

French teachers hold nationwide one-day strike vs Attal government

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Tens of thousands of striking French schoolteachers marched on Thursday to protest poor working conditions, low wages and the far-right policies of incoming Prime Minister Gabriel Attal. Police sources said 6,800 teachers marched in Paris, 1,600 in Marseille and hundreds in other cities across the country. According to union sources, 47 percent of teachers in middle and high schools and 40 percent of elementary school teachers joined the strike.

The strike took place as farmers' protests continued across France and Belgium, where 1,000 farmers occupied the city center to protest outside a meeting of EU leaders negotiating a new €50 billion package to Ukraine for war with Russia. Police assaulted French students who blockaded their schools in solidarity with striking teachers, attacking the Voltaire high school in Paris and Saint-Just high school in Lyon.

After years of underinvestment, French schools are in crisis. In the Program for International Student Assessment results released at the end of 2023, France scored record low scores in reading, mathematics, science—also recording their sharpest ever drop between two assessments across the three categories. According to a 2022 Ministry of Education report, France has the largest class sizes in the EU.

Teachers not only oppose collapsing wages due to high inflation and large class sizes, but also wider political issues. These include Attal's plans to divide high school students into "groups" based on their academic scores, impose harsh sentences for youth who clash with police or send them to reform schools, promote nationalism by singing the *Marseillaise* national anthem at school, and reimpose Universal National Service (SNU). Coordinated with the army, the SNU is a barely-disguised preparation to reintroduce military conscription amid the NATO-

Russia war in Ukraine.

WSWS journalists interviewed school staff protesting in Paris. They met Nathalie and Florette, social workers protesting a wage freeze and the onslaught of police repression Attal is aiming at the youth.

Nathalie criticized Attal's plans to impose forced labor sentences on students, saying: "When will we invest in preventing delinquency, to help the kids? All the specialized educators, the clubs, they lost their budgets. They used to help kids organize their free time, to show them something else than the poor suburbs, but all that is gone. The school social services are now the front-line service to prevent delinquency. And now we can't handle the load, we are collapsing."

Florette said, "What the government is announcing, I don't think it will help youth at all. There are lots of punishments, but where is any interest taken in them?"

Nathalie added, "We're no longer credible when we propose educational aid, but students wait a year and a half to get it. Basically, the family will have worked it out, or the kid will have blown a gasket and ended up in front of a judge. ... The only thing that is being proposed is putting them in reform schools, which are not good for troubled children because there are no educators. Ultimately they end up in prison, and the prisons are also overloaded. So it's not a solution, except if one supposes that it can provoke rebellion and revolution."

Asked what she thought about SNU military service requirement amid the escalating NATO war with Russia, Nathalie said: "I think that if a majority of French people supported the war, they wouldn't need to introduce the SNU, which is nothing less than indoctrinating our youth. I'm glad I no longer have minor children, I feel sorry for parents who will then have to ask themselves: 'Do I send my child or not?'"

WSWS journalists met members of the "Social

Workers for Services to Help Students” collective set up by school social workers to organize outside of the trade unions. Nathalie, the group’s spokeswoman, told the WSWs, however, that she advocates a “no politics” approach and close collaboration with the union bureaucracy.

She said, “We are a number of social workers, a collective under no political flag, but we come together, think and are united. As we speak, it is growing, we will reach 1,000 members. We collectively come together, think things over, involve our friends the unions, as they are also already working on the ground, too, so they are not excluded. But on the other hand, we say that what is happening has to stop.”

The interview with Nathalie confirmed, however, that a “no politics” perspective in fact adopts the politics of the union bureaucracy, blocking attempts by workers to develop opposition in rank-and-file bodies to the reactionary policies of the capitalist state. There is deep-rooted opposition among teachers, and in the entire working class, to Attal’s policies. But Nathalie refused to discuss these issues, claiming they get in the way of negotiating higher wages.

Asked about Attal’s plans to escalate police violence and forced-labor sentences against youth, she replied: “There are plenty of topics, but we are not here for that.” While the other social workers around her were surprised by her outburst, she added that their only concern was that they had not received a wage increase granted to nurses: “We are here in relation to a statement about the €200 wage increase for a profession we work with on the ground, on common missions.”

Asked whether the escalation of the NATO war with Russia and plans to conscript students into the army should concern school staff, she said: “We are not here for that.”

She dismissed WSWs reporters’ questions, saying: “All that, those are journalists’ polemics. It makes you happy to talk about it, but it’s not our problem.”

In reality, these remarks underscore that the burning issues posed to teachers and to the entire working class—world war, police-state repression, the promotion of nationalism, and social inequality—cannot be resolved outside the development of socialist opposition to the politics of the union bureaucracies and their negotiations with Macron.

Sophie, a junior high teacher, told the WSWs she

was protesting insufficient staffing levels at her school and the “groups” Attal is imposing on the youth: “Social sorting will be done even though children are only 10 or 11 years old. It’s unacceptable to strip them of a chance to discover and emancipate themselves when they are 10 years old. ... The academically weaker students will be 15 per group, but they won’t progress at the same level or the same speed as the others. There will be no emulation, no cooperation.”

Sophie warned that the “groups” would segregate education along class lines, with wealthier families buying better education for their children: “It’s social segregation, there are no other words for it. Privileged institutions in the city centres won’t have groups. That has been announced. People from more advantaged socio-professional classes will make sure to avoid these establishments where the pace won’t be right and the curriculum will be covered only partially, and you can’t blame them.”

Audrey, a teacher, told the WSWs she was protesting the social inequality involved in the introduction of “groups.” She said, “It replicates what we unfortunately see in our society, that is a major gap between the different layers of society.”

She also criticized Attal’s nationalist proposals for the schools: “It’s done to tell the right-wing electorate that tends to lean towards the extremes, that the *Marseillaise* and uniforms will solve educational or social difficulties of our children, of our fellow citizens. It’s a lot of PR and little substance. Instead of imposing community service for just about anything, we should focus on prevention” of delinquency.

When WSWs journalists pointed out that these far-right policies followed Macron’s hailing in 2018 of Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as a “great soldier,” Audrey said: “It brings back very bad memories from the past, and I don’t understand how it can still happen. We must do everything we can to fight this.”



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