French students join European youth day of action

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On November 20, as a one-day nationwide strike mobilized 1.5 million workers in Italy after similar strikes in France and Spain, youth protests were called across Europe. In France, thousands marched in Paris, as well as in Nantes and Lyon, and hundreds in Marseille, Toulouse, Dijon, and Rennes, where police banned the protest.

A striking contradiction marked the day: as struggles explode across Europe, turnout in France was down after two months of struggle. There is growing social anger among workers and youth. But the union bureaucracies and opposition parties, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France insoumise (LFI), are not fighting for a revolutionary struggle of the working class.

While millions have protested in France, the unions call isolated, widely spaced days of action, without mobilizing industries (like refineries, trucking, airports) that have seen militant strikes in recent years. Mélenchon announced that he would meet multibillionaire Bernard Arnault for dinner amid the November 17 strike. As the unions and Mélenchon offer no perspective for struggle, the movement is at a crossroads.

The international class struggle resonates in France, posing to youth and workers the necessity of a new political perspective to mobilize the working class against imperialist war and social reaction. It is ever clearer that there is no progressive way out other than an independent struggle of the working class to prepare a European general strike and for socialist revolution. This emerges from the interviews the WSWS at the Paris protest.

Elie, a student, supported an international protest, as Macron refuses to make any concession to social opposition: "Today is a day of struggle internationally. It's really powerful that youth of every country come out to express their discontent and their broad anger at powers all over the world that have a deep contempt for youth, for ordinary people in general, for our demands."

Referring to the threat of far-right dictatorship, he added: "Honestly, I'm tired of going out several times a week, into the streets, risking getting beaten up, tear-gassed. But I keep coming, because if we let them take away our right to protest, we're opening the door to a totalitarian regime. I want to show that even if we're tired—just like them—we keep going into the streets."

He linked the far-right threat to extreme social inequality under capitalism: "I'm really for a revolution of the system … a system that favors the rich far too much, and the interests of a handful of people, and despises everyone else, 90 percent of people. I'm anti-capitalist. I think capitalism bears an enormous share of responsibility. It's a handful of powerful people who govern, who decide where the money goes, while most people don't agree."

He added, "I'm against financing a genocide, for example. And yet it's the powerful who decide what is done with our money. … We don't want war, in general. While we don't feel like listening to a government that doesn't respect us in the first place, they want to make us into cannon fodder."

Elie spoke of his disillusionment with the union leaderships and his reservations on Mélenchon, though he plans to vote LFI against the neo-fascists in the 2027 presidential election: "In fact, the unions work hand in hand with the government … I'm going to vote for Mélenchon because it's the best way to block the far right. But the problem with Mélenchon is that he's also a capitalist, and the problem isn't just the government, it is capitalism in general."

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When the WSWS raised the need to organize in independent action committees to prepare a European general strike and a struggle for workers power, Elie replied: “If we have to make a revolution again, if our voices aren’t enough, maybe we’ll have to use our hands. I don’t know how it’s going to end. But in any case, we’re not going to let them walk on us like this.”

Zoé, a vocational high school student, was protesting so “that people can work and have a future that is more or less tolerable. Today, most people our age can’t even imagine having children, because we ourselves already don’t see any future, actually.” She added: “When the protests drag on, what’s a problem is also the fatigue that builds up.”

Zoé described her experience in a factory in France, where staff are paid a few dozen euros a month above the minimum wage and work around kilns heated to 1,300°C.

She said: “It was a luxury porcelain factory. It was a small team, because of course it has to be profitable. They demand productivity levels that are just insane, with pay that doesn’t keep up, and above all health conditions that really worried me. … There are many toxic substances in what we make. They have people working—most of them didn’t know how dangerous the things they were being asked to do were. And most of them were also foreigners.”

Zoé denounced police repression: “We hoped that at least, if they won’t listen to us, they wouldn’t spend money to have us beaten up. … Today, we are effectively already no longer in a democracy.”

She stressed her solidarity with youth mobilizing across Europe against dictatorship and war, notably in Germany against the draft: “It’s true that today in Europe, in any case, there is a rise of the far right that is pretty terrifying. And it’s true in Spain too. … I don’t know much about political events in Germany, but of course I support them with all my heart.”

She also criticized Mélenchon’s opportunism. “He says a lot of things that are also simply to make himself look good to certain parties,” she said. “Today, we must do something more drastic than what Mélenchon is proposing.”

Mathis said he was protesting because “it’s a call that is not only French but also European, so it seemed important to answer it. Today, for the powerful, any war that can be waged must be waged. That’s not my view of things.”

When the WSWS said the capitalist oligarchy also wages war to impose a police dictatorship at home, Mathis replied: “I completely agree with that. The money we put into the army or the police, we don’t put into something else.” War, he added, “is a pretext to not do more to help the people who need it, obviously. Because if we didn’t put so much money into the army in particular, it could go elsewhere.”

He added: “The billionaires—it’s absolutely not in their interest for the left to win. … They have no questions to ask themselves about the choice to make: for them, it’s the far right.”

When the WSWS pointed out that Mélenchon offers no real perspective and does not wage a revolutionary struggle against war and the fascist danger, Mathis replied: “Mélenchon advocates revolution through the ballot box, he says so clearly. He supports social movements, but for him, change has to come through the ballot box. So I can only agree. And then, as for the unions, for me the unions have been worthless for years. There, I agree even more.”

He agreed with fighting to mobilize workers independently and prepare a European general strike: “Recent history in France, and elsewhere too, shows that the convergence of struggles is extremely important. I don’t see why only youth should be mobilized; these aren’t just a youth issue.”

As masses of workers and youth mobilize internationally, these interviews underscore key political lessons. A profound radicalization is under way. But to prevent the state machine and the capitalist oligarchy from throttling the movement by sheer inertia, a decisive and bold turn is needed toward a Marxist-Trotskyist struggle for an independent mobilization of workers, and the perspective of a European general strike and a revolutionary struggle for socialism.

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