Mobilize the working class to defend French student protests, stop war!

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2 October 2026

Over the last week, protests at high schools across France against austerity and police repression have grown into a direct confrontation with the state. The occupations began on September 21 at a high school in Créteil, outside Paris, spread nationwide during the September 29 public sector strike and escalated after that one-day strike.

A quarter of France's approximately 3,000 high schools have been blockaded by students or preemptively shut down by the government to prevent youth from gathering.

Anger is mounting over the brutal police crackdown launched by lame-duck President Emmanuel Macron. More than 5,000 people, most of them minors, have been arrested since Monday, and many were rushed before kangaroo courts. Videos of police assaulting youth have been seen by millions. They show police firing a tear-gas grenade launcher into a 14-year-old boy's face at point-blank range in Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, grabbing a 14-year-old girl by the throat in Alençon, and leaving a youth near Balzac High School in Tours at risk of losing an eye.

On Thursday, the movement spread to the universities. There were blockades at 29 universities that morning, among them campuses in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Lille, Toulouse, Montpellier, Rennes, Rouen, Reims, Poitiers, Dijon and Brest. On Friday, an all-trade union alliance of the CGT, CFDT, FO, FSU, UNSA and SUD issued a joint call for a national education strike on Tuesday, October 6.

The ruling class clearly fears an outcome like May 1968, when protests against mass arrests of students at Sorbonne University led to the eruption of the greatest general strike in French history.

French authorities are carrying out emergency shutdowns of public transport in major cities. In Marseille and Grenoble, transit authorities and the unions jointly shut down the entire system, supposedly to protect transit workers from assault by protesters, stranding large numbers of commuters. In Toulouse, transit service to the university district was cut off, and trams were halted in Strasbourg and Mulhouse.

The Macron government and the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) both denounced the protests as a communist plot by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's populist France Unbowed (LFI) party. At an emergency cabinet meeting, an aide to Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu reported that French intelligence declared the protests "a manoeuvre" by LFI "and its ultra-left proxies." RN leader Marine Le Pen called them "riots organised by professionals and overseen by France Unbowed members of parliament."

But the all-trade union alliance, like Mélenchon and his political satellites, is trying to channel, not to lead, the protests. Among significant layers of workers and youth, the all-trade union alliance is discredited for selling out the 2023 mass strikes against Macron's massively unpopular pension cuts. It wore down and ultimately shut down the largest strike movement in France since 1968, after top union officials went on television at the height of the strike to declare that they were terrified of social anger against Macron.

In a video posted Thursday, Mélenchon called on voters to back him in next year's presidential election and promised a return to the policies of the Socialist Party (PS) governments of the 1980s and 1990s. Stating that PS Minister Lionel Jospin had met with high school protesters in 1986 and 1990, "and two-three days later, 4.5 billion were given," Mélenchon added, "Go on, get out the billions. I know how that's done."

But what is emerging is not a national protest movement that will be resolved by reforms granted under pressure by capitalist governments. It is an irreconcilable class conflict between the capitalist oligarchy and the police state, on the one hand, and workers and youth opposed to austerity, neo-fascism and war, on the other. Moreover, it is a conflict that is unfolding on an international scale.

In Spain, mass protests are mounting against high rents and evictions demanded by real estate investors, after the

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eviction of 87-year-old Maricarmen a week ago. Protest camps spread from Madrid to Barcelona, Seville, Pamplona and Bilbao after parliament voted down a proposed partial ban on evictions. Yesterday, the renters' union in Madrid called for a general strike for housing ahead of protests today in these cities and in Valencia, Granada, Murcia and Cádiz.

Strikes and social protests are erupting across Europe. In Portugal, public administration workers held a one-day national strike for a 15 percent wage increase, the opening of a wave of workplace actions planned for October and November. On Thursday, high school students in Liège carried the French movement into Belgium. In Germany, young people continue to protest against remilitarization and conscription.

The issues driving the protests, from overcrowded classrooms and unaffordable rents to low wages and conscription, are directly connected to an escalating economic crisis, the expansion of war and the subordination of all of society to the interests of the capitalist oligarchy.

France, like most of Europe, is staggering under the combined impact of US tariffs, a US blockade of Persian Gulf energy amid the war on Iran, the loss of Chinese markets, surging military spending for the war with Russia and unsustainable sovereign debt. Since 1996, the wealth of France's billionaires has grown fourteen-fold, to more than €1.1 trillion, while its sovereign debt has grown five-fold, to more than €3.5 trillion. Lecornu's €54 billion austerity budget and the neo-fascist RN's call for €125 billion in cuts express the oligarchy's refusal to tolerate any meaningful reform.

The crisis of European capitalism finds its sharpest expression in the reckless escalation of the war with Russia. The European powers are preparing to blockade Kaliningrad, even though Moscow has warned it would respond with nuclear weapons. The tens of billions of euros diverted to the military in France and across Europe are meant to prepare wars of plunder abroad and also to build up the forces of repression at home. The protests now erupting across the continent show the class conflict those forces are being readied to suppress.

The decisive issue posed by these struggles is how they can be unified and developed into a conscious political movement of the working class against austerity, neo-fascism and war. The student protests cannot defeat the state apparatus on their own. Their struggle poses the necessity of turning to the working class, while workers must come to the defense of the youth against police repression and link this fight to the mounting struggles over wages, jobs, housing, social services and war.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES) advances the formation of independent committees of action in schools, universities and workplaces, elected by those engaged in struggle and independent of the trade union bureaucracies and the parties of the capitalist establishment. Such committees would provide a means for students and workers to coordinate their actions, oppose police repression and arrests, break through the isolation imposed by the union apparatuses, and prepare a broader movement of the working class.

This approach has deep roots in the history of the Marxist movement. Amid the explosive class struggles in France in 1935–36, Leon Trotsky called for committees of action arising directly from the struggle. He insisted that they link workers from workshop to workshop, factory to factory, neighborhood to neighborhood and city to city, creating an independent organization through which the masses themselves could coordinate and extend their fight.

The same fundamental issue is posed today on an international scale. The struggles developing in France cannot be separated from protests against unaffordable housing in Spain, strikes against austerity in Portugal, opposition to conscription and militarism in Germany, or the developing struggles of workers and youth throughout Europe. The PES argues that these movements must be consciously united across national borders in a common struggle against austerity, repression and the escalation of war.

For the PES, this requires not merely a broader protest movement but a socialist political perspective directed against the capitalist system that produces social inequality and war. It connects the building of independent organizations of struggle with the development of an international political leadership in the working class—through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the building of the PES and sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe.

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