

French students protest war, support striking rail workers

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On Friday, students protested in Paris as rail workers began two more days of strike action against rail privatization. On the fifth strike day, the explosiveness of the social and international situation was plainly apparent. President Emmanuel Macron had just appeared on TF1 television, promising to disregard public opinion and continue his social attacks, while also threatening Syrian and Russian forces with the air strikes in Syria that went ahead early Saturday morning, European time.

Students also opposed Macron's call, supported by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement, to return to the draft under cover of a "universal national service," as well as moves to systematically break student blockades of universities protesting Macron's reforms. They stressed the link between militarism abroad and repression at home, as well as the rise of social inequality under capitalism.

Maxime and his friend told WSWs reporters at the Tolbiac campus in Paris of their opposition to Macron's reforms and the military escalation launched by Washington, London and Paris in Syria. He said, "We are still living with nuclear weapons everywhere, and we are trapped in an escalation spiral that threatens to go nuclear. That can lead nowhere, so it is totally stupid to let a global conflict heat up this way."

Maxime was doubtful of Macron's allegations that the Syrian regime had waged a chemical attack in Douma. France, he said, would "not have the right to intervene this way without UN approval, even if it were the case that the chemical attacks were in fact launched by Bashar al-Assad's government. ... Anyway, we have seen that all the Middle East wars in the last 30 years in Iraq, Afghanistan, and so on, the Western interventions do not do much except send violence soaring in those countries. In the end, I think it is probably just to justify

our military budget and boost our weapons sales."

He stressed his support for the rail workers faced with the danger of privatization: "What is being done is just to smash all the public services. If we don't support the rail workers, the reform will necessarily pass. It is good also for them to be with us, a real coming together of the struggles is taking place now, a real counter-power to the government is emerging."

He also pointed to the ever more violent and authoritarian policy of the French government, noting that Macron "is totally separated from reality" and is "responding with police repression. There are attacks in Rennes, Montpellier, Lyon, and Nanterre. Macron is separated from the people, the youth, from the ideas of the rail workers, from everyone."

Livio, a sociology student, also pointed to the imminent danger of war: "Many people think that there can or could be the beginning of a third world war. We are watchful, but the fact remains that the climate is extremely dangerous."

He added that universal military service "was removed a few years ago, putting it back into place in 2018 is scandalous. ... The youth these days are not anymore in a mindset of joining the army, it is impossible especially if one does not support the government."

Livio warned that if Macron imposes his plans for stepped-up selection of students in the universities, "It will be an anti-egalitarian system, like paying private schools. Unfortunately, it will be those with the best grades and the most money who will go to university. It will accentuate class divisions that are still present, and now it will accentuate them even more. It is dangerous."

Adélaïde stressed her opposition to the anti-egalitarian principles involved in selecting students:

“For me, the principle of the university is to provide an education for everyone. And this law ... will prevent the broadest masses from having access to college and an education. Getting an education is not just about getting a diploma and finding a job, it’s also about intellectual growth. We have a right to make mistakes in our educational path, to change fields, not to know what we are doing.”

Macron’s reforms, she added, “would of course harm the poorest people, whose parents cannot afford to support them financially in their studies. Students who are working are also important, I am thinking for example of older students who come back later in life to continue their studies.”

She also called for the population to support striking rail workers: “Yes, it’s annoying to be 40,000 in a subway and yes it’s annoying to have trains canceled, but ultimately it’s in a good cause. ... I live in the suburbs, but of course the rail workers are not doing this just for kicks. It takes up their working time. They lose money when they don’t work, it is a sacrifice that they are making and I think we should support them.”

Ella criticized media claims that the goal of France and NATO in bombing Syria is to help the Syrian people. She said, “In my town there is the biggest camp with Syrians in France. We help them to start a better life; the Syrians who are fleeing war, they arrive without anything, just like that. I could speak about it for hours. There are pregnant women who do not have what is needed to prepare to give birth. But they cut electricity in the city, our mayor has refused access to education to Syrian children. ... Most of the Syrian people never wanted this war. They now find themselves in France where they are repressed, discriminated against, singled out and rejected by everyone.”

On universal national service, she said that youth “will end up being totally against it, because for one it will increase social inequality. They will put more money in some new military service thing, whereas we already don’t have enough funding for our studies. And it would be training youth to do military service, let’s be blunt, training them for war. ... Youth between 18 and 25, we don’t need to be trained for war, to be brainwashed by an army that is just looking for cannon fodder.”

She also criticized Macron’s reactionary social

priorities, pointing to the case of Liliane Bettencourt, France’s richest woman, who died last year with a net worth of almost €36 billion: “I am for sharing the wealth of all, in fact. ... There is this story of Liliane Bettencourt. It would take you 2 million years of your salary to accumulate the net worth that she had, this shows clearly that there is something really wrong.”

She added, “There are many people who come see us, many rail workers, health care workers. It is all the same struggle. I really hope that after a while, we will have a general strike. We hope that our struggles will come together and that we will end up with 10 million people in the street, like what happened 50 years ago,” during the 1968 general strike.



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