

Macron government doubles down on right-wing attack on French universities

Alex Lantier

23 February 2021

Following the adoption of the “anti-separatist” law in the French National Assembly, Higher Education Minister Frédérique Vidal has continued to defend the government’s measures announced over the past week to bring universities into line with the law. Vidal proposed to investigate all university research in France and to take action against academics guilty of supposed “separatism” and “Islamism-leftism.”

Vidal’s proposal highlights the anti-democratic character of the “anti-separatism” law. It restricts religious freedom, overriding the 1905 secularism law in France. It contains a far-reaching attack on the right to association, as all associations are kept under constant threat of dissolution for the actions of their members. In the context of universities, the law is now being used to impose the political criteria of the extreme right on academic researchers.

Above all, this is aimed at suppressing a growing political radicalization among students and in the working population over the coronavirus pandemic and the policy pursued by the French ruling class.

More than 600 university higher education lecturers have already signed a statement demanding Vidal’s resignation. Published in *Le Monde*, it denounces Vidal’s project and the government’s indifference to the fate of students, who have been cut off from casual employment during the pandemic and been forced by the lack of government support to turn to charities for food and other essentials.

“The violence of the law underscores the cowardice of a minister who remained silent about the distress of students during the pandemic, just as she was deaf to our questions about a law on research programs that was massively rejected by researchers,” they write.

Deploring the intellectual “poverty” of Vidal’s arguments, “culling from the repertoire of the extreme right an imaginary “Islamism-leftism,” while threatening

“intellectual repression,” they write: “Frédérique Vidal jumps on the conspiracy theory of ‘Islamism-leftism’ and accuses us of rotting the foundations of the university. She wants to launch an investigation, threatens to divide and punish us, to create suspicion and fear, and trample on our academic freedoms. We consider such a minister unworthy of representing us and we strongly demand her resignation.”

Vidal’s proposal highlights the dictatorial nature of the projects of the entire ruling class and the need for a political mobilisation of the working class. The right wing and the Macron government openly demand the repression of so-called “Islamism-leftism.” The Stalinist French Communist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) voted for large portions of the law in the Assembly. Just like the coronavirus pandemic itself, the anti-separatist law can only be fought with a mobilisation of workers independent of the trade union apparatuses and the establishment political parties.

Large sections of academics are aware that Macron is working to rehabilitate the political traditions of European fascism. His lead collaborator is Gérald Darmanin, the Minister of the Interior and former supporter of the far-right *Action Française*. Sorbonne President Jean Chambaz linked the hunt for “Islamism-leftism” to the campaign by the Nazis and *Action Française* against communism and the Jews in the 20th century.

On *France Info*, Chambaz called for “denouncing this kind of position.” He added: “‘Islamism-gauchism’ is an absolutely imprecise term, coming from extreme right-wing circles, taken up by certain Republican deputies who would like to ban the teaching of certain disciplines at the university. ... It makes me think more of the slogans of the 20th century denouncing Judeo-Bolshevism.”

Confronted with the opposition of students and teachers toward Macron’s policy of “herd immunity” to permit the coronavirus to spread, Chambaz was compelled to

implicitly denounce the government. Responding to Vidal's claim that Islamo-leftism is "gangrene" for society, Chambaz said: "What is the real gangrene for society? It is discrimination, ghettoization, social inequality in access to employment, in access to education, to culture, and the failure of public policy in this area over the last 50 years."

The essential issues involved in the "anti-separatist" law and, more broadly, the pandemic, are becoming increasingly clear. The European Union is hostile to the basic health measures that have stopped the virus in China and Taiwan. The ruling class has maintained corporate production at all costs, even if it is not essential for the €2 trillion in capital provided by the EU in bailouts to banks and big business. This has been at the cost of almost 800,000 lives and has permanently undermined the economy and the social conditions of workers and young people.

To impose this policy over social opposition, the ruling class is moving to create an authoritarian regime, in continuity with Macron's brutal police crackdown against the "yellow vests."

The fear of a political radicalisation of young people and a social explosion dominates all the European governments. In Spain, the coalition government of the Social Democrats with Podemos, the Spanish ally of Mélenchon's LFI, has thrown rapper Pablo Hasél into prison for denouncing the monarchy. In the United Kingdom, the right-wing government is establishing a "freedom of speech" commission that would impose financial penalties on universities that allow protests against academics tied to the government.

In France, the Macron government is continuing its effort to bring universities into line. The Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, has called "Islamism" an "undeniable social fact," and Darmanin has claimed that the university and public services "are affected by Islamism sometimes aided by leftists."

This weekend, Vidal confirmed to the *Journal du Dimanche* that the government would not abandon its plan against the universities. Hypocritically declaring her commitment to academic freedom, Vidal let it be known that the investigation is aimed against a political radicalisation in the universities.

"There will indeed be an inquiry," she declared, insisting on her willingness to "quantify things, to get out of the feeling and the presupposition" about the "entry of Islam" into the universities. She went on to say that the

target of the investigation would not be "Islamism," but any radical thought: "When I use the term 'Islamism,' used by the journalist who interviewed me, I have in mind all the forces of radicalism in our society."

This comment, presented as a denial to reassure the JDD and its readers, in fact underlines the anti-democratic nature of Macron's projects.

Far from limiting the number of subjects or theories that the state is to monitor and suppress, Vidal's comment expands them. It is known that Macron was personally terrified by the "yellow vest" protests and the growth of strikes in France throughout 2018. Historical studies of working class movements, revolutions, and a broad array of political theories opposed by the extreme right and the police could be targeted.

Vidal added that no topic would be banned so long as it did not provoke political militancy or activism. She said: "One can obviously do postcolonial studies in France or work on intersectionality. The whole issue is to distinguish between the work of scientists and those who use this work to carry an ideology and nurture activism."

In reality, the pandemic and the increasingly overt authoritarian character of the bankrupt capitalist system underscore the necessity of a mass political intervention by the working class and youth. This is inseparable from a broad movement to the left by the population against the defenders of the political establishment, including their pseudo-left variety, who have supported the policies of "herd immunity" and the police state that has been built up in Europe over decades. The defence of academic freedom against Vidal is inseparable from a renewal of the working class struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)