

After student sets himself on fire, French youth protest: “Precariousness kills”

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30 November 2019

Following the self-immolation of Anas K., a student from the city of Lyon, demonstrations organised by student unions mobilized thousands of students across all of France last Wednesday, including in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Grenoble and Rennes.

Anas K., 22, is studying political science at the University of Lyon. His self-immolation on November 8 triggered protests throughout the country. His desperate action and his scathing denunciation of the Macron government and of capitalism reverberated powerfully among tens of thousands of students who face the same conditions. Anas K., with burns to 90 percent of his body, is still in hospital in a grave but stable state.

Another suicide attempt, this time by a senior high school student aged 18, who tried to burn herself to death on Monday in a suburban Paris high school, is an indication of the immense social distress that students in France are suffering.

In his letter, Anas described the poverty-stricken conditions that students are enduring: “This year, doing the second year of my degree for a third time, I had no government assistance. And even when I did, is 450 euros per month enough to survive?”

He then directly denounced the government: “I condemn the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, and by extension the entire government. Let us fight this rising tide of fascism which does nothing but divide us and create liberalism, which creates inequality. I accuse Macron, Hollande, Sarkozy and the EU of killing me.”

Anas was living under conditions of very severe economic insecurity, according to his friends. During the first year of his degree, he was living with his parents in St. Etienne and was making the daily trip to Lyon (approximately 55 km away). Having obtained university accommodation last year, he lost it this year along with his bursary, and accommodation subsidy. It was cancelled by CROUS because he had to re-take some classes.

(CROUS is the government body under the Ministry for Higher Education and Research responsible for providing public assistance to students). He was also refused any emergency assistance.

Even with his bursary, Anas was having difficulty in paying his bills. “Furthermore, his accommodation was unhealthy and substandard. It was infested with bed fleas and cockroaches,” according to a female friend. Since then, he has been living partly with his parents and partly with his girlfriend, who describes him as “proud of his home town’s popular working-class traditions.”

Anas’ act was followed by dozens of student meetings and demonstrations in university towns as well as barricades being set up at numerous universities.

In Lyon, more than a thousand students demonstrated and set up barriers to prevent lectures taking place in several faculties at the University of Lyon, while surrounding Anas’ girlfriend Laetitia. In Lille, students prevented a conference by former French President Francois Hollande (Parti Socialiste) on the “crisis of democracy” from taking place, with cries of “Hollande: murderer!”

It was Hollande who was responsible for setting up the structure of a police state in France, for imposing a state of emergency, under which fundamental democratic rights were abrogated, and for resuscitating the politics of Vichy. The Lille students also organized “free meal operations” in which they blockaded the cash registers of the university cafeteria. Several marches left different Paris universities.

At Tolbiac, students shared with WSWs reporters their emotion and their anger at the role of the public authorities. Marius stated that he was able to “understand if living as a student in precarious and sometimes very complicated situations led some to go that far. Such things could be stopped earlier with a little more assistance, not only financial, just psychological support for example.”

Aissata added: “I think that the government and the heads of institutions are not close enough to the students, and I think that is why they burnt themselves.” She added, “at uni, the standard is more demanding than at high school. The university lecturers mark harshly and students must really work hard ... If I attend class, I go home, and I must do more study there in order to get the best marks, it’s really difficult.”

The mobilisation of students in France against the relentless conditions of financial precariousness imposed by the financial aristocracy and its political representatives is part of the rapid radicalisation of students and youth worldwide, their rebellion against social inequality and impoverishment.

The youth have been at the forefront of the recent mass popular movements, facing bloody police repression in Iraq, Hong Kong, Chile, Algeria and many other countries. They are not being mobilized on the basis of questions of gender, race or personal identity; rather, they are rebelling against the social attacks, against the deeply unjust manner in which social resources are distributed. They are rejecting the divisions of race, religion and gender that governments such as that of Macron use to divide them.

Terrified by the perspective of a unified movement of students and the working class against Macron, various figures in the Macron government are making despicable attempts to deny the political character of Anas K.’s act. Gabriel Attal, Secretary of State to the minister of National Education and Youth, declared viciously before the National Assembly: “It is never a political act to put an end to one’s life.” He received an ovation from the government party deputies.

Anas K.’s horrible and tragic action does not offer a perspective for millions of youth and workers now mobilizing in struggle against the Macron government. However, it is evident that his gesture is a condemnation of the policies imposed by successive governments on the youth in France.

The conditions of life and study for students from less well-off sections of society have been deteriorating for years, and the degradation has accelerated since the arrival of Macron. One in every five students today lives on the brink of poverty. One in five goes without a meal several times a week. One in three cannot adequately look after their health due to lack of money. Three out of four have no social welfare entitlements.

Student bursaries (covering 38 percent of students), amounting on average to 234 euros per month, are

sufficient neither to live nor to study. Many students are forced to work, which either causes a delay in their studies or impedes them. This in turn causes them to lose the right to any assistance. The bursaries are only paid for 10 months. Many students must abandon their studies before obtaining a degree. According to the OVE (Student Life Observer), nearly half of all students (46 percent) work outside of their studies.

Once accommodation assistance is deducted, a bedroom is available to a student for 80 euros per month, while a fitted-out apartment of 18 square metres would cost between 150 and 200 euros per month, according to CROUS. CROUS manages the stock of student accommodation, which only has the capacity to house 6 percent of the total student population (2.3 million).

In the towns, the cost of renting a room is exorbitant. The 800,000 students who receive Accommodation assistance (APL) have been directly impacted by the cut of 5 euros (the price of a meal and a half) imposed by Macron in 2017, as well as the deindexation of rents.

Half of all students cannot finance accommodation outside their academic institution. Half cannot study what they would like due to lack of means.

Already in 2016, 22.7 percent of students surveyed reported to the OVE that they had been confronted with “significant financial difficulties during the year.” About 60 percent were experiencing fatigue and were suffering from stress, 45 percent mentioned problems with sleep, and 32 percent were depressed.

Numerous interviews with students bring out the impossible conditions they are compelled to endure. “If I stop before I have submitted my thesis, I will have lost all these years, and developed chronic illnesses for nothing,” declared one female student who works up to 40 hours per week.

A student message on Twitter said: “We, the precarious ones, have a duty to let our difficulties be seen, to stop hiding them, and to stop being ashamed of them. For it is not our fault if we are slaves, if we panic, if we have psychological problems linked to our material situation. The State is pushing us over the edge. It is killing us every day.”



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