

Amid fears Greek demonstrations could spread

Government postpones French high school reform

Kumaran Ira
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On December 15, French Education Minister Xavier Darcos announced the temporary withdrawal of a highly contested high school reform, in the face of student protests and after consultation with President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The decision to temporarily postpone implementation of the law, which would cut teaching staff and rearrange high school curricula, is an embarrassing about-face for the government. A week ago, Darcos promised he would maintain the reform movement, explaining that student protests “are almost a habit... I am not the minister of National Hesitation, I have a duty to future generations. We must reform a country that badly needs it.”

Since then, however, there was the eruption of massive and violent anti-government protests in Greece, after police shot dead a 15-year-old boy, Alexis Grigoropoulos. Sympathy protests spread to many European countries, including France. With youth in France facing dismal economic and job prospects, the French press widely commented that the anti-reform protests could be infected by what they called the “Greek syndrome.”

Darcos explained on Europe 1: “What worries me is not so much that high school students can contest reforms, which is something we are used to... There is social agitation, a deep-seated fear that goes far beyond the question of whether next year we will have curricular modules in 11th grade, all of that goes much further. I do not want the high school reform to be held

hostage by these social tensions and concerns, which are obviously tied to causes beyond the high schools. Today the climate does not allow for a serene discussion, so it is not very serious if we put the reform off by one year.”

Students oppose the reform because they worry about cuts to education budgets and hours of instruction, attempts to make public schools compete with private schools, and the likelihood the reform will undermine their diploma’s credibility with employers. They are also angry about job cuts in education: the government has decided to eliminate some 13,500 teaching jobs next year, after eliminating 11,200 this year.

Since the Darcos reform was presented in October, students have staged numerous demonstrations against it. Over the last week, a number of demonstrations and school occupations took place in cities such as Rennes, Nantes, Amiens, Aix-en-Provence, Paris, Marseille, and Nîmes. Some violent incidents erupted in several cities in western France. In Brest, police fired teargas at a small group of youth, mostly students, who responded by throwing stones.

The basic economic conditions that provoked the Greek riots exist in all of Europe, and in particular in France. Youth unemployment in France, among the highest in Europe, stands at 23 percent and more than 35 percent in some neighbourhoods. Five years after finishing their studies, more than a fifth of French people in their 20s still do not have a job. They are forced to choose between a precarious job and no job at all.

After a young man lost his life in a police chase in the suburbs of Paris in 2005, unemployed and working class youth rioted for several days in protests that started in the Paris suburbs and spread to over 300 French towns. The government responded by declaring a three-month period of emergency rule and using large-scale deployments of riot police. Riots also broke out in Paris in November 2007, after police fled the scene of an accident in which a police car had killed two youth on a motorcycle.

These social tensions are now intensified by the spread of the world economic crisis, with massive bailouts and industrial shutdowns throughout Europe. Students' futures are ever grimmer in a capitalist economy where no job or industry is safe. Moreover, by insisting on cutting a few billion euros from education budgets to eliminate teaching jobs, while rapidly finding €360 billion to bail out France's banks, the government has starkly shown its class character.

In its December 11 editorial, the daily *Libération* wrote, "The aggravation of the economic situation lays bare longstanding difficulties: the low-budget precariousness in which a large part of the population, especially the generation of 20- to 30-year olds, lives... The Elysée [presidential palace] is observing with intensity the slightest indicator of revolt. It is a wise precaution: divided, stressed, and disillusioned, France has a Greek profile."

Ex-Socialist Party Prime Minister Laurent Fabius noted, "What we are seeing in Greece is not outside the realm of the possible in France. When you have such an economic depression, such a feeling of social hopelessness, all that is missing is a match."

The discrediting of the unions, amid repeated defeats of strikes and demonstrations against Sarkozy's social cuts over the last two years, also creates a harsher popular mood. The state has no confidence that the student unions and trade unions would be able to control student protests.

In an article titled, "We are sitting on a powder keg," *Libération* asked University of Paris sociologist

Isabelle Sommier whether "the unions and political parties can channel this despair." She responded: "They are in a morass and without credibility, as they offer no alternative, that is to say no perspective other than the preservation of what currently exists. Of course, they can mobilize themselves, but already for several years this has led nowhere. From there stems the inclination, in some youth, to direct action."

High-ranking French officials have been carefully monitoring protests both in Greece and France.

An aide of Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie told *Le Monde*, "We are following with close attention the movements that are developing around the high schools. The climate is nervous, and certain medium-sized cities have suffered damages."

French officials also received daily updates from the Greek government during the riots. *Le Monde* wrote, "[French Immigration Minister] Brice Hortefeux contacted Greece's interior minister, whom he knows well, to take the measure of the situation. He fears an 'overexploitation' of the phenomenon in France."

See Also:

France: Riots break out in Paris suburbs after police crash kills youth
[27 November 2007]

Paris hit by anti-police riots
[2 November 2005]



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