

French high school students protest education cuts

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On Thursday, April 10, tens of thousands of French high school students and teachers demonstrated for the fifth time in two weeks against measures affecting secondary education. The measures were announced by Xavier Darcos, minister of education in the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

On this fifth day of protest, about 30,000 high school students as well as teachers and university students demonstrated in Paris, coming from all over the city. The numbers of students taking to the streets have steadily increased since the demonstrations began. Thursday's demonstration was twice as big as that which took place two days before. Over the last two weeks, there have also been substantial demonstrations in other major towns like Lyons, Grenoble and Toulouse as well as in smaller towns like Blois, Tourcoing and Montpellier. In Toulon, according to trade union figures, 4,000 people demonstrated on April 4. In Grenoble, about 6,000 students and teachers demonstrated on April 10.

Numerous lycées and colleges in the Paris area have been blocked or occupied by students. "General assemblies," where opposition to the new measures is being discussed by students, teachers and parents, have also been drawn into the actions. Unlike previous protests, it is mainly the vocational/technical high schools and lycées in the suburbs that have mobilised and are sending students to the demonstrations. The two main high school student unions called for a "massive mobilisation" on April 10.

The demonstrations have been accompanied by a heavy police presence and have faced repeated provocations from both the state forces and the government. Following a definite pattern, groups of youth precede the demonstrations and pelt the police with missiles, to which the police respond by charging the demonstrations and arresting demonstrators. This is then used by the government to justify further intimidation and portray the protests as "generating violence" and consequently as illegal. Tuesday's demonstration was dispersed by the police before it could reach its destination.

On Tuesday, Education Minister Darcos linked the opposition to his measures directly to "incidents" picked up by the media, in which teachers or headmasters in high schools were assaulted. He said on LCI radio station: "The fact that students arrive at a college in order to smash up everything, that they bully our teachers, or they steal the mobile phones of their fellow pupils or that they thrash a head of school, all because at the start of the new school year there will be a class of 33 instead of 32, or because there will be 98 teachers instead of 100—I find that all this is assuming unreasonable proportions."

In several instances, riot police dispersed peaceful protests by students in front of high schools. On April 4, in Creil, a suburb southeast of the capital, police dispersed more than a hundred students with tear gas. A student was arrested and only released after parents and teachers mobilised to have him freed. In Gagny, another suburb east of Paris, the entrance of a high school, where dozens of students had gathered peacefully was "cleared" April 1 by a team of riot police using tear gas and flash balls, which sparked off a broad protest by youth, parents and teachers throughout the area.

Last week, Darcos sought to talk down the protests, saying they represented only 2 percent of high schools in France, and on Tuesday, he stated that the protests were "assuming hysterical forms" considering what was at stake. The government accused secondary school teachers of instigating the protest and of "using" students to implement their own agenda. In a veiled threat, Darcos said he wanted "to say to some 'extremist teachers' they should think about the risk of urging [secondary school] students onto the street." After several days of protests, Darcos decided to allocate a €750 bonus to headmasters, which was widely seen as a sort of bribe.

As in other European countries, the Pisa study conducted by the European Union to assess the efficiency of the education systems of various countries is being used in France to justify the imposition of drastic changes in education.

High school students and teachers are protesting against a series of measures, justified by the government with the necessity to modernise an obsolete education system, but widely seen as an attempt to impose cuts at the expense of students and staff and increasing the difficulties for the most disadvantaged students to achieve qualifications.

The measures on which protests have focused so far is the elimination of more than 11,200 teachers' jobs (8,800 in secondary schools), planned for the next school year. The reduction has been justified by the government on the basis of reduction of the number of secondary school students.

Léo Moreau, vice president of UNL (Union nationale des lycéens), one the two main high school student unions involved in the protests, stated, "Jobs are being axed in a much bigger proportion than are justified by the demographic situation." He also denounced the axing of certain courses like drawing, music and even foreign languages, as well as the increase in student numbers in already overcrowded classes.

Quoted in *Le Monde* April 4, Alain Olive, the secretary general of Unsa (Union nationale des syndicats autonomes), a teachers' union, said that if things go on as they are at the moment, "by 2012 there will be 85,000 teaching jobs less with 150,000 more high school students in the education system."

The high school students' union FIDL (Federation indépendante et démocratique lycéenne) declared: "These cuts affect mainly the lycées in the suburbs, the very ones which are most in need of staff." The destruction of teachers' jobs often means the disappearance of classes or courses and often results in overtime for the remaining teachers. This is presented as an "incentive" for working more, and has been strongly contested by teachers.

There are also concerns that many so-called "nonessential" courses—such as art, music, theatre and other similar subjects—will be scrapped.

Another measure opposed by protesters is the compressing of the four years' preparation for the baccalauréat professionnel (vocational studies) into three years and the elimination of the Brevet d'Etude Professionnel (BEP). The "bac pro," introduced in 1986, is a higher qualification than the traditional "baccalauréat," which is prepared in three years. The BEP, taken after two years, is a better qualification than the traditional Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle (CAP), a kind of craft certificate. It was introduced in 1919, and its suppression would mean the discouraging and dropping out of many students who would be left with an uncertain CAP and unable to achieve a baccalauréat.

A third measure opposed is the abolition of the "carte scolaire." The carte scolaire regulates the distribution of resources and teachers and the allotment of students to state schools. It was introduced in 1963 and established a certain equal level of resources and education standards across the state-run education system. In recent years, it has been under attack from various governments, who cut back on it by introducing dispensations. Better-off families are able to bend the rules and put their children into better performing schools—outside the "carte scolaire." Socialist Party presidential candidate Royal was also in favour of changing the carte scolaire in order to generalise this practise to the detriment of poor districts.

The Sarkozy government has announced its suppression altogether. Children are normally sent to the school/college situated in the district where they live. The suppression of this system would open the door to a two-tier education system. Parallel to this, the government also envisages closing down "failing" schools and reopening them, as was done in Britain by the Blair government with disastrous results.

Under the slogan "reestablishing the authority of the professor," the government wants to generalise the reporting of any "incident" to the judicial authorities (which has already been operating for a number of years). This move is seen as turning away from education towards authoritarian and repressive measures.

In spite of the experience of the railway strike against the destruction of the *régimes spéciaux* pensions and of the student movement against the *Loi Pécresse* for the privatisation of universities last autumn, the perspective of the two main high school student unions and that of the teachers' trade unions have remained exactly the same: put pressure on the government to

open a dialogue and discuss the attacks. The main purpose of the demonstrations is to ensure that student representatives be invited to talks.

Thus, after last Thursday's demonstration, the president of the UNL, Florian Lecoultré, said that "the relationship of forces is now well established," adding that "the minister can no longer afford to ignore the demands of high school students. The mobilisation will continue as long as we do not receive answers."

The struggle by university students last September against the "autonomy" law of universities by Education Minister Pécresse ended in exhaustion and defeat after three months of confrontation. The isolation of that struggle by teachers' and other unions allowed students to be worn down. This was a repeat of the betrayal of rail workers just weeks before. The lessons of the university students' fight mean that school students and teachers must break from the paralysing influence of the official unions and political parties, take their struggle into their own hands and turn to the working class as a whole.

Darcos has made it repeatedly clear that, even if he speaks to the teachers and students, he will not reconsider his measures. On April 1, he said that "even if I wanted to go back I couldn't" since the cuts have been "broadly debated" since last summer and voted in by parliament in November. The French bourgeoisie is implementing these vast attacks on education because it is facing intense competition from its imperialist rivals under conditions of severe international crisis.

The unions are not opposed to discussing a "reform" of education with the government. Their only precondition is that they be consulted about it. The withdrawal of the cuts is a bargaining chip to start discussion about a more "general reform" of education. Thus, the UNL declares in a statement dated April 4 on its web site that it "reaffirms its demands for the restoring of the suppressed resources as the precondition for a real reform of education."

In the same statement, which called for demonstrations on April 8 and 19, the UNL writes: "The UNL desires thus a reform of the lycée...but it considers that it [the reform] cannot be done without consultation and not on the basis of massive cuts in resources in order to make budget savings on the backs of the high school students."

In a similar way, the main demand of FIDL after the demonstration of April 3 was to be received by the minister of education. After calling for two more demonstrations on April 8 and 10, it states with much hand wringing: "The FIDL restates its will to be received by Xavier Darcos, the minister of education, so that he listens at last to the demands and worries of high school students. Indeed, faced with the magnitude of the mobilisation, the minister must assume his role and receive the representative organisations."



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