

Thousands of French teachers join “Red Pens” protest on Facebook

“We have the same fight in France as the US”

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Inspired by mass “Yellow Vest” demonstrations launched on November 17 and organized on social media, tens of thousands of teachers across France are joining “Red Pens” Facebook groups to oppose funding cuts and poor working conditions in schools and call for a united struggle.

Growing opposition among French teachers is part of a rise of the class struggle among teachers and other sections of workers internationally. In Los Angeles, the second-largest school district in the United States, tens of thousands of teachers are set to strike today to demand increased funding and oppose the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

Last year witnessed statewide strikes by educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, which developed—particularly in the case of West Virginia—into a rebellion against the national education unions, which worked to smother the strikes and impose sellout agreements on the teachers.

Significantly, as with the US teachers’ strikes and the Yellow Vest protests, the movement among French teachers is developing on social media largely outside the control of the education unions, which have collaborated with successive governments to cut wages and slash classroom conditions.

The “Stylos Rouges” (Red Pens) group was established on December 12 in response to the Yellow Vest protests and has since been joined by more than 60,000 Facebook users. Teachers are posting comments on the impact of decades of education spending cuts, which have forced them to work long hours at home, led to overflowing classes of more than 35 students and cut wages to levels that are impossible to live on.

Caroline, a teacher of 14 years and member of the “Red Pens” Facebook group, spoke to the *World Socialist Web*

Site yesterday and gave her support for the strike by LA teachers. “Your demands are similar to ours,” she said. “We are demanding wage rises ... a reduction in class sizes (we’ve seen many classes close and so the number of students is rising in every class) and at the same time the growth of classes with students who have great difficulties and specific needs, as well as a recognition of our work hours” outside of class.

“So good luck for your strike tomorrow!” She added that previously she “truly believed the teachers were better treated in the US. I thought we were a bit on our own in this situation.” But “we have the same fight in France as the US to defend public school in order to be able to form enlightened citizens. And it’s because we teachers still believe in a better world for tomorrow that we will fight!”

Indeed, many of the comments left by French teachers read as though they were written by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma or LA. “Since September, I’ve had to spend around €300 from my pocket to have a little library in the classroom and be able to do printing,” said Sam.

“I’m an aide for disabled students [Accompagnant d’élève en Situation de Handicap—AESH] in a high school and I joined the group for other aides,” said Tassin. “I’ve seen horrors on this site. Contracts for €602 a month and people who may or may not be able to afford the school canteen fees. Some don’t eat in the afternoon because they can’t afford it. We need better contracts for aides to be able to live decently.”

Nicolas, a 40-year-old high school technology teacher with 19 years seniority, commented: “The worst thing is that close to 50 percent of my colleagues in this subject are replacement contractors who make €400-500 less per month for doing the same work... That works out well for the government to pay people less for doing the same

thing!”

A high-school languages teacher explained that since 2006, her school had limited language class sizes to 25 students. “Thanks to this we were able to implement an active strategy to improve the speaking and global skills of our students,” she said. At a meeting held after President Emmanuel Macron’s government announced its latest pro-business high-school education reforms, teachers were told that classes would be raised to 36 students. “Is this the spirit of the reform that pretends to offer students ‘a springboard to success in higher teaching’?” she asked, quoting Macron government propaganda statements.

At the beginning of 2018, the Macron government announced a series of regressive, widely unpopular reforms of the high schools. These include changes to the structure of the final two years of schooling. Rather than choosing from generalized degrees, students now select two or three specialized subjects from a total of 12 available nationally. As the change takes effect for the beginning of 2019, however, students have learned that the government is providing funds for schools to offer only seven of the 12 subjects. Many students find their chosen programs unavailable.

In September, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer announced further cuts to the education budget, including the destruction of 2,650 positions in public schools and 400 positions in the department administration. This is part of a broader austerity offensive implemented by capitalist governments across the European Union and internationally, of labor and tax reform to funnel wealth from the working class and social programs to the bank accounts of the super-rich.

Limited protests have already been organized on the Red Pens Facebook group. In Lille, teachers have refused to return marks for students’ assignments and are returning perfect scores to everyone. Canteen workers in Marseille closed down 204 out of 444 school canteens in the district in December, in opposition to the raising of work hours by the local government in November.

Many teachers have posted comments calling for participation of delegations of teachers in the Yellow Vest protests.

The prospect of such action terrifies the education and other trade unions, which are seeking to assume control over the movement of educators in order to smother it and are hostile to the Yellow Vest protests against the Macron government and social inequality.

The main education union has sent letters to teachers

claiming that the demands raised by the “Red Pens” are those of the union. In fact, like education unions in the US and across Europe, French teachers’ unions have presided over the continuous erosion of education funding over decades by successive governments in France. According to the CGT union federation, teachers’ real wages have been cut by 15 percent since 2000, as a result of the refusal of successive governments—under both the Republicans and Socialist Party—to raise the base wage index in line with inflation.

The unions isolated and sold out the powerful 2003 French teachers’ strike, refusing to strike during the grading of the national high school exam, thus disorganizing the strike and discrediting themselves among broad layers of teachers.

French teachers can place no faith in the unions, which are terrified of any genuine struggle against the political establishment’s austerity agenda. Their real allies are teachers and other workers in France and internationally, as well as students who are protesting against these reforms. Local workplace and neighborhood committees can be established in each area to discuss demands, establish contact with other areas, and prepare strike actions.

Such a fight will win immense support in the working class as a whole, amid mass opposition to social inequality and austerity and a growing movement in the working class that found initial expression in the mass Yellow Vest demonstrations.

The organization of such a struggle must be connected to the development of a political strategy: to mobilize the working class against the capitalist system, the Macron government and all the big-business parties. The defense of the most elementary social rights of the working class, including to a fully funded, free and high-quality education system, requires a frontal assault on the fortunes of the corporate and financial elite, and the socialist reorganization of economic life, to meet social need, rather than private profit.



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