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The high school students movement in France

Anarchist Communist Federation

1999

In October 500,000 students of the lycees (high schools) demonstrated in almost every French town. Claude Allegre, Minister of Education, who has followed a course of confrontation with the teachers, turned himself into a Father Christmas with the students, concerned as he was with the strength of the demonstrations.

The demands of the students were simple-lightening of learning programmes and decrease in class sizes-the average class size is between 30 and 40 while the recommended class size is between 20 and 25; the filling of all vacant teachers posts. Allegre played the old game of pretending to listen to the students demands, making vague promises, letting negotiations drag on til the school holidays came along, multiplying the demagogic announcements whilst watering down promised reforms. The result: on 5th November there were 10 times less students in the street than at the previous large demonstrations. Allegre has a number of advisers who used to be on the other side of the barricade back in 1968. Chief among them is Alain Geismar, ex- Maoist leader who has become Inspector - general of National Education and chief go-between between the

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students and the Minister. Sharks like him know all about struggles and how to defuse them.

Also at work were the various organisations claiming to represent the students, each competing against the other as the authentic voice of the lycees. At least five coordinations have seen the light of day. One of these, the coordination of the FIDL (Federation Indépendante Démocratique Lyceenne) is close to the Gauche Socialiste current of the Socialist Party, that is, the party in power. Its' stage managed meeting with Allegre was met with derision by the majority of striking students, so much so that it was forced to do a U-turn . After the meeting with Allegre it called for an end to the strike movement, then called for a mobilisation after the holidays because it was afraid it would be out-manoeuvred by the other coordinations. It should be pointed out that the Gauche Socialiste has no representatives in the government and is relatively marginalised within the Socialist Party. It hopes that it can be shown to be useful as a broker so that it can get selected for some of the electoral lists for the European elections in 1999.

The movement itself presents many class divisions and different situations. The media has attempted to show the movement as one of responsible young citizens, with an apprenticeship of the "democratic strike" as the first step to a responsible role as good middle class bastions of society. Indeed, budding politicians and bureaucrats of the coordinations, often representing no one but themselves, have placed themselves at the head of demonstrations, insisting on the "apolitical" character of "their" movement, ordering students to tear up any leaflets handed to them. The media has colluded with these groups, to insist on the teachers helping out by directing the demonstrations.

The journalists have found it more difficult to explain those lyceens extremely sceptical about their future and about their movement's ability to change their lives

Many movements start up with reformist, economic, or even everyday demands and end up "demanding the impossible" so it

might seem churlish to criticise the lyceens' movement. After all, we readily support industrial strikes for pay or conditions or to stop closures. But the lyceens demands are eminently reasonable and well-behaved. They want reduction in class sizes, more teachers, more technical and material back-up, so that they can study properly, get good results and end up with a good job and career. Sure, everyone wants their study environment to be better. But the whole education system, from kindergarten onwards, is a place to establish discipline, time keeping and recognition of hierarchy. Did you ever hear of an action by prisoners whose aim was more warders? And in the lycees, the aim is to tell the students that they have a chance after finishing their courses, that they will all get permanent jobs when the future for many is longterm unemployment or jobs with short term contracts. The myths of education for all, and equal chances for everyone, as well as good citizenship, are very strong in this movement, obscuring the very real differences of opportunity for students from different class backgrounds.

Despite all of this, radical ideas still emerge even within such limited movements as these. At Montpellier, more demands emerged with the call for members of the racist Front National sitting on the governing board of the lycees to be removed and for the principals to take a position on this. On a number of demonstrations, some banners and chanted slogans called for revolution. Also on a number of demos, many students had the circled A, the sign of anarchy, painted on their faces....a gesture, or an indication of increasing radicalisation? At Paris, the most popular slogan was "Dans greve, il y a reve" (in the strike there is the dream), an indication that students are looking to a different future, that utopian demands have the possibility of emerging. And the joy of the mass of students at demonstrating for the first time and not having to be at college was there for all to see.

It is noticeable that the same tactics are being used on the lyceens as on the unemployed . First of all a pretence at dialogue and that the demands will be considered by the government, followed by

drawn out negotiations to sap the movement. Then heavy policing to intimidate the more intransigent and most active. This is what happened with the unemployed in 1997–8, and is now happening with the lyceens. In some towns, spokespeople for the lyceens were submitted to security checks and ID controls as soon as they arrived at demos. This points to the excellent coordinations between police, and the principals and managers of lycees. Unfortunately, a large number of teachers have colluded with this. There has been a real horror among many teachers at the thought of students demonstrating, followed by questioning and criticising the movement in class, and getting heavy about absences from college on the day that demonstrations took place. At the end of 3 weeks of demonstrations, and continuous criticisms from the mass of teachers, the very same people decided to come on strike and support the students- 3 days before the end of term!- attempting to tie their feeble demands to the feeble demands of the students! Of course, the Socialist government has attempted to turn teachers against students and vice versa.-easy to do under the circumstances.

As well as those students sceptical about the movement's ability to really change their lives (and who have resorted to attacks on property in some instances, as at Montpellier) there are those young people excluded from the education system altogether. The youth of the banlieus, the outlying parts of towns that are the French equivalent of the inner cities, in groups and without hiding their faces, have used the lyceen mobilisations to loot expensive shops, tobacconists, and audio-visual goods stores with no apparent concern for the lyceens' demands. The press have quickly tagged the name "casseur" (breaker) on to them as they have with previous examples of disaffection in the banlieus. Allegre and the State have used this in a number of ways, turning youth against youth, the "good" against the "bad". A little police repression in the deprived parts of town in the run-up to demonstrations, a little wind-up reporting in the media beforehand about the possibility of trouble, also does wonders in provoking outbreaks of looting.

The gangs who have undertaken these actions are hardly paragons of revolutionary virtue. The cults of money, physical strength, authority and sexism within the gangs, the stripping of coveted items of clothing from other young people, show the dominant values of capitalist society, of "war of all against all". But instead of blaming these disaffected youth, it would be better to look at the increasing levels of poverty, unemployment and social deprivation, with news of redundancies practically every week. With the Jospin government, the cult of law and order has been raised to levels not seen for years., with the creation of a national security council, the gendarmerie out in force in the banlieus, and everyday the increasing number of CRS (riot cops) on the street. The police are now to be seen in the supermarkets, on the tubes, in all the town centres on a permanent basis.

The Communist Party has joined in this orgy of law and order, denouncing the casseurs, praising the CRS! Increasingly the Communist Party equates the poor with the "dangerous class" with no comment on the worsening social conditions.

The high school system as a conveyor belt to rising higher in society is in the process of breaking down. At the moment the youth of the banlieus are contrasted with the nice high school students. A growing realisation that the future is just as bleak for many high school students is needed. The limited demands of today have to be replaced by a vision of a different society based on equality. Whether this has any possibility of developing at the moment within this oh so reasonable movement seems unlikely.