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Youth mobilization

# In the wake of the yellow jackets, a major youth movement could develop in France

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**Since the beginning of December, French high schools [1] and universities have seen the development of a mobilization that gives us hope that a major youth movement can be created.**

This renewal of struggles among youth in France reflects a new resistance against neo-liberal counter-reforms, which have developed in the context of the yellow jacket movement. It expresses the sense amongst young people that they also reject the idea that the working classes should pay the price for a policy entirely oriented towards the satisfaction of the richest, which is the major characteristic of the yellow jacket movement.

## The "children of the yellow jackets"

The mobilization of high school students has been closely linked to the yellow jackets' movement. It began on Monday, 19 November the day after the first weekend of yellow jackets' mobilization, when provincial high schools spontaneously went on strike in solidarity with the yellow jackets. The movement, which developed slowly in the following days, took on a national dimension on Monday, 3 December following the insurrectionary demonstration of the yellow jackets on Saturday, 1 December. It was like an oil stain, since on Friday 7 December no fewer than 470 French high schools were blocked, which is a significant level of mobilization in a country with only 2500 public high schools. Since then, the movement seems to have begun a gradual decline, with the approach of the Christmas holidays constituting a demobilizing factor, while maintaining a real potential for mobilization.

The high school movement is strikingly similar to the yellow jacket movement in that it is first and foremost a response from the working classes to the neo-liberal policy that Emmanuel Macron has put in place in education, as in all other sectors. The government passed a reform of the high school system that abolishes the baccalaureate as a national reference diploma, setting up a new liberal framework that will make it possible to adjust requirements and teaching according to the means and realities of the schools. Young working-class people have obviously understood that this deregulation will further increase the already very marked inequalities that separate bourgeois high schools in the city centre from establishments in working-class neighbourhoods.

This situation appeared all the more unfair as it was linked to the recent challenge to the right of baccalaureate holders to go to university. Last year, the government set up the "Parcoursup" programme, which establishes a ceiling on numbers for each course and selects high school students to be admitted to university not only according to their results, but also their courses and their institutions of origin. Such a policy is obviously biased against the working classes, who see the doors of academia closing in front of them.

This opposition to selection was combined with a desire to resist the new budget cuts in education, with the announcement of the elimination of 2650 teaching posts in secondary education for next year. Here again, high school students in working-class neighbourhoods understood that their schools might be the first to suffer, since the Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, mentioned a forthcoming review of the "priority education zones", which allows the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods to have a level of teaching staff that is slightly above the average. The government's policy has thus emerged in all its reality; condemning young people in working-class neighbourhoods to a downgraded education, with no prospect of access to further studies.

By expressing the refusal of popular youth to see their future sacrificed to neo-liberal policies for the benefit of the richest, the high school movement has thus constituted a variation in the youth of the yellow jacket movement, to

such an extent that many commentators have spoken of a "children of yellow jackets " movement. Sociologically, the high school movement has also taken on a very popular colouring, which is not unlike that of yellow jackets. While high school movements have usually been based in the city centre high schools, studies have pointed out that in this movement the high schools in the outlying working-class districts have played by far the most important role.

## **A stifled movement that is struggling to build itself**

This popular nature of the high school movement has had consequences for its organizational forms. The traditional high school unions (UNL and FIDL), which are in severe decline, have played virtually no role in it and no youth organization has been able to make a real impact. The movement developed spontaneously, which resulted in major difficulties in construction and the absence of any real coordinating structures. The self-organization of the movement has thus remained very limited and no regional or national coordination has been set up, which does not allow the movement to coagulate around strong and collectively defined days of action.

In many places, high school demonstrations have also taken on an almost insurrectional character, with young people attacking everything that could symbolize the state and not hesitating to confront the police. This strategy, which does not encourage self-organization, has led to strong divisions within the movement between those who like to engage in confrontational strategies and those, often from higher social backgrounds, who would like to see their movement have a strictly peaceful form.

Of course, the state has sought to take advantage of this state of affairs to denounce "the breakers" and organize repression characterized by a level of violence that has never been seen before. On the orders of the Ministry of the Interior, the police have intervened with great brutality, often provoking clashes with high school students. Several thousand young people have been arrested and hundreds have been brought before the courts, which have often convicted them despite the absence of any real evidence.

Unacceptable brutality has been used on a mass scale as tens of thousands of adolescents have been clubbed and gassed. Even more serious: on many occasions, the police fired rubber bullets at high school students, often intentionally targeting them at their faces, which resulted in dramatic situations as about ten young people were disfigured or slashed.

The images of the arrest of 151 high school students in Mantes-la-Jolie in the Paris region, whom the police forced to remain kneeling, hands behind their heads, like in the worst scenes of military dictatorship, symbolized the violence of the repression created by the Macron government. There were many protests and young people have now got into the habit of kneeling in front of the police, hands behind their heads, chanting "we want schools, not truncheons".

## **A detonator among university students: tuition fees for foreign students**

The yellow jacket movement, on the other hand, has had little impact in universities, probably because of the under-representation of the working classes in student circles that have not identified with yellow jackets. Young students would probably not have moved if Prime Minister Edouard Philippe had not set fire to the powder keg by announcing on 19 November, just two days after the yellow jacket movement began, that foreign students would now have to pay a very sharply increased registration fee. Without any consultation, the Prime Minister announced that

foreign students would have to pay 2770 euros for a bachelor's degree registration, whereas the current rate is 170 euros, and 3,770 euros for a master's year, whereas the cost is currently 243 euros. The measure was immediately communicated to the French consular services, which implemented it, even though no official text had yet been drafted.

This increase was experienced as a real provocation by the university community. The additional cost imposed on foreign students was perceived as xenophobic or even racist discrimination, since students from the EU, Switzerland and Canada had been exempted from these provisions, which clearly targeted the countries of the South. This measure worried all university officials who understood that it would make their laboratories lose the benefit of recruiting many foreign master and doctoral students, who constitute an absolutely essential workforce for the development of French research. Even business circles have expressed concern about the effects of this measure, since the presence abroad of students trained in France is an important asset for French companies in conquering foreign markets.

In the days following the Prime Minister's announcement of this increase, university councils, laboratories and doctoral schools voted *en masse* in all French universities on motions to repeal this measure. Even the Conference of University Presidents, which is a most subservient institution and largely committed to neo-liberal policies, has called on the government to reverse this policy, which is ruining all efforts by French universities to attract foreign students.

For many students, whose living conditions are continuing to deteriorate and who are struggling to finance their studies, this increase in the fees for foreign students has been perceived as a trial balloon, announcing a forthcoming increase in tuition fees for all students. The Court of Auditors gave credence to this interpretation by publishing on 21 November, just two days after the Prime Minister's announcement of the increase in fees for international students, a report that called for a significant increase in fees for all students. This neo-liberal offensive was also accompanied by the publication in *Le Monde* on 12 November of an article by Alain Trannoy, a neo-liberal economist close to Emmanuel Macron, who advocated a "moderate" increase in registration registrations, considering that "3,000 to 5,000 euros per year of study seems to be an acceptable order of magnitude".

## Student mobilization

These neo-liberal provocations led to a strong student mobilization, with General Assemblies sometimes taking place, with up to 3000 students in Nanterre. However, the timetable does not allow the movement to expand immediately, as first semester courses are completed in most French universities and will not resume until mid-January. However, it seems obvious that French universities are moving towards a major movement, which is beginning to cause very serious concern to the government. Without wishing to go back on its reform, the Ministry of Higher Education has just tried to clear the ground, by opening up to universities the possibility of exempting foreign students from these new tuition fees... though they would have to finance the measure from their own budgets, which was seen as an additional provocation.

The increase in tuition fees for foreign students has thus awakened the student movement, which has made it possible to highlight many other demands. The university community had a bad experience last year of the implementation of the first year of selection. Spring 2018 was marked by a strong mobilization, with long-term occupations of universities that made it possible to build teams of activists almost everywhere. In addition, the publication in July 2018 of a new decree on undergraduate degrees, in line with the new deregulation of diplomas, but also the announcement of new austerity measures, marked this year by the abolition of 20% of the posts at the National Centre for Scientific Research, has considerably inflamed the situation. All over the place, staff and students are drawing up "*Cahiers de doléances*" (list of grievances), in accordance with the tradition opened by the French

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Revolution of 1789, which denounce selection and the increase in tuition fees, but also the neo-liberal deregulation of diplomas and austerity policies. If the government does not back down, all the conditions seem to be in place for students to join the high school movement in January, which seems to have enough potential to have a real ability to rebound after the Christmas holidays,.

For the French social movement, which has suffered greatly from the absence of any large-scale mobilization of youth since the big movement against the “First Job” Contract in 2006, this situation opens up major opportunities. [2] After a period of more than ten years marked by a decline in youth mobilization, the year 2019 could well result in a renewal of class struggles among high school students, which in French society has always heralded a rearming of the social movement as a whole.

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[1] The French secondary school system has two levels, the first four years (11-15 year olds) in *colleges* which are the same for all students, and then the *lycée* for three years – already differentiated into general and technological on the one hand and vocational on the other. This mobilization is largely concentrated in the general *lycées*.

[2] These proposed contracts for workers under 26 would have allowed employers to dismiss workers without reason, and not given the right to those dismissed to claim unemployment benefit. The movement forced the government to withdraw the proposal.