

French government announces youth grant in bid to halt labor reform protest

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Amid continuing protests against the Socialist Party (PS) government and the labor law reform of Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls met with student organisations on Monday. He announced half a billion euros in aid for students in an attempt to defuse opposition to the PS' austerity agenda among students and youth.

After meeting with unions including UNEF (National Union of French Students), UNL (National Union of High School Students) and FIDL (Independent and Democratic Federation of High School Students), the government announced 11 measures, worth €500 million per year.

They include imposing more taxes on short-term contracts, supposedly to encourage employers to hire workers on permanent contracts; increasing the number of available scholarships; and increasing funding for industrial studies at two-year technical institutes (IUT). After graduation, students would continue to receive financial assistance for four months, as would apprentices.

Valls declared, "Never has so much been done for the youth in our country. Never has a government struggled so much to ensure that the coming generation will be ready to succeed." He added that these measures were not intended to "smother opposition," but to "respond to deep concerns which require a long-term response."

Valls' remarks are a pack of lies. The proposed measures, even if they were implemented, would not change the deeply reactionary character of the El Khomri Law, which lengthens the work week and allows the trade unions to negotiate firm-level contracts which violate the French Labour Code. If the law is passed, youth entering the work force will find themselves even more exploited, as big business seeks to dismantle the social gains won by the working class

in France in the 20th century.

This is why the announcement of the law led to broad popular opposition, with 71 percent of the French people opposing the law in one poll, despite the modification of the initial bill following the outbreak of protests in early March.

When the government announced the El Khomri Law, it hoped that the law will be passed through a negotiation with the unions, as the PS has done with other social cuts under Hollande, relying on the spectacle of talks with the unions to suppress social opposition. However, it met immediately with a broad rejection among youth and workers and sparked explosive anger.

As a result, well aware of the deep discrediting of the pro-austerity PS government among the masses, the trade and student unions rushed to call protests in order to keep opposition in the working class and the youth under their suffocating control. There have been five weeks of protests in France, with over 1 million youth and workers protesting on March 31.

The purpose of Valls' measures is to provide the student unions with an excuse to call off the protests, or to liquidate them into the dead end of a symbolic occupation of a few public squares by the petty-bourgeois #NightOnOurFeet movement.

After the meeting with Valls, student unions have signaled their support to his proposal.

UNEF President William Martinet expressed his "satisfaction" and indicated that he considered Valls' proposals as a sign that the movement had won a victory: "Because the youth mobilized and raised their heads high, they succeeded in obtaining powerful measures." He added that after Valls' proposal, "The forms of mobilization will change." This is a signal that UNEF will wind down the support it temporarily gave

to protests against the bill.

For its party, the UNL also signaled its approval of Valls' measures, declaring, "This goes in the right direction."

From the outset, the FAGE, the second-largest university student union, did not oppose the bill, praising the proposal as "really structural measures for the youth."

The PS-affiliated Young Socialist Movement cynically declared, "These measures, that we salute with great enthusiasm, cannot make us forget our differences with the labor law."

Their support for Valls' reactionary proposal shows that the student unions are preparing to sell out protests against the bill. With their backing to gradually wind down further opposition, the PS is plans to pass the bill, by relying on the dip in student protests during the school holidays and exam period. This would allow the student unions to promote the paltry measures they negotiated with the PS government as a victory.

The strategy of the government was clearly laid out in a *Le Monde* article analyzing President François Hollande's re-election bid in the 2017 presidential elections. Announcing Hollande's sudden announcement of a prime-time televised address on Thursday night, the paper stated that the French president "is betting on the exhaustion of the mobilization against the labor law."

It explained, "The executive relies on different factors to stabilise the head of state. First, the weakening of protests Saturday, against the labor law. Together with conflicts with the security forces, this leads the government to believe that the union opposition is winding down and that it could eventually become, because of the violence, unpopular with public opinion."

The strategy of the PS and its union and political allies is not so difficult to understand. They are well aware of deep and explosive social opposition to Hollande, France's most unpopular president since World War II. By avoiding calling out the workers, allowing police to beat and arrest protesting youth, and relying on media slanders of protesters, they aim to demoralize public opinion, demobilise workers and youth, and leave the PS in power.

The union organizations, their political satellites, and groups like #NightOnOurFeet that insist that social

opposition does not require a political perspective or a political party, are bankrupt. The critical political issue facing workers and youth is the absence of a clear political perspective and a political party to lead the explosive opposition that exists to the PS in the working class.

The struggle must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions and their student union allies, and develop into a broader struggle of the working class against austerity, war, and the state of emergency, politically and organizationally independent of the union bureaucracies and the PS.



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