French school students maintain protests against Sarkozy's education reforms

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High school students in France continued their protests in recent weeks against the education reforms of the right-wing government of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Two central demonstrations took place in Paris on April 15 and 17, attended by 40,000 and 30,000 participants respectively, from all over the metropolitan area. The majority of the protesters were students from Paris and suburban *lycées* and high schools, but substantial numbers of teachers, parents and university students participated as well. Several teachers' unions also called on their members to strike on these two days. On April 15 striking primary school teachers joined the secondary schools in protesting a reform of primary schools.

Smaller demonstrations of high school students took place in other towns of the surrounding Ile-de-France region, where protestors blocked many lycées and collèges.

The April 17 demonstration was the seventh in three weeks. The Paris area is now on Easter holidays for two weeks, and protests have now began in other French regions, where schools were on holiday over the last two weeks and have now reopened. This week demonstrations have taken place in Strasbourg, Lille, Toulon, Rouen, Marseilles and Tours.

State repression and intimidation have increased since protests began last month. Gatherings of high school students in front of their schools have been regularly confronted by armed police, with headmasters systematically calling police as soon as students gather in front of or block a lycée. Students have been arrested and sent to court on the slightest pretext; some were even DNA tested and registered.

Heavy police detachments have surrounded the protests and police have also filmed the demonstrators. Confrontations have occurred between groups of youth walking alongside or in front of the marches and the police.

As in previous demonstrations, those protesting on April 17 demanded that measures announced last month by Education Minister Xavier Darcos be withdrawn. These include the elimination of 11,200 teaching jobs, the shortening from four to three years of courses for the *baccalauréat professionnel* ("bac pro," a vocational version of the general *baccalauréat*, the exam at the end of secondary school allowing entry into university) and the elimination of the BEP (*Brevet d'étude professionnel*, a qualification that can be taken after two years of preparing for the "bac pro").

The trade unions put forward the demand for a "*collectif budgétaire*," an alternative budget proposal to the finance law already voted in parliament last November, which underlay the cuts announced by Darcos.Tthis demand is purely symbolic, as the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) has a large majority in parliament.

The government is preparing a whole series of other attacks on the existing education system, none of which have been taken up seriously by the unions. The so called "Pochard report," drafted by a commission set up by the government last September, has proposed no less than a "fundamental reorganisation of the teaching profession." The commission included leaders of the Socialist party like former prime minister Michel Rocard and ex-minister of Education Jack Lang. It made a series of free-market proposals widely criticised by the profession.

The two main high school student unions, the UNL and the FIDL, both close to the Socialist Party, had official meetings with Darcos on April 11 and 16. The minister of education reiterated his commitment to imposing the job cuts and suggested that some minor modifications could be made to his plans, regarding the vocational *baccalauréat* and the BEP.

His limited remarks were seized on by the student unions, which immediately declared that the minister was moving in their direction. FIDL national secretary Alix Nicolet said, "We obtained a softening [of the minister's stand]," and in a letter published April 20 on the UNL web site, UNL national secretary Florian Lecoultre wrote : "The UNL has taken notice of the will of the minister to discuss the reform of the bac pro with high school students ...We obtained first encouraging signs such as a guarantee to retain the BEP."

Shortly after the last meeting between Darcos and the student unions, his office issued a statement declaring that there would be "no reconsidering the principle of a generalised bac professionnel in three years,' According to the ministry, "there never was any talk of eliminating" the BEP.

Since then, these unions have been repeating at every opportunity that they want to be "constructive" and seek a dialogue with the government, while Darcos maintains his stance, clearly calculating that with the holidays and

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baccalauréat exams approaching he will be able to get his way. The "call for dialogue" expresses nothing other than the resolve of the unions to prevent a political challenge to the government.

Darcos knows he is not facing opposition from the unions, but can count on them as political allies. One day after the April 16 demonstration, Darcos stated in a provocative interview that the teaching of some subject matters had to be looked at from the point of view of cost and announced the possible scrapping of 3,000 jobs on this basis. He used the example of "rare" foreign languages that could not be sustained, because "too few" students use them. Education should be judged according to "the service it renders the nation," he said. *Le Monde* quotes him in its April 18 edition as saying: "One has to take an interest in what education costs the nation and in what [the nation] gets in return from the expenses it has agreed."

In parliament, answering Regis Juanico, a deputy of the Socialist party who was demanding a "moratorium" on the cuts in education, Darcos declared arrogantly: "You say moratorium, I say reform. You say suspension, I say audacity. You say let's wait, I say let's change," adding: "progress doesn't need a moratorium."

These conflicts are taking place under conditions in which the Sarkozy government has been destabilised and its crisis is evident. One year after Sarkozy won the presidential election, recent opinion polls show that two thirds of the French population judge his presidency negatively.

Many taking part in the demonstrations consider the present round to be just the start of further attacks over the next weeks and months. One English teacher in Paris quoted in *Nouvel Observateur* April 18 said, "The cuts in teachers jobs are a run up to the project of reforming the lycées. This is due to be presented in May. It will contain the conclusions of the Pochard report. We're not going to let this one go through."

Many *lycéens* as well as teachers are mobilised not just against cuts in education, but also against what they regard to be the prelude to a privatisation of education. A large proportion of high school students and teachers oppose schools being run like businesses, which is summed up in the opposition to the "accountant's approach" of the government. Or as a banner appearing repeatedly on demonstrations said, "*touche pas à mon école*" (don't touch my school).

The main trade unions, all of which have education sections, have called for support for the demonstrations. But the union bureaucracies have carefully avoided involving any other categories of workers in the protests, although the measures directly affect the working population and the attacks by the government are directed at their children.

As in previous movements in education the main job of the unions and associated political parties is to prevent any real challenge to the government and maintain these movements on a limited trade union perspective of "putting pressure." The union bureaucracies want to be part of its reforms not oppose them. This pro-business agenda of the unions has already led to serious defeats in the recent past.

In 2003 a massive eight-week strike against the reform of the pensions in education, the decentralisation of education and the elimination of support personnel ended in a defeat with strikers forced to accept wage cuts for having taken strike action. In 2005 a struggle by high school students against a pro-business law on education called Loi Fillon, after the present prime minister and then Education Minister, Francois Fillon, was eventually passed in the form of decrees instead of a law after some of the most contested aspects of the law were removed.

In 2006 there was again a massive mobilisation of high school youth and university students against the CPE (*Contrat premier emploi*), but after a tactical retreat on the part of the government, the *Loi sur l'égalité des chances*, (Law on the equality of opportunities) of which the CPE was a part, was maintained. In 2007 there was a long struggle by university students against the Loi Pécresse for the "autonomy" of the universities, which ended up in a victory for the government.

These movements were each time crippled by a limited union perspective, based on an unspoken pro-market programme that opposed any political challenge to the ruling elite, and — on that basis — was encouraged by the so called "left" and "far left." The government that led the offensive against the gains of the working class was left in place, able to prepare another attack or an orderly transition to another, more right-wing bourgeois government.

What's needed is a political movement of the whole working class against the Sarkozy government on the basis of a socialist programme. For that to succeed, a political break is necessary with the unions and the parties of the official left and 'far left.' High school students and teachers should reject organisations which share the same basic political agenda as this conservative government and take the struggle into their own hands.

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