

French Prime Minister Valls imposes unpopular school reforms by decree

By Kanda Gabriel
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Prime Minister Manuel Valls imposed by decree last week an unpopular reform of the junior high school curriculum, in the face of mass opposition in the population and amongst teachers. The reform eliminates posts for the teaching of Latin and ancient Greek, scraps an intensive foreign language teaching program and changes the history curriculum.

Valls announced that he would impose the reform by decree on May 19, as French junior high school teachers went on strike across France and marched in protests organized by the trade union bureaucracies.

Arriving to discuss the reform that day with legislators of his own Socialist Party (PS), Valls announced that the decree would be published “as quickly as possible.” He added, “I am confident that this reform will be implemented as predicted.”

“There are concerns, they are legitimate. But there is a reform that allows us to ensure success for all. ... That is the spirit of the high school reform,” said President François Hollande.

The imposition of the reform by decree underscores the PS’ contempt for the working class and the struggle for high quality education. An Odoxa poll for Les Echos and Radio Classique last week showed that over 60 percent of French people oppose the reform and think it will harm pupils’ performance rather than improve it.

“They’re getting it completely wrong. We want a reform but not this one,” 34-year-old physics teacher Sebastien Bourdellot said at a protest march in Paris. “I voted for Hollande in 2012, I even put up posters for him, but I really regret it.”

Trade union officials complained that Valls did not negotiate the reform with them and impotently proposed a possible protest march sometime in September. The National Secondary Teachers Union

(SNES) called Valls’ policy “a provocation, an error,” while the National High School and Junior High Union (SNALC) attacked it as a “scandalous way of forcing the reform through.”

Valls defended his decision when challenged in a question-and-answer session at the National Assembly, however, confident that the unions would rapidly abandon their criticisms and return to jointly planning social cuts with the PS government and the employers’ federations.

Stressing that he felt he had to “act fast,” Valls said, “This government is determined to make reforms, we will continue, on this and all other subjects, because it is in France’s interest.”

Above all, Valls is determined to “act fast” because the entire ruling establishment fears the explosion of social anger in the working class in France and across Europe. Having handed over tens of billions of euros to big business by making deep social cuts, the PS has become the most unpopular government in France’s post-World War II history, in line with governments across the EU that are imposing a hated agenda of austerity. In a poll last November, the PS’ economic policies received a three percent approval rating.

The teacher strike expresses social anger rising among workers in France and across Europe. The French government and the EU have relied on the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left parties such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) to stifle growing opposition. After three years of constant attacks on the working class by the PS government, the unions have not even called the type of impotent, one-day national protest strike they routinely called against Hollande’s right-wing predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy.

The strategists of the French ruling class still remember the sudden eruption of the general strike of

May-June 1968. Their strategy, relying on the bankruptcy of the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left groups, has been to rapidly halt any strike or protest before it could become the focal point of broader working class opposition.

Each time the working class has mounted industrial action, in France and across Europe, the unions have moved rapidly to suppress it. Over the last year, rail and airline workers' strikes in Germany, teachers' strikes in Britain, and strikes by Air France pilots and Radio France workers were all rapidly shut down. At Air France, the unions shut down the strike, insisting that otherwise pilots might cause financial damage to the company—that is, that if they kept striking, the pilots would be in a position to win their demands.

Valls' latest imposition of the reform by decree is a continuation of this strategy, seeking to block any broader intervention of the working class against the anti-democratic agenda of austerity.

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