

France: Teachers and students mobilise to defend education

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As many as 40 percent of all primary and secondary education teachers struck yesterday in thousands of schools throughout France and staged demonstrations against staff cuts and the deterioration of educational provision throughout the French education system.

The mobilisation is part of a worldwide resistance by teachers and students to austerity policies in education being implemented by governments throughout the world, notably most recently in Germany, Austria and the United States.

The action was organised by the main education union federation FSU (Federation of Unitary Unions), the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and SUD (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy) Education. The main college students union UNEF (National Union of Students of France) and organisations of high school students called on students to support the teachers.

Over 15 percent of the country's postal workers also were out on a separate strike against privatisation and post office closures and rallied 3,000 workers in a separate demonstration.

The FSU counted 8,000 people on the Paris demonstration. There was a large and lively contingent of lycée (high school) pupils and a smaller contingent of university students, mainly from the Sorbonne and central Paris universities. The youth appeared to outnumber the primary and secondary teachers.

Smaller demonstrations were reported in the main cities of France, meaning that many strikers chose to stay at home rather than join the unions on the street.

The principal issues bringing students and teachers into action are the systematic reduction of the teacher workforce and the deterioration of teacher training, along with the shutting down of openings for regular employment in education amid rising unemployment, with youth joblessness reaching 20 percent and over.

Some 16,000 teaching posts are due to be cut in 2010, making 50,000 in five years, nearly half of the 136,000 jobs that are being axed in state services in the same period, in line with the government's policy of only replacing one out of two workers who retire from government employment.

The joint statement of the FSU/CGT declares: "The cumulative effect of the job cuts for all categories of staff and the lack of recruitment is bringing about the deterioration of

study and work conditions....depriving many young people of access to public service jobs....The reforms being implemented or planned are guided by the will to cut resources and to make the education system market-oriented." The education unions are also calling for a wage increase for education personnel, whose purchasing power has been in decline for decades.

The UNEF, apart from calling for more student lodgings and an increased grant for those relatively few entitled to one, cites the mass opposition to the "regressive and scandalous reform of teacher training."

This measure will replace the current postgraduate two-year course, which includes a year of academic study of the subject to be taught and some educational theory, at the end of which the candidate takes a competitive examination, the door to a permanent teaching post. Successful candidates, only five percent of those in contention, teach a few hours per week in the second year, under supervision by an experienced teacher and teacher training staff, and continue with courses on the art of teaching.

Under the planned new system all would-be teachers will be expected to complete a two-year masters course at the end of which they will take the competitive exam for posts in primary and secondary schools. They are then thrown in at the deep end to teach under the same conditions as experienced teachers.

The state will have saved on a year's wages for these novice teachers. Another advantage for state finances is that many of the failed candidates will nevertheless have masters degrees in education and can constitute a pool of teachers to be employed under short-term contracts with much reduced working conditions, salaries and rights.

The other key issue motivating the protests of high school pupils and teachers alike is the reform of the lycées being imposed by education minister Luc Chatel, a somewhat watered-down version of the one his predecessor Xavier Darcos had to postpone in the face of mass movements in the universities and the lycées last academic year. This reform reduces the obligation of lycées to provide specific amounts of teaching time for school subjects in order to make way for "individualised support" which, the teachers' organisations maintain, will tend to put lower-performing pupils at a disadvantage while favouring the front-runners.

The union statements omit any assessment of the experiences of the last years, where mass movements such as 2003 (pension cuts), 2006 (against drastic attacks on work rights), 2007/8 (pension rights and working conditions in the public sector) were carried out in the teeth of the opposition of the trade unions, which did everything they could to divide and limit struggles to one day and dispersed protests.

They did not stem the government's offensive against the rights and conditions of the workers and the youth, but, rather, encouraged it. This enabled the government, in addition to significant reductions in workers' conditions, to make serious inroads into the right to strike in public transport and education through minimum service legislation.

The union statements ignore the global economic and financial crisis, which is driving governments all over the world to impoverish the working class and the youth to enable their capitalists to compete on the world arena.

The CGT/FSU statement calls for more jobs, better work and study conditions and teacher training and the end of short-term contracts and issues the threat of "a major and lasting conflict" if these demands are not met, a threat mainly for the consumption of their own members, to convince them of the validity of the union perspective of being able to convince the Sarkozy government to act in the interests of the workers and the youth.

The FSU, after reporting a nearly 40 percent participation in the strike, issued the toothless threat: "The minister just carries out a charade of discussions, refusing to listen to the basis of the demands of the staff. If the minister does not take the staff's opinions into account, the SNES (secondary school teachers branch of the FSU) with the FSU would take more action to impose other policies for education and its staff."

UNEF, likewise complained that "Luc Chatel did not take advantage of the postponement for a year of this reform so as to open up a real dialogue," and bemoaned his "scorn for social dialogue."

None of the "left" political parties—Besancenot's New Anti-Capitalist Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Party and the Communist Party—propose any perspective other than pressure on the government to grant concessions.

Only the statement of the German section of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) "For an independent working class movement to defend education," distributed by ISSE supporters at the Paris demonstration, pointed out that the struggle for a decent education system for all was closely bound up with the fight for the socialist transformation of society, involving the development of a worldwide social movement aimed at replacing capitalism.

WSWS reporters interviewed some marchers.

Amelie, from the Lycée Jacques Decoures in Paris, is in her second year studying literature. She reported that the lycée was blockaded by the students. "If they're cutting back on teachers and general culture, it's because they want to get rid of half of

the government workers," she said.

She added that it was good that students were moving in other countries, but thought that demonstrations were enough to stop the attack and placed some hopes in the Socialist Party.

Sofyan from the Lycée Newton in Clichy (Paris) said, "They're cutting teachers and education provision with the aim of privatising in the interests of big business. Education should be free for everyone, whatever their background. It's going to be hard to destabilise the right with Sarkozy there. Our future is tough. The present system needs changing. We must do everything for that, then the economic crisis can be managed."

Bertrand, in his first year at the Lycée Rodin in Paris said, "Pressure from the streets made Darcos back down." He said the youth were capable of fighting like they did in the past but thought that there could be no solution through the present unions and political parties. "The wars must be stopped and a peace established, but it's complex, because society is divided, with different interests," he said.

Morgan is a trainee primary teacher in Paris. He said, "We know about the movements in defense of education in Europe. We're always comparing situations. The state is trying to economise by getting rid of teachers and general culture. They're cutting back on special education. That means more teachers on temporary contracts."

He agreed that street pressure was not enough. "A lot of people don't realise that trainee teachers won't be getting practical experience," he said. "We could have pushed back the university reform last year [LRU, leading to autonomous universities financed by big business]. The unions weren't much to be seen."

Although he thought that the crisis could be solved with the existing political parties he was dismayed by the "personality war" in the Socialist Party and said, "We should be opposing the government. We need a real opposition.... I've got the impression it's getting like Italy, where the opposition concentrates on the personality of Silvio Berlusconi and not on his political programme. France is going in the same direction."



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