

French university teachers strike to defend working conditions

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Some 100,000 university teachers and students protested in French cities February 10 seeking to force the withdrawal of the decree issued by the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy on the status of university teachers. The decree forms part of the Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities (LRU) law on university reform against which students battled last year in isolation.

The higher education reform would give autonomy to university governing bodies and open the way for market-oriented policies. The teachers' determination to continue their fight to defend their working conditions has hardened in spite of an appeal by Minister of Higher Education Valérie Pécresse "to find ways through" the dispute by naming a mediator.

Fifty-seven thousand university teachers have been on strike or have made some form of protest since February 2, when a national coordinating committee of 196 delegates representing 79 institutions met at the Sorbonne in Paris. The delegates rejected the changes in the status of research teachers, teacher training and the content of competitive exams required for teaching in primary and secondary education.

In Paris, 50,000 took to the streets, including academic staff, university technicians, administrative staff, library workers, maintenance staff, university engineers, students and high school pupils. The leading banner proclaimed, "United for higher education and research." The main university teachers' union SNESUP-FSU (National Union of Higher Education--University Union Federation) and the students' union UNEF (National Union of French students) held a banner saying, "No to the smashing up of universities and research."

Five thousand marched in Lyon, 3,000 in Strasbourg and 1,500 in Marseilles. More than 6,000 participated in Toulouse from the city's three universities.

The LRU law passed in 2007 establishes the right of universities to become autonomous in budgetary matters within five years, giving them the management of human resources and the ownership of the university buildings. The powers of university presidents are increased through a veto on teacher recruitment, bypassing the existing prerogative of teachers' committees in the recruitment of their peers. The president will be able to recruit in the "free market" on temporary contracts and distribute bonuses to staff. He can also appoint 30 to 40 percent of the board of governors. Student representation on the boards is reduced from 20 percent to 10 percent, while private sector representation rises from 20 percent to 30 percent.

Opposition to government plans to separate research from teaching in order to increase the workload of academic staff has united even the traditionally conservative faculties of law and economics, 56 of which are mobilizing in opposition to the reform. A dozen university presidents have demanded the withdrawal of the decree on the status of university teachers. The president of Paris IV university, Georges Molinié, was unequivocal: "It's the biggest blow against the Republic's education system since Vichy" (the World War II government of Marshal Philippe Pétain, which collaborated with the Nazi occupation).

Even university presidents in favour of the reforms, like Axel Kahn of Paris V, have abandoned support for the decree under pressure from rank and file teachers. Sarkozy's own ruling Union for Popular Movement (UMP) is coming under fire from within. UMP deputy François Goulard demanded the decree's withdrawal. Another UMP deputy, Daniel Fasquelle, is trying to save the government's face by

introducing a bill to “improve” the decree. The naming of a mediator to “rework the decree” was rejected by Jean Fabbri, general secretary of the SNESUP-FSU, as “a ridiculous provocation that doesn’t meet the expectations of thousands of protesters.”

The unions—after strikes and demonstrations mobilising over three million people took place January 29 against unemployment, the rising cost of living and in defence of the social services—are doing everything they can to prevent a mass movement against the government developing outside of their control. They have attempted to isolate the high school pupils’ protest movement. Now with a general strike movement developing in Guadeloupe and Martinique (two French “overseas departments” in the Caribbean), alongside the movement in the universities, the next day of action has been scheduled for March 19—permitting Sarkozy to deal with the struggles isolated from the main contingents of the working class.

The government mediator appointed by Péresse was due to meet teaching union leaders on Wednesday. The talks are aimed at separating the issue of the teachers’ status from the fundamental aim of the LRU law, opening the door to the privatisation of higher education and an entrenched two-tier system. The government’s plan is to have the top universities attract the lion’s share of funding, while most other universities offer declining standards.

University teachers have come out on strike largely to defend the balance between teaching and research under attack in the Péresse decree. The government may be prepared to make concessions on this issue, while leaving the LRU law intact. If the bulk of France’s two million university students have not yet joined the teachers en masse to defy the government, it is perhaps because last year the teachers’ unions left them to fight alone for months on just this issue. Students are clearly looking for signs of a genuine struggle against the Sarkozy government.

The defense and improvement of quality higher education depends on an offensive by teachers and students going beyond the limited sectional demands of the unions and uniting all sections of the working class being driven by unemployment, job insecurity and poverty wages into conflict with the government’s austerity programme. This requires a break from the unions and the “left” parties and the development of new socialist leadership.

World Socialist Web Site correspondents in Paris reported on the massive demonstration that set out from the Sorbonne

and marched to the National Assembly.

The CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party), was out in force, with cars and loudspeakers, and the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party), FO (Workers’ Power) and SNES also had delegations. There were large contingents of demonstrators from universities in Avignon, Nantes and Nancy, as well as from Paris-area universities.

David, a researcher in nuclear physics, told the WSWS he wanted “a moratorium on the reform and the LRU” and “to establish a more rational system” for the assessment of research by peer groups, not university presidents. “The university reform has been imposed on us and that has to be changed.”

An undergraduate student commented, “This demonstration of students and teachers is aimed at making the government retreat on the latest decrees. The problem is that our university is too market-oriented, too tied to private enterprise.” The student added that this “sort of economic goal is likely to reduce the acquisition of knowledge and diversity.”

The teachers and the students were motivated by different aspects of the reforms, he said. The students were against the LRU, while the teachers were reacting against the decrees on teaching and research and some were not bothered about the LRU.

Julien, a history teacher, said, “The economic crisis is hitting the universities first, based on the American model [private funding rather than state funding]. This involves choosing the kind of society we want.”



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