

French university strikes end in union betrayal

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After more than 16 weeks of continuous strikes and protests, the movement against the government's LRU "autonomy" law for universities (*Libertés et Responsabilités des Universités*) has broken up. It did so under the pressure of government threats over upcoming exams and the sabotage of the unions in refusing to mobilise any solidarity.

The law opens the way for the profit motive and competition to be introduced into public higher education.

From last February, more than half of France's 83 universities were on strike. Only Toulouse Le Mirail University remains on strike. Eleven students at the South Toulon-Var University have started a hunger strike demanding the LRU's withdrawal.

The Paris IV Sorbonne University, at the centre of events, voted on May 19 to restart lectures. Minister for Higher Education Valérie Pécresse gave guarantees extending student grants and offered to keep open student residences and canteens to cover delayed exams. The government had already made a compromise on some of the LRU's clauses without affecting the law's basic thrust. Staff cuts have been suspended for two years; the power accorded to university chancellors (instead of teachers' peers) to decide teacher promotions and hirings has been curbed, and the attack on research teacher status, which seeks to impose a greater teaching load, has been withdrawn.

The government also intended to abolish the one year of teaching practice in Teacher Training schools (IUFM) for students, cutting their pay and civil servant status. A two-year master's diploma was to take its place. On Wednesday May 13, Education Minister Xavier Darcos announced this reform was temporarily shelved for students qualifying as teachers in 2010/2011. The main teachers' union, Snesup FSU, hailed this as a "government retreat thanks to pressure."

Recent weeks saw a hardening of the government's attitude. Police violence against student protests has been frequent. A peaceful march in Amiens was broken up by CRS riot police on April 1. The brutality of police attacks on student demonstrations contrasted with the teacher and student unions' indifference to or outright support for the government's position of amending the LRU while retaining its essentials.

University staff and teachers' delegates of the National University Co-ordination (CNU) from 73 universities met on April 29 at the Sorbonne and vowed "not to organise exams until their demands were satisfied." The official trade unions did not support this call. On May 6, Pécresse said salary deductions would be implemented against striking teachers who refuse to organise exams or withhold grades, while Darcos announced that protesting students would receive no diplomas. Frédérique Lefebvre, parliamentary spokesman for the governing UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), demanded legal action against anyone preventing students from passing their exams.

The ex-leader of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, proclaimed a "conjugation between the government which won't listen or negotiate, and the extreme left which is looking, for reasons known to itself, to engage in a conflict which has lasted too long."

An article attacking teacher and student militancy appeared in the journal *Informations Ouvrières* of May 7-13. Daniel Shapira, a leading member of the Independent Workers Party (POI) and CGT (General Confederation of Workers) member, wrote, "The anxiety of students and their families, and research teachers, is growing. This anxiety has been reinforced by the appeal of the last University [national] Co-ordinating conference on April 29" [calling for the boycott of exams]. This was "somewhat irresponsible," he claimed. The POI is the successor to the OCI (Organisation Communiste Internationaliste), which broke from Trotskyism in 1971.

This year's university strike is a repeat of that in 2007, when students battled for months against the LRU law with no support from teaching unions or the UNEF (National Union of French Students). From the beginning, it was clear that the teacher and student unions were retreating once again from any confrontation with President Sarkozy's government. While 32,000 students, teachers and hospital workers linked up to protest in Paris on April 28 against attacks on public services, a similar protest on May 14 kept hospital workers and teachers separated. Hospitals are set to lose 20,000 nurses under the government reform of the health system.

At a debate held by LIBE Forum on March 22 with UNEF President Jean-Baptiste Prévost, government spokesman on the LRU Benoist Apparu noted the mobilising role of general assemblies (mass meetings) and national co-ordinating committees. He then insisted that "the only representative partners [with government], these are the unions. The national co-ordinations, these are the democracy of the soviets."

The unions, which represent just 7 percent of the workforce in France, are recognised as "representative partners" by government only because they serve the interests of the bourgeoisie against the working class. Prévost, whose UNEF negotiated acceptance of the LRU in 2007, naturally concurred with Apparu. He declared that the general assembly meetings did not have "as much legitimacy as the unions to negotiate."

The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) led by Olivier Besancenot insisted throughout that militant protest—ringing endorsements of "concrete solidarity," the "convergence of struggles" and "the construction of the mobilisations at the base"—would be enough to secure victory for the students. The same position was advanced by the SUD-Etudiant (Solidarity, Unity and Democracy) union and the various anarchist and syndicalist movements that advanced as an alternative to the UNEF (close to the Socialist Party). Their calls for a general strike are never posed from the necessary standpoint of mounting a political rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and its programme of nationalism and class collaboration.

The last meeting of the National Student Co-ordinating conference met in Dijon on May 3 and called for the abrogation of the LRU law, automatic validation of the students' semester and a general strike. But without advancing a political struggle against the government and its accomplices in the trade unions, this was left as mere rhetoric hurled in the face of imminent defeat.

The task facing students in France is the construction of a new leadership, which advances a socialist and internationalist perspective against the redundant protest politics of the various "left" groups.

The International Students for Social Equality is the student organisation of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Its main statement explains:

"The ISSE rejects the policy of protest for the sake of protest, of pressuring the established parties to 'take action.' This perspective, characteristic of so many groups on campus, is a hopeless and bankrupt one. Our aim is to build a mass political movement, based on a clear and comprehensive theoretical perspective, to struggle for power, establish a workers' government and reorganise society on a democratic, egalitarian and rational basis."

The ISSE states that "our aim is not to build a purely student movement. The pressing need is for an independent political movement of the working class as a whole, that is, the vast majority of the world's population. The majority of student youth today are or will be part of the working class. The particular problems faced by students are products of the capitalist system, based on the exploitation of all workers."

Above all, "The working class needs its own party, its own programme and its own voice."

To this end the ISSE stand for the building of Socialist Equality Parties, as sections of the ICFI, in France and throughout the world.



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