

French youth protests grow, as government cancels high school classes

WSWS reporting team
6 October 2026

Hundreds of thousands of high school and university students, teachers and workers marched across France on Tuesday in a third national day of action of the high school movement, now in its third week. According to the Interior Ministry, 256,000 people demonstrated in around 30 cities, while the organisers counted 450,000. The students are protesting against overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms, unreplaced teachers, exhausting timetables and the Parcoursup university selection platform, as Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu presses ahead with €54 billion in austerity cuts while tens of billions are poured into the military.

The movement is rapidly developing into a confrontation between French youth and the Lecornu government and lame-duck President Emmanuel Macron. In the afternoon, Lecornu announced that regular classes in all high schools would be suspended this week and replaced by “internal democracy” sessions. After mass protests against housing in Spain led to the calling of new elections, the government is desperate to prevent the youth movement from spreading further and leading to a general strike by the working class, as in May 1968.

In Paris, 100,000 people marched according to the organisers; 30,000 in Marseille and Toulouse, 25,000 in Lille and 20,000 in Lyon. Thousands more marched in Nantes, Strasbourg, Mulhouse, Grenoble, Bordeaux, Rennes and other cities, as well as in the overseas territories of Réunion and Mayotte.

According to the Education Ministry, classes were suspended in whole or in part at 891 schools in France, 250 of them in the Paris region. The National High School Students Union (USL) put the number of high schools blockaded by students or locked down by authorities at around 1,800, and the Union étudiante reported 57 university sites blockaded, including the Sorbonne and the ENS Paris-Saclay.

The day of action took place amid a brutal police crackdown. Around 2,000 police officers and gendarmes were deployed in Paris. Already in the morning, riot police

fired tear gas to disperse demonstrators on the Cours de Vincennes, and the march ended in clashes at Place de la Nation, where police used tear gas and stun grenades. In Lille, police kettled several hundred students, parents and union members. Since September 28, the authorities have arrested more than 6,000 people, the great majority of them minors, and placed more than 5,000 in police custody.

On Monday, a 15-year-old in Lens lost his hand when a police grenade was thrown at him in front of Auguste Béhal high school. A 14-year-old in the Val-d’Oise has lost sight in one eye, with injuries prosecutors call “compatible” with a rubber-bullet (LBD) shot. On Tuesday, prosecutors in Metz opened an investigation into suspected sexual assault after a video showed a police officer groping a schoolgirl lying on the ground during her arrest. In the National Assembly, Lecornu responded by accusing Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s populist La France Insoumise (LFI) party of making violence part of its “political project.”

WSWS reporters intervened to interview youth and workers at the march in Paris.

Charlotte, a university student who was attending the protest in solidarity with high school students, said she was outraged by the extent of the police repression: “I find it totally unacceptable. I do not see how we can normalize the fact that children are being struck. We cannot forget that high school students are minors. But they are treated like adults when it suits the government, and children when it suits the government. But minors are losing limbs when they are just beginning their lives, when they are not yet even adults.”

She emphasized her agreement with the need to mobilize the working class more broadly against the government in defense of the high school student youth: “I agree with this ... there have been firemen’s unions, workers, farmers and so everyone really getting together, which shows unity precisely against this government. It shows we’re not isolated. In fact, we are all in reality against the same thing, which is the capitalist system, the lack of funding for high school and all the other causes that go with it.”

Antoine, a young General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union delegate in the nuclear industry, told the WSWs: “We are here to support the high school and university students in the social movement that has unfolded over the last week, to bring our support, to try to drive the social movement and make it take off.”

He said that he was attending the march also to protest deepening social pressure on the working class more broadly. He stressed his concern at the growing lack of personnel and time pressure under which energy workers do their jobs: “In order to ensure that nuclear plants are safe, I need to have good working conditions. But today, everything that we see, is that they are getting worse and worse.”

Antoine, who is also an LFI member, said he hoped that the election of Mélenchon in next year’s presidential election “could bring workers a little breathing space ... a little bit of added social value. But we should not kid ourselves. We will be faced with a system that will fight tooth and nail to preserve its privileges. So these type of struggles will have to continue.”

When WSWs reporters stressed the need for workers to organize independently of the union bureaucracies, in action committees that could develop the struggle against the government, citing the sell-out of the mass strikes against Macron’s pension cuts in 2023, Antoine replied: “I am not uncritical of the leadership, what politically the trade union leaderships are proposing. And yes, the fact is that responsibility for the defeat of the struggle against the pension cuts, in my view, falls on the all-trade-union alliance.”

Antoine agreed when WSWs reporters stressed that the working class had to mount a broader struggle against the escalation of war and the danger of fascist dictatorship, as in the possibility of the election of a far-right president in next year’s French presidential election.

He said, “the neo-liberal system is hitting the end, reaching its limits, today people are being impoverished. So the only way for this government, for supporters of this policy to hang on, is to look for repressive policies, authoritarianism, and so the side of the far right. It has already happened before, history is repeating itself. Obviously, if the far right were to come to power in the future, for workers, for foreigners, for racial minorities in France, it would be a disaster. They will be the first to be attacked, and that is the nature of the far-right ideology.”

The WSWs also spoke to two junior high school students, **Kim** and **Aline**, who had come to the protest in solidarity with the high school students. “The problem is precisely that there is a form of censorship that is trying to block out our voices, so that no one hears what has to be done,” Kim said.

Aline added, “The fact that riot police allow themselves to strike youth and children, who are minors, is extremely serious. This is also one thing against which we are struggling in this protest.”

When the WSWs pointed to the global escalation of war, as in Iran, Gaza and the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, Kim said: “I think things can still escalate and reach all of Europe. And the far right will not make any of this better.”

When the WSWs pointed to the growing international struggles of workers and youth across Europe, such as the mass protests in Spain over housing, public sector strikes in Portugal, high school protests in Belgium and protests against the draft in Germany, Kim said she supported a broader mobilization of the working class.

She said, “I think the fact that there are so many protests in a large part of Europe, that there are workers, youth, high school students who are allying together to make themselves heard, again, this is something extremely important. We have seen in the past that the only way to be heard is to all come together. ... So we completely support the causes that are being fought for in Belgium, Portugal and everywhere. That is even one of the reasons why we are here, even though we are still junior high school students.”

What is emerging is an international struggle of the youth and the working class against imperialist war, far-right reaction, and social austerity and inequality. This movement must be organized from below, with rank-and-file committees of action among workers and youth in struggle, that are independent of the bureaucracies that are seeking to stymie and sell out the movement. They must instead fuse this movement across national borders. The decisive question is uniting this movement internationally, freeing it from the influence of the national bureaucracies and capitalist politicians, and arming it with a socialist perspective for a revolutionary struggle against capitalism.



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