

# France: Thousands of high school students protest cuts in education

Antoine Lerougetel  
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Between 40,000 and 50,000 high school students demonstrated April 29 in most of France's major provincial cities against the government's austerity plan for primary and secondary education. The plan threatens cuts of 11,200 teaching posts next school year.

The protests were a continuation of those built up in the Paris region over the previous three weeks, which involved seven days of action when the students had been joined by large numbers of teachers in demonstrations of 30,000 to 40,000 through central Paris.

Paris schools are now on holiday for a fortnight, and the rest of the country is just returning. The April 29 mobilisation included 4,000 in Toulon, 2,000 in Nice, 3,000 in Tours and Rouen, 2,000 in Marseilles and more than 1,000 in Orléans, Strasbourg and Toulouse. According to Agence France Presse, as many as 3,500 primary teachers demonstrated in Rennes against class closures. In the Gard department, the education authority reported 66 percent of secondary school pupils on strike.

Slogans reported from different mobilisations included: "We are high school students at war with the state," "When reason fails, the street prevails," "Primary education spoiled, high schools botched," "Not the teachers, not the *sans papiers* [undocumented immigrants], the government should be kicked out," "Fewer cops, more teachers."

The cuts in teaching jobs next year come on top of 8,700 this school year and are part of the plan to axe 80,000 teachers' positions by 2012. It is estimated that the number of high school pupils will have risen by 150,000 in the same period. Claims of the government that it will compensate for these losses by offering overtime work have been rejected by teachers and parents alike.

The high school students are also protesting plans to reduce to three years the four-year course leading to the vocational *baccalauréat* school-leaving diploma and the

possible suppression of the BEP (Professional education certificate) qualification. In addition, the suppression of minority subjects such as rare languages and art is seen as the dumbing-down and impoverishment of education.

Also motivating the opposition to the government's education "reforms" is the government-inspired Pauchard Report, which advocates the opening up of school boards to private enterprise. On the invitation of right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy, Socialist Party heavyweights ex-education minister Jack Lang and former prime minister Michel Rocard participated in the commission that drew up the report.

Critics of the report fear that high schools will be thrown into competition with each other to attract the interest of private businesses and eventual private funding. The report also advocates the widespread recourse to teachers teaching outside their specialisation and field of training, largely seen as contempt for the hard work put in by teachers to acquire their skills and qualifications and a further attack on students.

The high school unions FIDL (Independent and Democratic Federation of High School Students) and UNL (National High School Students' Union), both close to the Socialist Party, have called for mobilisations alongside the workers' trade unions on May 1 and May 6, when all schools will have resumed. They are also mobilising to join the one-day strike called by teacher unions for May 15. All these forces peddle the illusion that sectional and one-day actions can force the government to make concessions.

However, Education Minister Xavier Darcos commented: "I am not the minister who backs down" and "I shall be the minister who goes right through with the reforms." *Le Monde* on April 29 pointed out the contradiction between these statements and the fact that "in 2007 the government had expressed its will to halve in five years the number of pupils starting in secondary

schools in great educational difficulty. Sarkozy stated on April 27: 'I will not ask Xavier Darcos to create teaching posts when pupil numbers will be declining.' ”

The Sarkozy administration is under tremendous pressure from the French and European ruling elite to make no concessions to workers and youth and to accelerate its attacks on social rights and conditions. European capitalism is exposed to ever more harsh conditions of competition with its global rivals, as the banking crisis slows the world economy. The catastrophic situation of French finances has prompted a warning from the European Union.

France is forecast to have a budget deficit of 2.9 percent of gross domestic product this year and 3 percent in 2009, brought about by the slowdown of French economic growth, which the European Commission calculates at 1.6 percent for 2008 and 1.4 percent in 2009, well below government projections. *Nouvel Observateur* of April 30 quotes the EU commissioner for the economy, Joaquin Almunia, in an early warning from Brussels on the deepening of the deficits, saying that France's situation "is a clear case for using the instruments we have in such cases."

The call by the leadership of the Socialist Party for dialogue between student union leaders and the government is a cynical trap. Their defence of the competitiveness of French and European big business overrides any concern they may have for the rights and conditions of workers and youth.

The mass movements of high school and university students and the powerful mobilisations and strikes of workers in defence of education rights, pensions, medical care, work rights and jobs in 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2007 have been stifled by divisive action by the trade unions and the "left" parties. Only a movement uniting all sections of the working class and the youth on a socialist programme of the rational organisation of the wealth of society on a global scale can overcome the capitalist offensive.

The WSWs spoke to demonstrators in Amiens in Picardy in northern France on Tuesday, where some 200 high school pupils, supported by a few parents, teachers and university students, braved the rain to make their protest. They finished with a sit-down in the road in front of the Picardy education offices (the *Rectorat*) where primary school teachers were picketing against class closures.

Maëlyse, Clémentine and Justine, first-year students at Madeleine Michelis High School, told the WSWs that

"with less teachers there will be larger classes. They must understand. We will not accept that."

"Sarkozy only thinks about the rich. If he calls that democracy, pull the other leg," said one. Clémentine added: "The unions should be with us and the workers should support us."

Aurélien Delaporte, a second-year literature student at Amiens University, said, "I'm here in solidarity with the high school students and their struggle for decent working conditions, both for the pupils and the teachers, against the lack of resources, merging classes, reduction of choices and options and for an education which gives a real culture."

He went on: "I would like to be a teacher. I feel my career is threatened and I want proper working conditions. I took part in the protests last year against the Pécresse Law [diminishing access to higher education, cutting back on courses and preparing the way for big business influence]. What we needed was a big social movement in unity with the railway workers fighting for their pensions. The other unions should be with the high school students."

"People try to make out that they don't know what they are demonstrating about. It's not true: they are very worried about their future prospects. We need a tidal wave. The struggles are too limited, so there is not enough solidarity. We need another system."

Francis Guésou, a retired worker and technician, was demonstrating in support of the high school pupils. He told the WSWs that he is vice secretary of the Somme department branch of the FCPE (Federation of Councils of Parents of Pupils), the largest school parents association in France and was defending his organisation's principles of "defending children and public, secular, free education."

"The high school students are right to demonstrate against Darcos," he said. "The suppression of the BEP is a loss for pupils in difficulty. It can lead to a job. It is possible to push Sarkozy back like we did in '68. Then the revolution was possible, but the political parties were not ready. The trade unions were bypassed, they weren't ready."



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