

Macron calls to introduce massive US-style university tuition fees in France

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Last week at the closing of the 50th anniversary of the Conference of University Presidents, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke about his possible second five-year term. He proposed to end quasi-free university education in France, with the emergence of “American-style” paying institutions. Macron is proposing a fundamental attack on the democratic right to education, especially targeting children from working class or low-income families.

In front of university presidents, he began by congratulating himself on the “giant leap” University of Paris-Saclay has made, “directly climbing to thirteenth place this year’ in the Shanghai ranking of universities, moving up one place. He called for “redoubling our efforts so that in ten years, our university will be stronger, attracting the best international students and talent.”

Macron spoke of the need to professionalize universities in conjunction with businesses, which should lead to the opening of places in short courses, even though it is more advanced degrees that provide the most protection against unemployment. He proposed to review university governance to aim for “more excellence for universities,” adding, “Yes, we must move towards more autonomy in terms of organization, financing, human resources.”

To do this, Macron warned that the quasi-free status of French universities, in which most tuition fees for most students amount to a few hundred euros, must come to an end. “To meet international competition, we cannot remain for long with a system where higher education has no price for almost all students; where a third of students are on scholarship; and where, however, we have so much student insecurity and a difficulty in financing a model that is much more financed on public money than anywhere else in the

world.”

In France, after the May 1968 general strike, the organization of universities was significantly modified by the Faure law: it abolished faculties, democratized university governance and created several universities in large cities. But over the past 15 years, with the “law on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities” brought in by Valérie Pécresse in 2007, a series of reforms have followed one another. These reforms aim to diminish democracy and collegiality in the governance of institutions and give businesses greater power and influence in universities.

These reforms have been accompanied by the employment of staff working under precarious status, which led in 2018 to a movement protesting against the “research programming law” voted the same year and put into place by the Macron government.

Macron wants to go further and break what remains of social and democratic advances established by workers’ struggles in the 20th century, especially after the defeat of fascism in World War II. Targeting the ability of working class families to access higher education—which provided technicians and engineers for new industries that were created in France after the war—his proposals seek to pave the way for a vast increase in social inequality.

Higher Education and Research Minister Frédérique Vidal has already made foreign students pay tuition fees, slashed benefits for teacher-researchers, and institutionalized selection at the entrance to Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. Now Macron wants to generalize these fees.

This attack on the right to higher education is an integral part of the response of the ruling class to the pandemic, which is to enormously deepen social inequality and return to a society of naked class

privilege.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in France and Europe spent trillions of euros in public funds. This was done not to save lives—over 1.5 million people died in Europe—but to strengthen the banks and major corporations at the expense of massively increasing European states' public debts.

After the 2008 stock market crash, Greece's public debt was 125 percent of its GDP, at which point the European banks declared this to be an unsustainable level of debt requiring devastating attacks on wages and social conditions. These debt levels then rose to 180.5 percent of GDP in 2019, before the pandemic and 206.30 percent today. Now, with the pandemic, public debt has exploded to 115.3 percent of GDP in France, 122.1 percent in Spain and 155.6 percent in Italy.

Financing these bailouts for the financial aristocracy requires making the working class pay in the form of reduced pensions and social spending. Universities are now a target of this cost-cutting logic. Macron's proposal for the emergence of "American-style" institutions is a shocking provocation against working class and youth.

The American model that Macron refers to is a social catastrophe for students. Tuition fees often amount to \$40,000, to which must be added housing and living expenses. The annual cost is therefore estimated to be between \$50,000 and \$55,000, or 42,500 to 46,750 euros annually.

There is a system of low interest loans, some of which are not repaid until the student enters the workforce. This system often leaves students with large debts. In 2019, student debt in the United States totaled \$1.6 trillion, an amount that has nearly tripled in 12 years. A student who finishes his or her studies can find himself or herself in debt to the tune of several hundred thousand euros to be repaid over decades.

The example of Britain gives us an idea of how Macron envisages the evolution of tuition fees on the European continent. Tuition fees were introduced in the UK in 1997. They rose from \$1,442 in 2001 to \$4,421 as of the 2009 academic year. In 2012, they rose to \$12,770, following a decision by the Cameron cabinet to triple tuition fees between 2009 and 2012. Students pay the tuition fees once they have completed their studies and their salary reaches an annual amount of \$29,965.

Given that the median salary in France is \$2,202 per month and that 8 out of 10 wage earners have a net monthly salary of between \$1,367 and \$3,632 per month, such fee increases would make so-called "excellent" universities unaffordable. Large sections of the 10.9 percent of university students from the working class would be discouraged from studying at universities. They would go into short courses at the lesser-rated institutions where they are currently most represented.

An irreconcilable political conflict emerges between the right to higher education through almost free-tuition that is supported by students and workers and the desire of the ruling elite to create a two-tier university system, where only the children of wealthy families will be able to afford higher education. Workers and young people must prepare for a no-holds-barred fight against the next government, whether it comes from a re-election of Macron or the election of another president, which will prepare for an unprecedented attack on democratic and social rights.



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