

France: Thousands demonstrate against education cuts

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Up to 60,000 people—school students of all ages, primary and secondary school teachers, and good numbers of parents—demonstrated on January 17 throughout France against education cuts. Some 13,500 posts are to be lost in schools in 2009 after cuts of 11,500 in 2008. More than 80,000 posts are due to be axed by 2012.

The protests were called by a collective of teacher unions, parents' organisations, and education support associations and were supported by the high school and university students' unions.

In Paris, about 8,000 people marched behind a banner saying, "Education is not a financial burden to be reduced, it's an investment for the future." In Lyon, there were 8,000 protesters; in Nantes and Bordeaux, 2,500 each.

Participation on the demonstrations, coming after a series of well-spaced-out days of action organised by the trade unions since the beginning of September, was considerably down. On November 20, hundreds of thousands of teachers struck and demonstrated. On December 18, after mass demonstrations of high school students throughout France during weeks of protests, some 180,000 were on the streets.

Union leaders have attempted to explain the diminished support for the January 17 demonstration by asserting that people are reserving their fire until January 29. A day of action will be held then, organised by all the unions in protest at the effects of the recession: sackings, closures, declining living standards and cuts in the social services. The unions also claim that the government's decision to postpone reform of the high school curriculum and its reduction of teaching hours for key subjects and other minor concessions have dampened down the movement.

These claims attempt to cover for the fact that all the calls to action are organised by the unions as a means of letting off steam and wearing down the movement. The decision of the education unions to wait until January 17, and of the entire trade union confederations to delay a broader movement until January 29, was designed to isolate the growing high school movement.

In the wake of the mass youth revolt in December in Greece, sparked by the fatal shooting of 15-year-old student Alexandros Grigoropoulos, governments were fearful that the "Greek syndrome" would ignite youth all over Europe, all of whom are facing similar situations. The French government felt obliged to make certain minimal concessions.

A report in *Le Monde* January 5 gives an idea of the objective conditions driving the movement of the students in France. Entitled "Youth, the first victims of the 2009 social crisis," it quotes Philippe Askenazy, a head of research at the Paris School of Economics, who commented, "We know the first victims of this great clear-out in the temp agencies: young people, the prime source of temporary work."

Annie Jeanne, president of the National Association of Managers of Local Agencies (ANDML), remarked, "We see more and more of them coming through the doors of our local agencies. Moreover, young people who are trying to join the labour market and who are suffering a lot in this period of crisis. We see people under 25 who had almost achieved a stable work situation thanks to going from temp job to temp job, which enabled them to pay the rent, and to be independent, who are now unemployed."

Askenazy added, "Today the government should be more afraid of the youth than of the workers. And think about what happened in Greece."

Le Monde reports that "The OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] forecast on Tuesday that the unemployment rate in France will climb to 8.2 percent of the active population and to 8.7 percent in 2010. Up till present the rise in unemployment affects the young and temporary workers 'but it will probably have a more general character in the near future,' the OECD stresses."

A striking feature of the leaflets and campaign material for the January mobilisations is that they hardly mention the rapidly deepening economic crisis in Europe, which has driven France into recession with a record monthly rise in unemployment of 49,900 in October, bringing the national

total to more than 2 million jobless.

At the demonstrations in Paris and Amiens, *World Socialist Web Site* teams distributed a leaflet titled, "A socialist reply to Sarkozy and Darcos' [Xavier Darcos, minister of education] attacks on education." The statement pointed out, "These attacks are driven by the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s and represent an unprecedented failure of the capitalist system. Workers and youth are fighting these attacks."

The statement added, "The €360 billion provided to refloat France's banks and the €26 billion plan to kick-start the economy are attempts to revive the fortunes of French capitalism, but this can only be done through a vast increase in the rate of exploitation of the working class."

The statement explained that such attacks were taking place throughout the world. The same driving forces are behind the growth of imperialist militarism and wars of conquest for material resources, in which French and European imperialism are fully involved or complicit—in Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza.

The statement warned, "The trade unions and parties of the 'left' collaborate daily with Sarkozy. They make no serious reference, if any, to the economic crisis because this would involve challenging the system itself and the cosy relationships they have with big business and the capitalist state."

"Save public education"

The Paris demonstrators marched behind the banner reading, "Save public education"

A woman high school teacher wore a notice, "Education according to Sarkozy and Darcos: job cuts, overloaded workdays, the smash-up of education, pupils in danger, parents brushed aside, infant education ridiculed, the future under threat, overloaded classes, defend our public, secular, free education system in every neighbourhood of France. Save the school for success for all."

Other signs read, "The right is smashing everything up, the left couldn't give a damn!" "Angry parents," "Equal rights" and "Parents and teachers together save public education."

Our reporters spoke to demonstrators in Paris. One said he was a member of a left group, asked for a leaflet and commented, "I read your site, it is very interesting and you produce very good Marxist theoretical and principled statements and documents. You are very sharp and powerful in politics."

Ambroise, a student from Lycée le Kremlin-Bicêtre, said, "We must show that we are with the working class. We must all get together and bring down the government. The worse things get in the world, the worse it is for France."

John, a first-year university student, complained, "These job cuts make the work much harder for teachers. They're

having to work overtime, and that lowers the quality of their work and their attentiveness to us, the pupils."

Guillaume, a high school student from Paris, explained, "There are already 35 pupils in my class. It's already difficult for a teacher to attend to them—40 to 45 is impossible. There's a relationship between the reforms and the financial crisis. It's bringing down the economy, and the education cuts are a way of trying to get money back."

He spoke of an experience when high school pupils had been attacked by riot police and the teachers' unions had not come to their aid. "We are young all the same; we don't know everything. We need help from experienced people. We must unite with the working class and the youth of Europe and, in fact, the world. We have common interests."

In Amiens, the WSWS spoke to Lucas, Zoé and Luc on the protest. They are high school students from the Lycée Robert de Luzarches.

Lucas said, "We are demonstrating against cuts in teaching posts. It's part of a whole neo-liberal attack on social rights."

Zoé added, "Sarkozy is not going to stop his attacks. It's a dialogue of the deaf. They may slow down, but they will not stop. The crisis makes us the generation with a worse future than our parents. You see people with swastikas. People should get interested in history. We've had lessons on the '29 Crash, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, but we weren't shown the links, the importance for today. People must become aware."

She continued, "There's no political party among the high school students to raise political questions. They are against what is happening, but they have no ideology."

Lucas agreed. "It's disapproved of to talk about politics at the high school. They say that students who are interested in politics are being manipulated. But politics would help students to think, and the state doesn't want that. With the high school reform, Darcos wants to reduce teaching of history. We need that to be able to think. There were consequences of the '29 Crash. That could happen again."



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