

Students protest against Macron as strikes against austerity mount in France

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Amid the growing strike movement in France, students are stepping up action against the reactionary policies of President Emmanuel Macron. A half century after the brutal police repression of student protests provoked the May-June 1968 general strike, during which over 10 million workers struck and occupied their factories, students are occupying university buildings, defying threats from university administrators, police and far-right thugs to protest the Macron administration.

The escalating strike action by workers against Macron has gone hand in hand with a movement of campus occupations by university students in France—over half of whom are already in the workforce, holding down jobs to pay for tuition and living expenses while they study.

All over the country, students are occupying campuses and holding general assemblies and demonstrations. Yesterday over 2,500 students participated in the general assembly at the university in Rennes. Universities where buildings are being occupied or blockaded include Paul-Valéry University in Montpellier, Jean-Jaurès University in Toulouse, the Victoire site of University of Bordeaux-Montaigne, the Lumière 2 campus of the University of Lyon, University of Lille-3, the universities of Rouen and Strasbourg, and the Saint Denis, Tolbiac, Clignancourt and Nanterre campuses of the University of Paris.

Yesterday, as Air France workers struck, grounding a quarter of flights, and rail workers prepared to go back on strike on Friday, thousands of students marched in a “Day of Action” to protest a new law issued by Macron imposing new selection rules limiting students’ access to university education. The new law, the *Orientation et Réussite des Étudiants* (ORE, Orientation and Success for Students), is set to come into effect in

September.

In Paris over 1,000 participated in a demonstration at the Sorbonne University, which was heavily guarded by police. A WSWs reporting team intervened in the protests at the Sorbonne, distributing the perspective “Fifty years after May-June 1968, the class struggle erupts in France” and interviewing students. Students spoke out against the growing social inequality Macron’s education policies will produce, as well as the growing danger of war.

Léo, who is studying history and English at the Sorbonne, told WSWs reporters that he is protesting “because of the new law that passed.”

“Before university was basically for everybody if you got your baccalaureate, but now you have to have certain prerequisites,” he explained. “For example, if you want to study geography you have to travel, if you want to study English you have to do an internship in English. You have to do things not everyone can afford, so university is not for everyone now, but only for more privileged parts of the population.”

Léo solidarised himself with the growing strikes against the privatisation of the French National Railways (SNCF). “We also agree with the SNCF strike. Our protest is about student issues, but it’s also about what the government is now doing to the refugees. Sending policemen to just beat up students. And we don’t want this government keep passing laws we don’t agree with. And we want to say that we don’t agree with it.”

Asked what he hoped the movement would accomplish, Léo said: “We are trying to put pressure and make everybody understand why we are here. Maybe if more of us come out, the government will step back from what it is doing. We are not sure about that, but at least we are trying.”

When WSWS reporters pointed out, however, that Macron will not retreat and make concessions, because he is working closely with the European Union and diverting hundreds of billions of euros to the military to prepare for war, Léo said: “This is true. And, for example, the SNCF reform is also taking place because the European Union wants liberalisation. The German government did it before. But France is based on public services, and they should be for everyone. We feel that they want to take away everything that was won in past struggles, and that’s why we are here.”

Léo pointed to the growing opposition among European youth to war: “I am just against the army. Like for example in Mali and everywhere else, there are French troops there because they are former French colonies. And we just keep interfering in the affairs of countries that are not ours, and it is just disgusting and we should stop that.”

Asked about Macron’s announcement of plans to reintroduce the draft, Léo said: “We talked about it during the [2017 presidential election] campaign, because Mélenchon said something a bit similar, but we are just against it. I am against it and also my friends who are on my political side are also against it.”

He added: “We are not prepared and we don’t want to die in wars again. In the Sorbonne, inside the building, you have a list of names of people who went to war and all these people died. There are tons of names everywhere. And you see this every day. So when I hear about the draft, this is just disgusting.”

Similarly, a history student told the WSWS that she and her friends are worried about the comments of Macron and Jean-Luc Mélenchon advocating a return to the draft: “We do not feel like we are at war, but we are talking about the coming reform on universal military service. I find that unsettling, in fact, because it is as if a conflict were being prepared.”

Several students stressed their concern at the way Macron’s education agenda would increase social inequality, even as his economic policies aim to slash social spending and wages and reduce large swathes of the workforce to temp status.

Michel told the WSWS: “I feel solidarity for the workers’ struggles and I feel I am involved. And I also feel solidarity for their working conditions. First of all, there is a campaign to denounce the rail workers and legitimize the reform. I find this pretty disgusting

because that is just appealing to jealousy of various people in order to get a legislative measure through that is unfair. And, moreover, it is based on lies to say that the rail workers are privileged people; that’s outside of reality.”

Michel stressed that Macron’s education policies would increase the gap between the super-rich and the broad mass of the working population: “The impact of the reform, overall, will be to reinforce social inequality. Because as I see it, only certain parts of the population will be able to choose general, academic fields of study and temporarily leave the labour market. And on top of this, this week a commission of the National Assembly will begin examining a bill to increase tuition fees.”

Emile also criticised how Macron’s education law would increase social inequality: “It really gives an advantage to families that can make very long-term plans several years in advance to know what course of study to follow, in which high school, and to join which university. And it’s been shown that it is the families of teachers, management and executives that have advantages in making such calculations. ... That is not the right way to go, solving budget problems with a policy of social and academic selection. I don’t think it’s good.”

Asked if he supported the struggles of the working class against Macron, Emile said: “Yes, we’re in complete solidarity, I hope even that for most students it is an inseparable part of their decision to mobilise. ... State policy is always in the same mind-set of short-term profitability. That is not the right approach to take.”



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