

France: One million strike in defence of education and social services

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Over one million public sector workers went on strike, and 300,000 demonstrated in the streets in all major cities and towns in France on Thursday. The strikers were protesting government plans to eliminate 11,200 teaching positions and cut some 30,000 public service jobs.

If the government's plans are carried out, some 80,000 teaching posts will be eliminated by 2012, the four-year course for the *Bac Pro* vocational diploma is to be reduced, and an intermediate qualification, the BEP, will be suppressed for some trades.

In many places high school students headed the protests, the culmination of two months of mobilisations against government attacks on education. However, one of the two main high school unions, the FIDL (Independent Democratic Federation of High School Students) has called off further action this school year, but not the UNL (National Union of High School Students). They have claimed as a victory, however, Education Minister Xavier Darcos's offer of 1,500 low-paid, untrained teaching assistants in 200 of the most under-achieving high schools. He has made no retreat on the 11,200 planned cuts in teaching posts.

Around 60,000 marched in Paris; 30,000 each in Marseille and Rennes; and 15,000 in Toulouse. In Lyon and Bordeaux, 10,000 protestors were present. In Strasbourg, Lille, Le Havre and Perpignan more than 5,000 people took to the streets. The public sector workers were mobilised to denounce the dismantling of public services. In Amiens, 3,000 workers and students marched behind the call for "quality public services and more purchasing power". High school banners denounced "inequality in education."

A leaflet put out by Goodyear/Dunlop workers from the local tyre factory in Amiens—under threat of 402 layoffs for refusing to accept increased productivity and

speed up rules—said: "The Goodyear/Dunlop group fires workers without any scruples and announces for the first quarter of 2008 profits of €100 million. And the four main directors gave themselves €20 million in salaries in 2008."

According to government figures—generally about 20 percent lower than trade union estimates—at midday on May 15 some 34 percent of people employed in the schools were on strike, 27.3 percent in the rest of the State Civil Service, 3 percent of local government workers, and 5.8 percent of hospital staff.

The State Civil Service numbers 2.5 million people, of which one million are in the education service. There are 1.6 million in local government jobs and a million in the hospital service.

Ten percent of 288,000 post workers struck, according to the SUD (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy) post-workers union. Workers at French Telecom and those in the media also took part. Even the weather forecast centres struck, with 23.7 percent of employees in 40 centres taking part. Many centres are set for closure.

The practice of the trade unions has been to dissipate workers' action by numerous dispersed one-day strike calls. This tactic was again on display in the unions' deliberate decision to separate last Thursday's strike from another on May 22 on the question of pensions.

Seven rail unions have called on their members to protest the government's move to increase the number of years required for full pension retirement from 40 to 41. They did not mobilise for the May 15 demonstrations, however. After the rail strike that paralysed the country last year, and the unions' "negotiated" betrayal of that struggle, the May 22 strike call rings hollow for many workers.

On the evening of the May 15 strikes, President

Nicolas Sarkozy announced that he would initiate legislation for a minimum service during strikes. Teachers would be obliged to give 48 hours notice of their intention to strike. Parents would have the right to demand of local authorities alternative provisions for pupils affected by the strike. Teachers' unions have condemned this as an attack on the right to strike. All municipal councils except those controlled by Sarkozy's ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) have said that they would refuse to provide such a service and could not be forced to do so by the central government.

The *Ouest-France* newspaper commented: "Mauled and destabilised in his own camp, in a difficult situation with public opinion, Nicolas Sarkozy has chosen a very 'Sarkozyite' way of making a come-back." *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest* wrote that Sarkozy was stoking up a mass movement: "The good old trial of strength, which we thought had been buried as much as the spirit of May 68, is taking on its former lustre: demonstrations against the government, the government toughening its stance. The May 22 strike is likely to be another episode of a spring trial of strength, rather tougher than expected."

Teams of WSWS and International Students for Social Equality supporters handed out thousands of copies of an ISSE statement directed at the many thousands of high school students on the streets together with teachers, hospital workers and other public sector workers. (See "Defend public education against Sarkozy's cuts! Unite workers and youth across Europe and internationally!")

Many of those interviewed were familiar with the WSWS and displayed a serious attitude to the issues involved in the strike.

Referring to the determined mass movement of youth in 2005 against the First Job Contract (CPE), Lambert said, "Today's movement is less than the one against the CPE, but today there's a good amount of people. The different sections of the working class must unite. Against the CPE, we were united, and it worked". Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin was obliged to withdraw the CPE but left the rest of the repressive legislation of the Equal Opportunities Law intact.

Jammie, a student from Tolbiac at the University of Paris, commented on the 2007 student struggle against the Pécresse Law. The legislation was aimed at

restricting access to higher education and tying the universities to big business. "We lost," he told the WSWS. "We were walked over and beaten with batons. There was a lot of repression. L'UNEF (National Union of Students of France) supposedly negotiated, but the law is not changed."

Jammie affirmed that the attack on rights in France "was driven by the international context. As for privatisations, Sarkozy is in line with the rest of the world. The interests of the working class and the youth are the same. If the working class is weakened, then so are the youth. Already 50 percent of students have to work, so their interests are linked."

Jammie continued, "Sarkozy is continuing France's imperialist policy. Sarkozy is far too pro-American and pro-Israeli. When he went to Dakar, he gave a speech telling the Africans that they lived in a backward country and a dark age!"

He said that the Socialist Party is no longer a party of the left. "It is no longer a credible alternative to capitalism. The future is sombre and despairing. The youth were repressed and clubbed and nobody reacted. So that means that now it is acceptable to beat the youth when they revolt."

Tristan, 16, a pupil at Maurice Ravel High School in Paris, was clear that the education cuts in France were part of a worldwide development: "What we are going through is an international phenomenon, in Italy, Spain, in the Anglo-Saxon world. We'll bring this government down—that's what we are here for. All the sections of the working class will unite naturally. To win this struggle means overthrowing the government. After that there will be a socialist, communist government, we will see."

He denounced French foreign policy: "It's a scandal that France, the country of the rights of man should send its troops to Afghanistan and support Israel. We youth will soon be voting and we'll change that."

He pointed out that "capitalism was the problem. Wealth is unequally distributed, there's no equality. We'll destroy this world and build a new one."



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