France: Protests continue against Sarkozy's university reforms

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Five weeks of strikes and protests by university teachers and students against government reforms that undermine the status of teachers and the quality of higher education have maintained their momentum. This is despite Higher Education Minister Valérie Pécresse's watering down of the proposals and the trade unions presenting minor concessions as a basis for agreement.

On March 5, 20,000 university teachers, administrative staff and students marched in Paris. Another 23,000 took to the streets across 20 cities, notably in Lyon, Toulouse, Nantes, Rennes, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Nancy, Brest, Montpelier and Caen. Twice within two weeks the historic Paris Sorbonne University was occupied by 200 students before they were ousted by CRS riot police. Slogans and banners on the Paris protest included, "No to the break-up of universities and research! No to the destruction of teachers' status!" as well as "No to the destruction of teacher training—withdraw the Darcos/Pécresse reforms," referring to the higher education minister, as well as Education Minister Xavier Darcos.

One placard declared, "Guadeloupe everywhere, general strike," a reference to the French island's 44-day strike against the high cost of living.

The general secretary of the FSU (Federation Syndicate Unitaire, the majority education union), Gérard Aschieri, declared, "The movement in Guadeloupe, which succeeded in mobilising and obtaining results, can only help our mobilisation."

These comments are belied by the actions of the FSU, which has refused to mobilise workers and staff in the national education system over the last year to oppose the 13,500 high school teacher job losses imposed by Darcos, leaving students to fight alone.

Delegates of the universities' national co-ordinating committee, representing research teachers and staff from 67 universities, met last Friday after the protest. They vowed to fight on for the complete abrogation of the University Liberties and Responsibilities Law (LRU) on university autonomy. Delegates rejected the government concessions as "scandalously insufficient" and stated that "Nothing has been obtained on the master's degree [which replaces teacher training practice] and the reform of recruitment exams for secondary school teachers."

This position contrasts with the teaching unions (Sgen-CFDT, Sup'Recherche Unsa, Autonome Sup and Force Ouvriere) which Sgen-CFDT delegate Thierry Cadart said had reached a "consensus" with the government. The Snesup-FSU did not take part in negotiations but still declared it was "ready to meet the government."

The government found itself isolated when it tried to introduce a decree on a new status for university teachers five weeks ago. Up to that point, union leaders and the student union UNEF (close to the Socialist Party) had accepted the LRU law enacted in 2007. The revolt by teachers centred on the new powers for university presidents to decide who and how much teaching or research would be allocated to each teacher, based on performance data. Prime Minister François Fillon immediately told Higher Education Minister Valérie Pécresse to "entirely rewrite" the decree.

The teachers' university co-ordinating committee said on March 6 that the "rewrite of the decree is unacceptable in as much as it maintains the orientation of the first text." It called for further mass demonstrations on March 11 and the extension of the mobilisation to involve all teachers and staff from the nursery schools to universities.

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The government has conceded that timetables for the division of work between teaching time and research in universities will not be imposed, but done with teachers' "consent," and assessment of performance will now be national and carried out by peers. But the issue uniting rank-and-file teachers and students is that of new teacher training qualifications and the status for trainee teachers preparing to enter primary and secondary school education. Unions are asking for its implementation to be postponed for a year.

The new training course is referred to as the "masterisation." This will lead to the deterioration of new teachers' job status and employment security in a context of developing mass unemployment. The traditional status of trainee teachers as state employees, with the prospect of lifelong job protection, will now be undermined. The number of permanent posts with full civil servant status has been halved. Those who have achieved the education masters degree will be qualified to teach and will constitute a reserve pool of teachers with much reduced rights, to be employed on short-term contracts and with no job security. Previously students were qualified to teach with a BA degree.

The proposals for teacher training in the LRU law spell the virtual end of teacher training institutes (IUFM). Currently trainees spend a year preparing the competitive teachers' exam at university and then undertake a year's course in teaching practise. This course, a fully paid post, will now be abolished and replaced by a two-year master's degree without pay.

University teacher job cuts are also strongly opposed. Although the government now promises to freeze reductions until 2011, 1,000 posts have already been lost this year. The CNRS (National Council for Scientific Research) is also set to lose over 800 research and engineering jobs. The unions hope to negotiate a compromise on jobs and teacher training, but leave intact the LRU law on university autonomy (a form of creeping privatisation) that is being implemented in 20 of France's 83 universities this year. The law gives university presidents powers to set budgets, seek private funds and dispose of university assets.

Student opposition to the LRU remains determined, but less massively supported than last year. Currently 25 universities are affected by student strikes, protests and lesson boycotts. The principal student union UNEF has opposed any political fight against the government. The UNEF leadership called off the student mobilisations against the LRU 18 months ago, after months of strikes. Its president at the time, Bruno Julliard, appealed for "the end of strikes and occupations ... due to advances obtained by students." He is now Socialist Party spokesman on education.

The student section of the SUD (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy) trade union recognises the government's objective of "submitting the universities to the logic of competition between them, and obliging them to have recourse to private financing." But it claims only that "the mobilisation must continue to grow and to make the government retreat" and says nothing about the isolation of the struggle by UNEF and the trade union bureaucracy.

The Sarkozy government has been weakened by the opposition to its reforms and the fear of social revolt spreading from the Antilles (French West Indies) to mainland France. Only the trade unions and the official opposition (Socialist Party, Communist Party/PCF) keep the government in office. The New Anti-Capitalist Party of Olivier Besancenot declares that a general strike is necessary to make the government "retreat" on jobs and wages. But its aim is to tie the fate of workers to the trade unions, who are calling another one-day strike on March 19, seven weeks after the 3-million-strong strikes and demonstrations of January 29 against Sarkozy's austerity policies.

Relying on the trade unions to put pressure on the Sarkozy government to make a fundamental retreat on his programme of social regression has proved illusory. Any real defence of social gains involves a break from these organisations and their left apologists and the building of independent organisations of struggle, with the perspective of the socialist reorganisation of the economy under the democratic control of the working class.

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