

French students speak out against austerity and state of emergency

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WSWS reporters spoke yesterday to youth in Paris and in Marseille protesting the so-called El Khomri law, which launches a sweeping attack on protections offered to workers by France's Labour Code. University and high school students expressed their anger against the Socialist Party (PS) government's austerity policy, attacks on democratic rights, and France's wars in Africa and the Middle East.

At the youth demonstration in Paris, Margot and Lola said, "We're against this law they are trying to impose on us, and we the youth are trying to stop it. It's already a mess today, with the conditions of the youth, we are exploited and really badly paid. If this law goes through, it will be even worse, and we can't accept that, not today. I think that's why it's good to say we are not happy."

The WSWS also spoke to Elliott, a high school student, as the youth rally joined up with a rally called by the trade unions. He explained that he is opposing the El Khomri law as it dismantles social rights won by the working class in the 20th century: "It's because I think it is a step backwards, it costs us social rights that our parents and grandparents fought for, and I don't want people to decide things for us now. I don't think the future is as dark as we are being told it is."

Elliott opposed government claims that the flexibility in labour rules will create jobs, since youth already face high unemployment and poor working conditions: "First of all, the result will be that we will have more precarious working conditions, when already 25 percent of youth are unemployed. I don't think you can say then that making it easier to sack people is really the solution to create jobs."

Asked about the state of emergency, he said it was a complicated issue that was being discussed by many young people. "The terrorist threat, it is really there, but

you can't either sacrifice our liberties on the altar of security. ... I feel we are watched quite often," he said.

Anthony, a law student at Cergy Pontoise University, spoke to WSWS reporters at the youth rally about his opposition to broader attacks on democratic rights in France.

He said, "Today we are protesting against the El Khomri law, but it is a much larger struggle because today we are in a situation where democratic rights are being trampled, where we are in a state of emergency, the government limits us more and more and attacks freedom of expression. So we are here, we are fighting all these aspects of the system and against the established order itself today."

Asked about wars in the Middle East and his opinion of recent terror attacks, including in Paris and Brussels, he opposed military escalation: "We have endured attacks, but we are not at war and we should not be. It's our geopolitical situation that means that there are these types of attacks, but that is not a matter that moves us, the youth. We don't want their wars. ... And I think that if we put an end to our involvement in Syria, for instance, I think we will be able to breathe a little bit more freely."

Asked whether he wants a withdrawal of French troops from foreign countries, Anthony replied, "Totally, totally. A pull-back, a political or economic solution rather than military escalation. It is obvious that military engagement today, notably bombing cities and especially civilians, only brings more recruits for the Islamic State."

Anthony saw the rise of the far-right National Front (FN) as the result of decades of reactionary policies being pursued by the PS and the right-wing conservative Les Republicain (LR), formerly the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

Anthony explained, “It is the consequence of 30 years of policies pursued either by the UMP or the PS, which has increasingly divided society—including on social policy—and today the rise of the National Front is the consequence of that. One cannot simply blame it all on the people who are going to vote for the National Front, because these are for the most part people who are desperate. So of course I condemn the rise of the National Front, but one must at the same time understand it.”

Anthony asked students and workers reading the WSWs to attend protests against the El Khomri Law scheduled for next Thursday.

In Marseille, WSWs reporters spoke to protesters at a demonstration called by student unions and attended by dockers’ unions. It began in front of regional police headquarters, whose administrative offices were being blockaded by high school students.

Valentina, a high school student, said: “In the law, we are being taken for slave labour. It is not something I like. I am not sure that we can trust the unions, but what I do think is that we have to all unify our struggles to be stronger. I think that if we get large enough numbers involved, we can do a lot. It’s for sure that we need a broader movement, that is what we are trying to do.”



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