

FRANCE

## Revoluting Students

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The on-going student movement in France effectively began last year when the notorious Pécresse law was voted, went into a brief hibernation, and is now being revived in conjunction with the law's application by the right-wing Sarkozy government's minister of higher education Valéry Pécresse.

Generally speaking, French universities are meticulously organized and highly democratic places. For example, during mobilizations last year in only a two week period, there were over 48 general assemblies organized around the country with the vast majority having over 500 students in attendance. Such massive organization of young people and ideas toward political ends is something that is unparalleled in "public" institutions in the United States or elsewhere for example. While the realization of such mobilization is largely due to the very open and militantly public and popular—in the literal sense—nature of French institutions of higher learning (in fact an often heard chant in protests is "For a critical and popular university"), many denigrate the fact that some French universities risk being blockaded for several months out of the year by certain 'leftists' preventing others from being able to attend their classes and actually get an education in the formal sense. Yet the fact is that these occupations are organized and enacted democratically giving French students the possibility to understand how democracy works, take part in their system, and feel like they have a say in not only the democratic process that is higher education, but in the application of government policy as well; in other words, the experience is very educational.

This all may change however as the French government's application of the Pécresse Law threatens the very root of these ideas. Under the rubric of "Autonomy" and "Professi-onalization," the Sarkozy government intends to liberalize the functioning of university administration and funding. In terms of "Autonomy" the law calls for less funding from the state while pushing universities to take ownership of their own individual properties, and create foundations through which private money can fund or develop programs, which essentially means that the hand of the private sector will firmly take control of the current public system of education; and of course, these private funders could not go unrewarded. By restructuring the university administration, diminishing the power of professors in choosing administrators and replacing these decision-making bodies with corporate board-like entities, the private sector interests will easily gain their foot in the door to affect not only the functioning of the institution but also curriculum. This moves perfectly into the government's "Professionalization" theme which strives to provide students with "orientation and professional insertion;" in other words, an education that will provide them with direct professional insertion into the marketplace, and preventing them from studying "unproductive" subjects like history or the humanities. In fact, not only will there be large budget cuts in which less "useful" departments and faculty will be axed, but there will be an increase in inscription fees, tuition, as well as increased competition between universities to create the best educational brand in order to attract the most desirable students. All of this seems to

foreshadow leaving the French in precisely the same predicament in which the American university exists today as even so-called public American universities are, on average, only 30% financed by the state with the rest coming from quintuple digit tuition for students, and "investments" from private corporations pushing their own research goals and profit interests, killing all possibility for an education that takes into account the situation of the society, its history and the collective interests that its individual citizens within it represent. The last few years have made this more and more clear.

Two years ago, while in the throes of the Bush administration and some of the worst moments of the war on and occupation of Iraq this writer wrote an article for an independent publication on the differences between American and French university protest movements entitled, "The Money is the Matter". It was really frustrating to see discrepancy between the massive movement in France concerning the passage of a law that would begin privatizing the higher education system there, and the total lack of any movement within the already fully privatized higher education system in the United States after seven years of a bloody, imperialist and illegal war in Iraq. However, the point of the article not only connected those two dots but argued that it was precisely this privatization and the social deformations that it engendered that allowed such exorbitantly absurd atrocities to be committed without the slightest reaction. The two went hand in hand; and in fact, no American universities were occupied due to the war.

Nevertheless, the French seem to understand the American model and fortunately can learn from it - or rather, to avoid it. The head of the prestigious Sorbonne in Paris recently wrote that "professionalizing higher education would be devastating. Adapting to the needs of private corporations is not a good solution, because in a world of perpetual change, the needs of corporations are always changing thus leading to an education that after only a short time is outdated and useless." A major French newspaper *Libération* also recently ran an article in which four French professors with experience working in America commented on the neo-liberal American model and its application in France. They write that such a system "claims to have confidence in the market but instead only serves to reinforce hierarchy. The current reform, in reality, impoverishes the forms of solidarity that are effective in our societies." Thus, while the left is holding firm on the claim that the government should revoke the new law without any conditions, Sarkozy and his ministers are working to split the movement by seducing professors with compromises in an attempt to isolate the student movement. While such backhanded efforts have succeeded in forcing past legislation and repressing popular dissent, the current atmosphere appears positive as more and more universities are erecting the barricades against the imported neo-liberal policies that strive to kill the very possibility to collectively organize to express dissent. □

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