

French police assault students protesting Macron's pension cuts, arresting 20

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On Monday evening, French police arrested 20 students who peacefully occupied a building on the Condorcet campus in Aubervilliers, just outside Paris. These students were protesting Macron's pension cuts and falling living standards throughout France. By Tuesday evening, all 20 were still in custody in four police stations across the Aubervilliers area.

Monday's crackdown came after an assembly of protesting students at the University of Strasbourg was raided and cleared by heavily armed riot police on January 19, as 2 million workers marched against the cuts throughout France. During the January 19 demonstration in Paris, protesters and a journalist were also violently assaulted by police.

Increasing numbers of students correctly identify their struggles with those of the working class. Ultimately, opposing the "president of the rich," inflation and the risk of a nuclear escalation of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine requires a mass mobilization of the working class.

However, as the WSWs has explained, this struggle must be taken out of the hands of the French union bureaucracies, who work to divide striking workers and sow illusions in the very same bankrupt organizations that negotiated the pension "reform" with Macron. Instead, independent rank-and-file committees must be constructed in every workplace, school and university.

The students arrested on Monday were members of Solidaires union but seem to have begun this occupation independently. Once again exposing the union leadership's subordination to the state, despite the peaceful nature of the student's occupation at their own university, Solidaires has so far not made any comment on their members' arrest or continued imprisonment, let alone any complaint.

The police crackdown against this emerging

movement is being directed by the Macron government, which fears a massive rebellion of workers and youth against the reactionary framework of the unions' "social dialog" with the French president. Macron calculates that a swift crackdown will intimidate students and block a wider mobilization in support of strikers outside the control of the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties.

On Tuesday afternoon, a general assembly was called at the Condorcet campus to demand the release of the students, which was attended by WSWs journalists. Around 300–400 students gathered at l'Espace Françoise Héritier before marching to the building that houses the university president's office. The peaceful protest took place surrounded by dozens of heavily-armed police, backed up by multiple vans full of riot police waiting in reserve in the streets around the campus.

At the protest we spoke to a Condorcet student called Léo, who said he is an occasional reader of the WSWs. He explained that Monday's protest was "mainly [about] the law on pension reform that mobilizes students, but there is also the whole situation of higher education in France which is extremely degraded. There are demands which are specific to this campus, including that of having a common space for the students to meet and discuss things."

Léo stated that Tuesday's assembly had "the same demands as yesterday but reinforced by the fact that students were arrested," and raised "the general question of why the police are at the faculties all the time, and why they repress us each time there is a movement."

Asked about police violence against protests, Léo said, "It's the only answer they have because they [the Macron government] haven't backed down on their

policy. At the slightest protest, they send the police. They're not even afraid to do it on young people like we saw at the time of the 'yellow vests,' when they sent the police in high schools. From there, they are capable of anything and everything."

Léo spoke against the role played by the student unions: "[We need] organizations which don't try to negotiate with the university presidents. ... In fact the problem is not the president of your university, it's the whole situation."

"In the student environment, we see that most of the unions are already there. They sit on the university councils, so they go directly to discuss the law with those who enforce it. They then argue 'at least we know what's going on in the councils,' when in fact it just amounts to giving the [university] president guarantees." Léo explained how many of the students suspect that the university president worked with police to suppress the protests.

The WSWS reporters said that the role played by the student unions in the universities seemed similar to that played by the national union bureaucracies in the wider class struggle, to which Léo replied: "I agree with you this is what we see in France... the unions don't do their job. Well, maybe in one sense they do their 'job' very well to go and negotiate with the government, to go and have consultations and so on, but that's it. It's always the same story. Then, the government can say well yes, you were represented, your union was there when the law was decided."

Léo also pointed to the role played by unions in dividing the class struggle: "The strike movements are never simultaneous in all the universities. When there are strikes, it's branch by branch, company local section or company local section. It's one strike a day or one strike a week at the most."

"These government offensives always involve police repression, and behind this is the question of the class struggle and the response of organizations that are historically workers or students organizations. Well, they are not up to the task because it's also a whole system of class collaboration. That's my opinion."

The WSWS asked Léo if he saw any connection between the war in Ukraine and Macron's pension reform. He replied, "Yes, because there is a lot of money for the war. It's for the tanks, some of which are offensive weapons. It's the question of imperialism.

The bourgeois government is not going to put money to, say, make social reforms, it's going to put it to defend its interests. And therefore, it's necessary to mobilize on Ukraine because it's in the framework of American imperialism and its alliances in Europe."

The independent mobilization of French student in support of the struggle against Macron's pension reform is a highly significant development. However, the violent police response underlines the need for the creation of democratic rank-and-file organizations to coordinate this struggle independently of the pro-government union bureaucracies and to orient it to a wider mobilization of the working class against austerity and imperialist war.



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