

# Europe's student protests and the intervention of the working class

Peter Schwarz  
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The mass protests in France are spreading across Europe. No fewer than nine countries—including, alongside France, Serbia, Albania, Spain, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Portugal and Ireland—have witnessed mass protests in recent days and weeks, most of which were initiated by school pupils and university students.

And the movement continues to grow. In Austria's capital, Vienna, around 40,000 people took to the streets on Thursday to protest against a 10 percent cut to the budget for universities. In Germany, tens of thousands of young people regularly take part in the school strikes against compulsory military service.

Of paramount importance here is the growing role of the working class. Major strikes and national days of protest are planned for November in several of the countries affected, in which millions of workers will take part. This makes it clear that what is at stake is not merely a protest movement. A fundamental class conflict is developing, one that directly raises the question of power.

Who determines the course of society? The billionaire oligarchs, the corporate bosses and their politicians, who use every means at their disposal to increase their profits, to fund rearmament and to wage wars against Russia and in the Middle East? Or the working class, the vast majority of the population, who need a secure future, a good education, affordable rents, energy and food, and secure pensions and healthcare?

Most of the planned strikes and national days of protest are organised by the official trade unions, which have not the slightest intention of raising the question of power. They support their governments' policies of war and austerity and work closely with the corporations to cut jobs and wages.

They position themselves at the head of the movement to keep it under control. They have delayed the actions for as long as possible, limiting them from the outset to one or a few days, and are fostering the illusion that governments will yield to pressure from below, even though these governments are deploying the police and military against the protesters, arresting thousands and strengthening the far right.

Yet what drives the movement are real class issues: the lack of any prospects for the future for young people; rising living costs, energy prices and rents; the squandering of hundreds of billions on armament and war, while pensions and spending on social welfare, healthcare and education are being slashed; the unbridgeable gulf between an oligarchy whose luxury knows no bounds and the mass of the population who have to count every penny.

Unlike in the 1970s, for example, European governments no longer have any room for manoeuvre to make concessions. This lends the movement a powerful momentum and an international dimension. The most important task now is to make the movement conscious of these issues and arm it with a perspective that enables it to break free from the influence of the trade unions and all bourgeois parties, to unite across Europe, and to fight for the overthrow of capitalism and the United Socialist States of Europe.

## Planned protests and strikes

Below is an overview of the most important strikes and actions planned for the coming weeks.

**France:** School pupils and university students, as well as the “yellow vest” movement, are calling for further protests today (October 24) and next Saturday. Over 120 have been reported so far. The Interior Ministry has responded by imposing partial bans and has mobilised over 70,000 police officers and soldiers to counter the protests.

On November 3, the National Pupils' Coordination Committee is planning a day of action. There are plans to hold a school strike and organise rallies.

On November 5, the trade union federations CGT, CFDT, FO, UNSA and FSU are calling for a major nationwide strike and demonstration movement against the government's austerity and budgetary policies. The CGT is referring to it as a general strike and has also raised the possibility of extending it beyond a single day. The rail unions are calling for massive walkouts in both local and long-distance services. Schools, nurseries, public administration, refuse collection and hospitals are also expected to come to a virtual standstill.

**Belgium:** Following repeated unauthorised demonstrations by school pupils and students in Brussels and Liège over the past few days against rising tuition fees and cuts to education funding—during which they were brutally attacked by the police—spontaneous rallies, blockades and occupations are also expected in the coming weeks.

At the end of November, the trade unions are planning a week of action directed against the drastic austerity measures of Bart De Wever's government.

On November 23, tens of thousands of people from all walks of life (including health insurance providers, environmental organisations, students and pensioners) are expected to take part in a major national demonstration in Brussels. On November 24, the Belgian railways and the entire local public transport network will go on strike. On November 25, the public sector will go on strike, including schools, government departments, refuse collection and public service broadcasting. The highlight will be a cross-sector general strike on November 26, affecting both the public and private sectors.

At the end of the year, European farmers are planning a major demonstration in Brussels against cuts to the EU agricultural budget.

**Italy:** The newly formed “Movimento 17 Ottobre”—named after the demonstrations on that day, in which 100,000 school pupils and students took part nationwide—has announced around 250 rallies every Saturday until December.

Blockades by lorry drivers and farmers protesting against high diesel prices have virtually paralysed the south of the country, leading to empty supermarkets and petrol stations, as well as the suspension of production at many businesses.

The USB and other grassroots trade unions are calling for a full-day general strike in the public and private sectors on October 30. Significant disruption is expected to local transport, government services and the education sector, as large-scale protests by school pupils and students against the high cost of living are taking place at the same time.

On November 13, 14 and 16, local transport in various major cities is set to be at a standstill for 24 hours.

On November 20 and 21, the country’s largest trade union, CGIL, is calling for a national general strike. Among the areas affected will be schools, nurseries, public administration, hospitals, and rail and air travel.

**Spain:** In the regions of Madrid and Catalonia, school and university student unions have called for regional days of action in early November against cuts and the housing crisis.

A bitter pay dispute is raging in the transport sector. The two largest trade unions, CCOO and UGT, have called for several strikes. In the bus and local transport sectors, one-day strikes are planned for October 28 and November 11, with multi-day strikes scheduled for late November and early December. If no agreement is reached by December 23, an indefinite strike is planned over the Christmas holidays. In the aviation sector, ground staff are threatening to hold short strikes.

Agricultural organisations are planning tractor protests and road blockades in response to rising production costs.

**Portugal:** Following the police’s violent clearance of protest camps and tent settlements against high rents in Lisbon and Porto earlier this week, citizens’ initiatives have organised massive follow-up protests for this Saturday. A joint Portuguese-Spanish day of protest is planned for November 11.

On October 30, a 24-hour, nationwide rail strike will take place, affecting both long-distance and local services. On November 24, the trade union confederation CGTP is calling for a protest rally outside the Portuguese Parliament against the rising cost of living. On November 30, bank employees will go on strike.

**Greece:** The two largest trade union confederations, GSEE and ADEDY, have called for a 24-hour general strike on November 20 against the high cost of living. Public rail, air, ferry and bus services are expected to come to a complete standstill on that day. Government offices, schools, universities and hospitals will also be affected. Large rallies are planned in Athens and Thessaloniki.

On November 17, the annual commemoration of the Polytechnic uprising against the military dictatorship, protests are expected in Athens and Thessaloniki, along with heavy police intervention.

**Albania:** The Flamingo Movement, which was originally directed against a luxury construction project in a nature reserve, has developed into a broad-based movement against the high cost of living, poor conditions in schools and universities, corruption and Prime Minister Edi Rama.

The Albanian Students’ Union has called for indefinite boycotts and strikes at universities and secondary schools. In Tirana and several other cities, there have been repeated violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces.

**Serbia:** In Serbia, where mass protests against corruption and President Aleksandar Vučić have been taking place for almost two years, parliamentary elections are due to be held on Sunday, October 25. Vučić has resigned as president in order to continue his rule as prime minister after the election.

The opposition party with the best prospects is the Student List, which emerged from the protest movement but consists not of students but of professors, lawyers, celebrities and established figures. Its programme, which is primarily directed against corruption, offers no answers to the pressing social issues. Further clashes are expected should the election result prove contentious.

**Ireland:** Here, too, protests by students are converging with workers’ strikes. National petrol price protests, which paralysed the country in the spring, were, by contrast, largely dominated by the far right.

On October 14, over 300,000 public-sector workers—including teachers, nurses, doctors and administrative staff—walked out to demonstrate against the rising cost of living and for higher wages. Trade union leaders called off a second strike planned for October 21. In early October, thousands of students protested in Dublin against the severe housing crisis and astronomical rents.



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