

France: the politics of the National Student Coordinating Committee and the role of the LCR

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The National Student Coordinating Committee (NSCC) has led the political struggle against the university autonomy law (LRU) passed in August 2007 by the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy. Its statements offer a valuable insight into the views of students who blockaded university buildings and marched against the LRU, and into the political issues students must face as they continue their struggles.

The NSCC has, to its credit, consistently called for an orientation to the workers and shown a keen awareness of the broader goals of Sarkozy's reforms. It sought links with rail workers, who launched national strikes in mid-October and mid-November 2007 against planned cuts in their special regime (*régime spéciaux*) pensions.

In its October 29 statement, the NSCC added the following demands to its call for the abrogation of the LRU: retraction of public sector job cuts, opposition to medical fees, the defense of the *régime spéciaux*, the abrogation of anti-immigrant laws, and legal amnesty for those arrested during protests. It wrote: "To the government steamroller, we oppose the convergence of all the targeted sectors, which alone will be able to make it retreat." On November 8, students in Paris and Rennes blockaded train stations in solidarity with workers.

On November 12, the NSCC called for further train station blockades to coincide with the resumption of rail workers' strikes on November 14, and to last at least until the one-day November 20 mass strike by public sector workers against job and pension cuts.

The trade unions, which sought to limit the rail workers to a few isolated one-day strikes while negotiating with the government, gave no aid to students. Force Ouvrière head Jean-Claude Mailly gave a November 12 TV 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 also opposed station blockades, citing "the risk of security excesses." Bruno Julliard, head of the National Union of French Students (UNEF), the main French students' union, also opposed station blockades.

Police soon smashed station blockades. The rail strike, in the face of the trade unions' widely announced intent to negotiate a deal with Sarkozy, largely petered out by November 24. The unions held the mass public sector strike to one day.

As the movement was being thus rolled up and defeated piecemeal, the NSCC became disoriented, writing on November 25: "It is possible to win and make the government retreat on our demands.... Sarkozy can try as 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, amid the security hysteria whipped up after the Villiers-le-Bel riots started on November 25, the university blockades were progressively dismantled. Relieved of concern that brutality against students would lead to a shutdown of rail transport, the state marched riot police into the universities. In the face of studious media silence, videos circulated online showing university officials striking blockading students. Reports reached the WSWs of students injured by point-blank *flash ball* fire from police, including reports of a student who risks losing an eye.

The NSCC subsequently called for political clarification, noting in its December 20 statement: "Our movement is continuing in a phase of long-term struggle but also in a phase of reflection."

The WSWs salutes students' struggles and sets as a major goal clarifying the tasks of the student movement, in solidarity with all interested members of the anti-LRU movement. It offers the following observations.

The students' isolation and defeat was made possible by the ending of the rail strikes and followed on the heels of students' failure to truly unite their struggle with that of the rail workers. Though the NSCC set such unity as its goal, carrying it out would have required a broad political campaign, making a direct appeal to the workers over the heads of the trade union tops. However, the full implications of the trade unions' strangling of the strikes were not understood in the NSCC.

The NSCC had a somewhat vague conception of how to force the withdrawal of the law. Sarkozy has no intention or room to compromise, being committed to turning universities into research aids for French business in an attempt to maintain a technological edge over rising cheap-labor manufacturing powers like China and India. A real retreat by Sarkozy would soon pose the question of his replacement by the French bourgeoisie with someone else who could carry out this agenda. Anti-LRU protests thus directly pose the question: which class will rule?

In the subsequent police repression, the corporate media suppressed reports that would have put public opinion on the side of students and workers. This was part of a broader political strategy, abetted by the politics of the trade unions during the strike struggles: confusing public opinion by presenting the anti-reform movement as selfishly defending sectoral interests, divorced from the broader working masses.

What the NSCC lacked was a political party armed with a merciless critique of the trade union leaderships, an analysis of the international and revolutionary implications of the struggle, and the ability to

present this perspective to the entire working class. In other words, the political situation objectively raises the need for a mass Trotskyist party.

This political reality is obscured, however, by the opportunist political line of the parties who have claimed in one way or another to represent the heritage of Trotskyism in France. The most prominent is the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR), which has acquired a following among students at the same time as the corporate press has begun to promote its 2007 presidential candidate, Olivier Besancenot.

The line of the LCR's main publication, *Rouge*, has been to incite false confidence in the ability of simple protest militancy to force a favorable deal with the government, while always evading the central political problems posed by the development of the social struggles. It thus played a critical role in preventing students from orienting themselves in the complex struggles of late 2007.

As the LRU law was first announced in summer 2007, *Rouge* denounced it in an article titled "Not on the sly." *Rouge* called for large demonstrations against the law, referring to the experience of the 2006 struggle against the First Job Contract (CPE) reform proposed by then-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin: "The CPE showed the way: a law, even if passed, can be taken down by the street."

This is simply false. In 2006 the trade unions worked with then-Interior Minister Sarkozy to force the withdrawal of the CPE, discrediting Villepin before the bourgeoisie and paving the way for Sarkozy to win the 2007 presidential elections. Sarkozy is now reforming the labor code so that the anti-worker provisions of the CPE—notably longer trial periods with no job security—will be written into labor law. The proper conclusion is not the power of protest militancy, but the utter futility of opportunist deals with the bourgeoisie.

On November 8—weeks after the trade unions had, with difficulty, managed to call off the October rail strikes—*Rouge* titled its article on the universities "The strike begins." Though the LCR was doubtless aware of the sentiment in the NSCC in favor of linking workers' and students' struggles, it did not join calls for students to blockade train stations. Nor did it warn of the trade union bureaucracy's plans to politically strangle the November strikes. It wrote: "With the call for indefinite strikes at the SNCF [railroads], the first major confrontation will begin. It's a chance to make the government give in. A maximum number of universities must strike in coming days."

The silence on the role of the trade unions continued, even as the latter met with the government and prepared to cut off the strikes. On November 22, *Rouge* wrote: "The mobilized students know they need solidarity with workers to win against the government. The CPE experience is there. We must develop direct meetings between student and salaried strikers, publish joint statements to popularize the strikes." Two days later, the rail strikes had largely ended and the police began to seriously take on the university blockades.

Rouge's December 6 statement on the student movement, "Despite obstacles, the struggle continues," drew no lessons from the defeat of the rail strike. It wrote that the student movement would either "radicalize and lose itself in useless minority actions, or show its strength and further massify itself. The student and high-school student demonstration of December 6 ... should be central to ensuring the visibility of the movement and opening a path towards the workers. Education workers' strikes are the other essential lever for reinforcing the movement."

This persistent refusal to learn from or exercise foresight in these struggles is not incidental, or attributable to inexperienced writers at

Rouge. It comes from a party whose leadership is hostile to Marxism and hopes to create a large, formless party to the left of the Socialist Party (PS) based on unprincipled centrist politics. This was perhaps most crudely shown by Besancenot's statement at a March 13, 2007 Amiens meeting: "I have never called myself a Trotskyist activist."

The LCR's leader, Alain Krivine, made explicit his strategy of pressure politics at a December 3 meeting in Paris with PS heavyweights Henri Weber and Manuel Valls: "[F]or me, the adversary is not the PS but Sarkozy, the right, and the Medef [employers' federation]. If today we have disagreements, they are on how to fight Sarkozy." He improbably told Weber, Valls, and company that the "great reforms" in France came because "millions of people went into the street, launched a general strike, booted your buttocks."

The various "far left" tendencies in France differ from one another in the particular manner in which each avoids the responsibility of providing revolutionary socialist leadership. The LCR specializes in this sort of bluster and radical phrasemongering, while in practice it slavishly maintains its ties to the various discredited bureaucracies and attempts to steer wide layers of the population in the same direction.

Its perspective ultimately involves the demobilization of the insurgent masses and letting frightened legislators and trade union bureaucrats work out some sort of legal deal. Students who have fought and sacrificed over the last year must ask themselves: what good is a huge movement, if ultimately it is the same old traitors who determine its outcome? Despite Besancenot's media-driven popularity, the LCR leadership's perspective is nothing but a second-rate trap for students seeking a turn to the working class.

The WSWS insists that the tactic of pressuring the state must be abandoned and replaced with the strategy of political struggle against the government, based on the full heritage of revolutionary Marxism. It is confident that the LCR leadership's betrayal of its political responsibilities will lead students to look elsewhere for analyses and perspectives. We seek discussion, collaboration, and solidarity with all those trying to draw the political lessons of the recent struggles.



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