High school students in France protest against holding of final-year exams amid pandemic

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Since last Monday, high school students have been mobilising against the Macron government, which wants to proceed with final-year high school exams in classrooms despite the pandemic. The students are demanding the cancellation of the examinations and the certification of high school diplomas via continuous assessment throughout the year.

The Macron government has begun the ending of the limited lockdown announced at the end of March, including the reopening of schools over the last two weeks despite the large number of COVID-19 cases each day. These protests are part of an international wave of strikes and demonstrations by youth. The year 2020 saw a wave of mobilisations in Greece and Poland against in-person studies, and a wave of strikes to demand a halt to work in non-essential industries. This movement is continuing and intensifying.

Many high schools were blocked last week in France, including in the Paris region, Toulouse, Grenoble, Annecy, Bordeaux and Bayonne. The main entrances to the schools were blocked with fences, rubbish bins and pieces of wood, with students organising on social media. The blockades continue this week, with 200 high schools blocked across France. The government has responded by sending in the police to crack down on the students.

In front of a number of high schools, signs read “Continuous examinations” and “Precarity kills.”

On Friday, high school students organised protests outside the Charlemagne, Sophie-Germain and Victor-Hugo high schools in Paris. According to actu.fr, “clashes broke out at the Victor-Hugo high school, when the police intervened to remove the students who were blocking the school with bins. Tear gas, shields and truncheons were used to repel the students.”

In Seine-Saint-Denis, the d’Alembert high school in Aubervilliers, the Jacques-Feyder high school in Epinay-sur-Seine and the Flora Tristan high school in Noisy-Le-Grand saw student protests.

“We’re not ready, we haven’t had enough classes, either online or face-to-face,” said Adam, a student at Flora Tristan high school in his second-last year. “In terms of continuous assessment, most of us have a really good average, whereas if we are put in front of a test, from one day to the next, we will not be ready to answer a question...”

In other big cities, blockades have been organised in front of schools. “The Bagatelle high school in Saint-Gaudens was blocked on Monday 3 May. The next day, it was still blocked, as was Pierre d’Aragon in Muret and the Paul Mathou high school in Gourdan-Polignan,” said Paolo Carbonnel, federal leader of the National Union of High School Students (UNL) in Toulouse.

A joint statement from the UNL and the National Student Movement (MNL) said: “For 14 months now, we have been studying in calamitous conditions with online learning, class cancellations and a lack of teachers. ... The epidemic reinforces the inequalities that have already been present for years within the schools of the Republic. For months, the government has been … taking decisions from day to day, from week to week.” They demand “the total cancellation of the tests for all high school students.”

Last Wednesday, the high school and teachers unions organised a demonstration in front of the National Assembly, on the initiative, in particular, of the Federation of Parents’ Councils (FCPE). On the same day, the Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, received unions to discuss possible additional arrangements.

At the end of the meeting, Blanquer announced that

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the “grand oral” test, the flagship test that is to be held for the first time this year, would be maintained as planned. However, for the philosophy test, the continuous assessment mark will be retained if it is better than that of the written test.

For their part, the unions said the government was not providing real solutions and called for a mobilisation of high school students on Monday. “The movement will continue, will grow. On Friday, there were 210 high schools blocked, despite all the repression. We are calling for a mobilisation of high school students on Monday,” said Antonin Nouvian, secretary-general of the National High School Movement (MNL) on Saturday morning on Europe1.

By negotiating with Macron, the trade union apparatuses want to prevent the movement from gaining momentum and turning into a workers’ struggle against the murderous policy of “living with the virus” advocated by Macron and the ruling class. They are doing everything to control the movement, focusing on the sole question of the final-year exam, in order to isolate the movement within France and cut it off from the working class. Moreover, they are not calling for the closure of schools to prevent the spread of the virus.

The student movement, on the other hand, is a manifestation of broader anger rising across Europe and internationally at the ruling class’ criminal policy in response to the pandemic. The unions are working closely with the state to end lockdown measures, having negotiated trillions of euros in bank and corporate bailouts.

This policy, deliberately pursued by the capitalist states to defend the interests of banks and big business at the expense of human lives, has already killed millions, including over a million in Europe.

In recent months, many countries in Europe and around the world have seen strikes by workers, teachers and students. Teachers, including in France, England and the United States, have objected to keeping schools open while the virus is spreading.

Last autumn, Greek students supported by teachers and parents occupied schools across Greece to protest against the dangerous return to classrooms amid a resurgence of the virus in the country. Students in Poland also mobilised against the reopening of schools amid a spread of the virus.

The current school protest comes as the number of cases remains high throughout France, with hospitals still struggling with large numbers of cases. Despite warnings from several epidemiologists that new variants are circulating and pose a great risk, Macron is preparing to lift restrictions in order to continue his policy of “herd immunity.”

Refusing to close businesses and schools to contain the virus, Macron repeatedly said that the country must “live with the virus.” Society must “take into account the consequences” of measures stop the virus, including on “the economy.”

As high school students express their anger against Macron, it is a matter of turning this anger into a political struggle against the Macron government and the European Union. To lead it, a turn must be made to the working class and a broad coordination of struggles against Macron’s policy of “living with the virus.”

In this context, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) emphasises the political tasks for workers and youth. The ICFI has announced the formation of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees, as part of the fight for its perspective of international socialist revolution. This struggle requires the mobilisation of youth and workers on a global scale based on a socialist revolutionary perspective, to put an end to capitalism and advance the health measures necessary to eradicate the pandemic.

The aim of this global initiative is to develop a genuine rank-and-file workers’ movement internationally and provide a framework for the working class to break the shackles of the existing pro-capitalist and state-controlled union apparatuses.

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