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France

# The high school movement: a new generation opposes the governmental order

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**This spring saw an important movement of high school students in France, first of all in the form of mass demonstrations and then by radical forms of struggle such as blockading schools. For the moment the movement is over. There remain the tasks of organizing the defence of those school students who face charges for their participation in the movement and of drawing lessons for future struggles. The following article draws a first balance sheet of the movement.**

Since mid-January we have seen a high school students' revolt against the Fillon reform [1], a revolt that has proved to be lasting. It drew in tens of thousands of young people, while hundreds have not been attending classes for nearly two months.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/lycee2.jpg>]

All this is the expression of the fightback of a generation against a government that is the image of the society we live in: it gives nothing away. The movement should be situated in a particular context.

A context of defeats, the defeat of the mobilisations of workers in May-June 2003 and of the students in November 2003. A context where the revolt against the government is deepening with each electoral defeat, and with the refusal of most people to go to work on Whit Monday, a public holiday that the government turned into a working day.

And finally in a context where this revolt is beginning to be concretised by the popularity of the "No" in the campaign for referendum on the European Constitution, which gives workers a golden opportunity to express their rejection of the present policies; and also by the multiplication of strikes in different sectors (hospital emergency services, fishermen, radio personnel, postal workers, rail workers...).

The school student movement gives confidence to other sectors and challenges them (in the street, or at the dinner table, between school students and their parents...).

## Considerable obstacles

The lack of militant traditions makes itself felt: overall, the organisation of the movement at local level was weak, with few general assemblies, elected strike committees or financial autonomy. It only needed a racist offensive (conducted by the media, relayed by people's prejudices, helped by the role of the police...) for the divisions that exist between the school students of the poorest neighbourhoods and the others to need several weeks to be overcome.

The betrayal of the union leaderships was very clear. After having played, under the pressure of the rank and file, a role in driving the movement forward on a national scale, the FIDL and UNL school student unions [2] took the violence that occurred on demonstrations as a pretext for abandoning the movement [3]

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/lycee1.jpg>]

This role was widely understood by the school students who in demonstrations left the unions in a minority in relation to the coordination of high schools. The leadership of the main teachers' union, the SNES [4], did everything to stop teachers mobilizing. Finally the determination of the government prevented the school students from winning on their

own. So it was up to them to build a broad movement against the government.

This perspective was opposed to what was defended by some school students, out of despair: minority actions that did not enable us to draw in either school students or workers. In the course of the confrontation the school students rediscovered very traditional forms of struggle: general assemblies, strike pickets, demonstrations, the need for an all-out strike. One of the problems was that the understanding of these four aspects was too weak.

To face up to these difficulties, the school students could only rely on their own forces and limited help from revolutionaries. The setting up of the national coordination played a decisive role. It enabled us to continue the mobilization after the FIDL and the UNL had given up, by proposing dates, organising blockades, exercising a pressure on the union leaderships, trying to unify the movement...

This coordination was not however without weaknesses: mandates hardly existed; there was a disheartening degree of disorder; the elected leadership was practically powerless; some school students disconnected from the coordination and fell back on their own schools. These difficulties are essentially the result of the weak understanding that of the capital importance of organizing on a national scale.

## The role of the young revolutionaries

In the organization of the movement and the definition of its political objectives, the revolutionaries, mainly the JCR with the backing of the LCR, played a decisive role. We tried from September onwards to explain what the future law was all about, then we were at the origin of the coordinations and of the first blockades of schools, and we pushed (without much success) for the democratic organization of the movement.

Thousands of young people discovered that to defend their interests, they found themselves allied with those who have nothing to defend on this society and are ready to push confrontation to the end. Faced with a government that concedes nothing, there are only two attitudes possible: give up, as the union leaderships did, or try to build a general strike.

The outcome of the movement will have consequences: it will affect the amount of confidence a generation has in its own strength. A defeat would reinforce two kinds of error: electoral illusions and ultraleftism. But whatever the outcome of the movement, important lessons will have to be drawn from it. The first is that we can only count on our own forces and that we have to be ready to fight. We will see this generation in action, in the coming working-class struggles or in the universities.

The second lesson, less widely shared, is that there isn't much to expect from this society, since it couldn't care less about the demands of those directly concerned. That is leading to a healthy lack of respect towards various institutions (the police, government administrations and ministries ...) and for a minority, by a movement towards revolutionary organizations.

Several hundred young people will probably get organized in this way, mainly in the JCR, to a lesser extent in Alternative liberetaire or the CNT. [\[5\]](#)

That shows that the best way to build a force that is broader than our own political organization today is to defend a united front policy in the mobilizations, but at the same time to be clearly opposed to this society. That is the role we have to seek to play in the coming years: to help this new generation to understand, through a succession of

experiences, that we have to overthrow this society.

### Appendix

#### The unfolding of the movement

**End of August 2004:** the provisional Thélot Report sets out the main lines of the future Fillon Law.

**September 2004:** first leaflets about the Thélot Report.

January 6th, 2005: police identity checks in 1800 schools. Protest rallies. Local movements against lack of resources in the schools.

**Thursday 20th January:** demonstrations of 300,000 public sectors workers. Several thousand school students join the demonstrations. Coordinations are established in Nantes and Paris. There are more and more local demonstrations.

**Saturday February 5th:** Demonstrations in defence of the 35-hour week. 500,000 demonstrators nationally. There are 43 high schools represented at the meeting of the Parisian coordination.

**Thursday February 10th:** 100,000 school students demonstrate. The school holidays begin (in a third of France), the demonstrations continue.

**Saturday March 5th:** First national coordination;

**Tuesday March 8th:** 165,000 school students demonstrate. Violent incidents at the Paris demonstration.

**Thursday March 10th:** National trade union day of action: a million demonstrators across France. On the Parisian demonstration, violent clashes between the stewards of the school student contingent and gangs of youth. The FIDL and the UNL gradually withdraw from the movement. The demonstrations are no longer massive, but blockades of schools spread.

**Thursday March 31st:** 180 high schools blockaded (out of 2600).

**Saturday April 2nd:** demonstrations of teachers and school students; 60,000 take part.

**Thursday April 7th:** 480 high schools blockaded.

**Wednesday April 20th:** police hold 140 school students after the occupation of a building of the Ministry of Education: ten of them are charged.

**Thursday May 12th:** demonstrations called by the coordination in protest against the Fillon Law and the police repression of previous demonstrations.

Monday May 16th: school students stay away from school in large numbers, as do teachers, in protest at the suppression of the Whit Monday holiday.

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Photos on this page by Patrice Leclerc, [Phototheque du mouvement social](#)

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[1] The reform - whose official title is the "Law of orientation and programming" - seeks to do away with the right of everyone to a decent education. It introduces a difference between "a common foundation of knowledge" for the poorest students and a full education for the most well off. It starts to undermine the national diplomas, whose value doesn't depend on going to the "right" university. And it reinforces the links between the schools and the employers in terms of course content and financing of educational establishments.

[2] The Independent and Democratic High School Federation (FIDL) and the National School Students' Union (UNL) are small organizations, without a real presence among school students, and are linked to different factions of the Socialist Party. The FIDL, however, does have a certain legitimacy.

[3] For the violent incidents on the school student demonstrations, see Murray Smith, "France: a new wave of struggles", IVP n° 365, March 2005.

[4] The National Union Of Secondary Education (SNES) is one of the main components of the Unitary Trade Union Federation (FSU), the main teachers' union. The SNES is led by the "Unity and Action" tendency, originally established by Communist Party teachers.

[5] Alternative libertaire (Libertarian alternative) is a libertarian communist organization. The CNT (National Workers' Confederation) is a small union led by revolutionary syndicalists.