

French youth protests grow as political radicalization spreads

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The last youth demonstration on October 13 confirmed the spread of the movement of high school and university students against the police state and austerity in France. It is developing alongside the mass housing struggle in Spain, high school protests in Belgium, and strikes in Portugal and Ireland. Turnout in protest marches across France marked a clear rebound compared to October 8. More than 450,000 people demonstrated in all of France's largest cities.

Ahead of the October 17 day of action, which grew out of calls on social media for a revival of the “yellow vest” protest over purchasing power and social inequality, blockades are intensifying. At several high schools and universities closed by their administrations, young people have entered the premises to carry out their own blockade of institutions where classes are no longer being held. Beyond the numerical scale of the movement, however, the decisive question is the political perspective of this struggle, and how to mobilize the working class more broadly.

A substantial layer of youth and workers is becoming radicalized in the course of this struggle, in the wake of the experiences of the class struggle of recent years. May 1968, and the general strike that erupted then out of workers' anger at the repression of students, is on everyone's mind. So is the bankruptcy of the inter-union alliance, which sold out the 2023 mass strikes against Macron's pension reform. A broad rejection is taking shape of the explosion of military spending, the escalation of wars, and the rise of neo-fascism and the police state.

The conceptions of the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES) and the WSWs are winning broader support. This includes the call to form action committees to wage an independent and internationalist struggle from the rank and file. So is the PES' criticism of Jean-Luc

Mélenchon's national program for electing a new, supposedly “left-populist” capitalist government. The question of a revolutionary mobilization of the class struggle against war, fascism and police repression is arising in the consciousness of a growing layer of workers and youth.

At the blockade of Paris VIII University in Saint-Denis, Thomas told the WSWs: “We've reached a stage of general politicization that very clearly goes beyond trade union issues. There's also the whole revolutionary imagination of May 68 that is starting to re-emerge. People are almost talking about a new May 68 ... What people want, if we take up the imagination of May 68, is also the goals of May 68: to get rid of the government.”

Calls for a new May 68 are linked, Thomas explained, to the need to overcome the obstacle posed by the union leaderships, and to growing interest in the issue of workers' control in the factories and workers power. He said, “The unions have lost their historic role. They don't organize the masses. Anyway, mass unions don't exist anymore. And besides, they don't block anything anymore. I was stunned to learn that in May 68, there were people who locked the bosses in the factories and kept the factory shut under workers' control. Today, there's nothing like that.”

When the WSWs reporters raised the question of forming action committees in France and internationally, to mobilize workers and youth independently of the national union apparatuses, Thomas replied: “I completely agree that the perspective must be internationalist, that it must be about the general self-organization of students and workers.”

At the October 13 demonstration in Paris, two students, Eva and Luna, told the WSWs: “In fact it's an anger that

has lasted for decades and decades, it's just that today it exploded." They added: "Even in prestigious universities in Paris, whose names are recognized internationally, we have problems with teachers, we have students who don't have a professor." Students, they said, are "completely neglected by the administration."

They denounced the bloody police repression and mass arrests of the youth in struggle: "It's completely scandalous. France is supposed to be a country of human rights. Our history, after all, is marked by many revolutions. Anyway, it's wrong, no country should accept this kind of violence ... When you look at Macron's government and how it treated the yellow vests, how it also treated the farmers' protests a few months ago, there was just so much of this repression."

They stressed their agreement with the WSWs perspective of unifying the struggles in France with those across Europe and internationally: "The most beautiful thing about this movement is that more and more we see European countries rising up, and we see that it's above all a problem not necessarily on the scale of France, but simply a global and European problem. So maybe there's also something to be done on the scale of Europe and the EU, quite simply, because youth are starting to rise up."

At the blockade in Saint-Denis, Pierre told the WSWs: "To support the high school movement, we blockaded our university. But the university, in reaction, started blocking itself by pulling down the shutters and preventing us from getting into the university. So now we're gathering in front of it to discuss what comes next for the movement. And for what comes next, we'd like the university to be a place of refuge for high school students, and, for example, for workers on strike, factory workers, railway workers, the people who work at the bus depot over there."

He stressed the essential problem posed to youth and workers by the escalation of war and military spending: "Today the government has no trouble finding funds for the army, where the army is getting yet another increase in its budget. But for education, which is a crucial sector, education is what trains our youth, it's what is supposed to bring us into the world of work, there the state has a much harder time finding resources."

Pierre also stressed that the movement faces an attempt to build a dictatorship that imposes austerity, as in 2023,

without even a parliamentary vote, by using Article 49.3 of the Constitution: "Like you said, he's putting all the money into war. But also, today, this morning, he said they're going to cut 54 billion from the budget. ... They're going to use 49.3 to pass the laws. How can we stop that? It's very complicated from where we stand."

When the WSWs raised the need for a revolutionary mobilization of the class struggle, and argued that workers and youth cannot entrust the struggle against neo-fascism and war to a hypothetical election of Mélenchon in the presidential election, Pierre expressed his agreement.

He explained: "Yesterday I was at a general assembly where they were discussing exactly that. ... What we know today is that there's a president, there's a government, sure, but there are lots of institutions that are still, and will still be after Mélenchon's election, run by Macronists."

On the need to build action committees and a rank-and-file movement independent of the national union apparatuses, Pierre pointed to the union leaderships' attempt to call widely spaced, leapfrogging mobilizations: "The inter-union alliance, the CGT, etc., have called a mobilization on November 5, so we can see they're a bit disconnected from reality all the same ... The inter-union alliance is still a political union. So they also want to get their piece of the pie and their share of the action in the high school mobilizations."

He added: "There may be an awakening in Europe, and this awakening must be fed. These little sparks we have must be fed. But for them to be fed, students, like what we're doing at Paris 8, have to turn toward the workers, toward the factory workers. Because the revolt came from the high school students, it spread to the university students, and now it has to spread to the world of work, to the workers, to the factory workers."



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