



France: Teachers strike against government organised disruption

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Less than a hundred days before the first round of the presidential election on April 10, the strike by French teachers has been massive, determined and very combative. On January 13, supported by ten unions, more than 136 demonstrations took place, with about 80 000 teachers on the streets, and most of the schools closed.

The figures for participation in the strike are also historic: about 75 percent of teachers in primary schools and 62 percent at secondary level; the like of which we have not seen in 20 years. The teachers struck and took to the streets to express their deep anger against the absurd measures imposed by the government. Faced with sky-rocketing numbers of the epidemic during recent days, about 300,000 new cases every day, the government has decided to keep the schools open as much as possible. Ironically, the teachers, the trade unions and the parents' organisations share the same goal as the government: they also want to keep the schools open, but not in the same way and not on the same conditions!

In less than a week, the health regulations announced by the government have changed three times (they have changed 19 times since the start of Covid), the first being released on the very eve of the schools reopening after the Christmas break. It first required the parents to test their children three times if they had been in contact with an infected person. Classes were closed without warning, results of tests had to be checked, parents contacted, many teachers were sick themselves, parents and children queued for hours in cold weather to get the tests done in pharmacies: the feeling of an absurdly Kafkaesque system (dis)organised by an inept bureaucracy spread even quicker than the virus and triggered the strike from the rank-and-file level.

A teacher speaks: ?In my class, in one week, eleven children out of 25 have been tested positive. However, the class remains open. I must juggle with the absences of pupils, their progressive return, with MY masks, MY laptop, MY internet connection and my appalling low wage.?

Another teacher: ?After two years of the epidemic we have only just received transparent masks which allow lip reading for first-year classes which we requested more than one year ago. Here we no longer have a school psychologist or school doctor, we do not have surgical masks. In my school, we can only purchase masks thanks to money donated by the parents!?

This situation is not limited to schools, of course, even though that is where tensions are most acute. Since the beginning of the epidemic, the government has taken all its decisions through top-down ?defence councils? with a handful of top-level ministers. At one point, President Macron airily dismissed the advice of the medical experts, and took the decisions by himself, surrounded by a small circle of yes-men, praising him as the ?first epidemiologist of France?.

The situation is certainly a difficult one, faced with such questions as whether a class should be closed at the first Covid case and what sort of tests should there be to readmit a pupil? The unions, the teachers and the parents do not necessarily share the same positions. However, they do share two basic demands, and this gave the strike its strength.

The first is that government should not simply impose health regulations from above without taking into account the practical conditions on the ground and the opinions of those concerned. The second is that the debate cannot be limited

to the question 'to test or to close the class?'. The government cannot impose rules without giving the means to education workers and parents to keep the schools open in good and safe conditions. The strikers demand FFP2 high filtration masks, the measurement of CO2 levels in the schools and ventilation systems to refresh the air. They also demand hiring supply teachers to replace those on sick leave, as well as other support workers in the schools.

Conscious of the high political impact of this strike and of the enormous public support for it, the government promised the very same day 5 million FFP2 masks and 3300 additional teachers. Indeed, as the exceptional measures to support the economy in the last two years have shown, billions of euros can suddenly be found when necessary and there is no reason why the teachers, children and teenagers should not be able to study in basic healthy conditions.

There is, however, more than this fuelling the anger of the teachers. They were also on strike against the Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer. He is responsible for various attacks against the public school system, including a counter-reform of secondary education that has deeply disorganised and weakened the sector.

He has displayed contempt for the teachers, declaring in the last few days that 'the strike will disrupt the school system even more' or, with even more cynicism, that 'you cannot strike against a virus'. On top of this he has launched a right-wing campaign against universities and anti-racists in the name of "laïcité" (secularism) increasingly now a cover for islamophobia, denouncing 'islamo-leftism' in the universities, and denouncing the 'fascist' errors of UNEF, the student union, for having organised separate caucuses only for the racially oppressed, and declaring that 'hijab is not welcome in our society'.

Even beyond Blanquer and the education sector, the same top-down orders and disdain for workers are the rule in French society. For two years, the hospitals have been in the front line in the battle against Covid with very little help from the government. There has been no substantial increase in hospital resources or nurses' wages and, as a result, 20 percent of hospital beds are closed for lack of medical staff. In the meantime, the government has even continued its policy of dismantling the public health sector and closing hospitals. The same lack of elementary protective measures is true in other sectors, like transport, cleaning, shops, restaurants, offices open to the general public etc.

Thus, workers have many good reasons to strike to impose their control over the sanitary rules at all levels, from the workplace to the schools and the neighbourhoods. The teachers' strike is the first major progressive action in France on the Covid issue. It can and should be spread and generalised beyond the schools. It could become a major force in the coming presidential elections, sweeping away the disgusting racist and chauvinist propaganda. It could become a rallying point for all workers who are disgusted by politicians' lies, but who have been disorganised by the passivity of the trade unions and the fragmentation and capitulations of the official left parties.

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