
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Despite months of blockades and confrontations with police, the movement calling for abrogation of the Pécresse law reforming French universities is at an impasse. The law is still in place and, before the beginning of the Christmas holidays, most of the student blockades had ended or been forcibly repressed. The essential question facing students opposed to the law is: On what political basis can a struggle against the law continue?

The law, adopted by the French parliament during the August holidays, 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 corporations. It gives university presidents control of hiring decisions and greater power over the budget. It allows greater private investment in state universities, subordinating them directly to business interests.

Student strikes hit roughly half of French universities during October and November, as railwaymen also mounted powerful strikes against government-planned pension cuts. Students occupied university buildings and offices to prevent classes from being held; protests and blockades spread quickly. More than 50 of the 85 universities in France held mass meetings; about 30 voted for abrogation of the law.

The largest student union, the Union Nationale des Etudiants de France (UNEF), intervened only to keep protesting students under control. Closely linked to the Socialist Party (PS), UNEF had already abandoned opposition to the law in July when it received “guarantees” from President Nicolas Sarkozy that no selection process for masters students was being considered. While the UNEF continued talking to the government to get more money for higher education, the student general assemblies (AGs) elected delegates to a National Student Coordinating Committee and refused any negotiations with the government.

The National Student Coordinating Committee—largely influenced by the militant trade union SUD-étudiant, the “far left” Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), and anarchist groups—held a series of weekly meetings in different universities, calling for the abrogation of the law.

There was widespread sympathy among students for the railwaymen. However, without organisation and mass support

inside the workers’ and students’ movements, it mainly took the form of isolated attempts to mount blockades of train stations, which were quickly assaulted and disbanded by police. This failure to link students’ and workers’ struggles arose directly from the political perspectives of the movement’s leaderships.

The trade unions, which were busy trying to limit the rail workers to a few isolated one-day strikes while working out a negotiated accord with the government, totally opposed uniting the workers’ and students’ struggles. They gave no aid to students trying to blockade train stations. Force Ouvrière head Jean-Claude Mailly gave a November 12 television interview, saying, “I don’t think that blockading, as some have announced, the stations tomorrow, would be a good idea.” CGT-Rail chief Didier Le Reste opposed station blockades, citing “the risk of security excesses.” Also on November 12, UNEF president Bruno Julliard said that the UNEF “did not support” railway blockades.

The defeat of the railway strikes in mid-November then allowed the government to turn on and defeat the student blockades.

The government had been unwilling to use force against students while facing a serious threat of shutdown of the rail and transport sector of the economy. As the strikes ended, police began openly confronting student blockaders, amid a media-driven security hysteria whipped up during the repression of riots in Villiers-le-Bel, after the November 25 deaths of two youths in a vehicle collision with police. CRS riot squads and police progressively expelled blockading students in campuses in Paris, Grenoble, Nantes, Lyon, Montpellier, Rouen, Rennes, Amiens and other cities.

The UNEF leadership withdrew their limited support for strike action against the law after the defeat of the rail strike. After receiving minimal concessions in talks with Higher Education Minister Valérie Pécresse, Julliard announced on 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. Two days later, Julliard called for “the blockades to be lifted and the strike suspended due to the advances obtained for the students.”

The National Student Coordinating Committee, which had

never seriously prepared for a political fight with the government, became further disoriented. After its November 24-25 meeting in Lille, it issued a resolution stating: “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.”

In fact, as events would show, the railway defeat freed the state to deal with the students. Workers and students could fight, but without a political campaign to win over the entire population, they could not win. This lack of political perspective was combined with a drastic overestimation of the government’s economic and political room for concessions to students.

The government must carry out its reforms, due to massive changes shaking global capitalism and affecting Europe’s place within it. France has been facing a slowdown in GDP growth for more than a decade, amid the rapid rise of highly competitive, cheap-labour manufacturing economies such as China and India. The French bourgeoisie’s preferred strategy to compete in this new environment is to move its economy into high-technology sectors.

A document published by the Prime Minister’s Economic Analysis Council (CAE), titled “Globalisation: France’s Strengths,” states: “42 percent of French exports are in high-tech. Over two-thirds of these are in the aeronautics sector alone. In the case of China, the [high-tech] sector represents only 13 percent of export sales. This is important, because it constitutes a barrier against competition from low-wage countries.... France does not have a choice:... she must place herself in the high-tech sector to see Chinese competition fade away.”

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France is still behind, however, in the development of high-tech products. For instance, in 2004, French expenditure on R&D was 2.16 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), lower than Germany (2.49 percent) and Sweden (3.74 percent). The number of patents per million inhabitants in 2003 was 40.9 in France, 90.5 in Germany, and 91.2 in Sweden.

French capitalism wants to press the universities into service, to make up for this weakness of private industry. The CAE report stresses the need to build “centres of competitiveness”—joint ventures between state research institutes, universities, and private companies. It gives as an example Medicen, a Paris-area medical research cluster “regrouping [companies] Gsk, Ipsen, Philips-Fr, Pierre Fabre, Sanofi Aventis, Servier, Siemens, [state research institutes] CEA, CNRS, INRIA, INSERM, the Pasteur, Curie, and Roussy Institutes, and the universities of Paris 5, 6, 7, and Paris-South, the Central [engineering] School, ENS, and ESPCI.”

These projected changes give an objective basis for the unity

of the students’ and workers’ struggles, as they necessitate both a massive reorganisation of French universities and determined attacks on the living standards of workers.

Emphasis on university “autonomy” will lead to inequality between universities, as only the universities to be considered as research centres for private industry will be funded, and rural or smaller-town universities to be left to rot. Moreover, subjects not immediately profitable to private companies will be increasingly starved for funding.

Forcing universities to rely on private funding will inevitably threaten working-class students, with the possibility of introducing large tuition fees as in the US. There, students take out loans to pay for their studies, often leaving school with unmanageable levels of debt, in the tens of thousands of dollars.

The growth of high-tech industry on a capitalist basis is, moreover, impossible without an attack on the social conditions of the working class. For instance, for French biotech firms to attract investment and compete internationally, they will need to increase fees for drugs and medical treatment to levels like those in the US and UK, where they are dramatically higher. It will also require the development of a larger class of wealthy investors—i.e., a transfer of social resources away from workers and an increase in social inequality; the CAE report states: “[France has] too few *venture capitalists* or *business angels* (600 in France versus almost 60,000 in the UK).”

To advance their struggles, French students must turn to the working class. In opposition to the profit-driven plans of the ruling class targeting the universities, students and workers must advance a perspective of the planned, democratic use of international resources to satisfy social needs. Such a perspective depends on a revival of the heritage of revolutionary Marxism internationally, and it is on this basis that we call for building of a section of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) and of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in France.



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