

French students blockade universities in struggle against selective admissions

By Guillaume Garnier
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After the March 22 protest of rail and public workers against the privatisation of railways, on the 50th anniversary of the initial youth protests that ultimately triggered the May-June 1968 general strike, students began a movement to occupy and blockade universities across France.

The student movement is largely carried out in solidarity with the striking workers, and amid broad opposition to Middle East wars, and its immediate target is the ORE (Student Orientation and Success) reform, commonly known as the Vidal law. The law, named after Minister of Higher Education Frédérique Vidal, would transform the university admissions process in France.

The Vidal law—which has already been legally declared on March 8—will require universities to take into greater consideration high school grades, the quality of the high school students have attended, and their academic activities and related training. In effect, this law will favour privileged layers who have greater access to higher-quality education, travel, and job and cultural opportunities than most working-class youth. It will put pressure on students as young as 14 to decide which career they will choose in order to start padding their CVs for university applications.

Over the last two months, student occupations spread rapidly across France. On March 26 the Tolbiac campus in Paris was blockaded, on April 3 the campus of Saint-Denis (Paris VIII), Paris III and Paris IV (Clignancourt) on April 8, and the campus of Nanterre on April 17, following the intervention of militarized police the previous week on the campus. Blockades also emerged in major cities outside Paris: Limoges (start of April), Rennes (April 5), Toulouse (mid-March), Metz (April 11), Nantes (April 4), and Marseille (April 19).

On occupied campuses, the students are demanding the withdrawal of the Vidal law and the resignation of the university president, if he or she sent in police to attack student blockades.

Several of these occupations have been dismantled in raids launched by military or riot police squads. The Tolbiac blockade was suppressed on April 20, Metz April 25, Toulouse May 9, and on May 10 the Nantes court ordered the “liberation” of the occupied Censive building. But blockades are continuing at Paris IV (Clignancourt) and Paris VIII (Saint-Denis), Marseille, Limoges, and Nantes. Rennes-II and Nanterre are the only campuses still completely blockaded.

The key question facing students, who are largely opposed to austerity and war, is the turn to the working class and how to carry it out. Students are still meeting in General Assemblies (AGs) to debate how to continue with protests. Many students called for a “convergence of struggles” between students and striking workers in the railways, Air France, health care and the broader public sector.

A half century after 1968, the turn for the youth is into the working class, for a common revolutionary struggle to bring down President Emmanuel Macron’s unpopular government. The central obstacle to this is pseudo-left groups like the New Anti-Capitalist Party or the Stalinist French Communist Party, whose youth members largely organise and set the agenda, and whose trade union wings work to subordinate strikers to deals worked out with Macron.

The way forward is a political break with these organisations and the building of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in France.

WSWS reporters interviewed students at the Saint-Denis campus. Asked about the ongoing struggle against the privatisation of the railways, Mathieu, a

film student at Saint-Denis, said: “I support the strike of the rail workers”

He added, “For these social gains [which the rail workers possess] the whole French working class had to fight for years. The rail workers are right to defend them for the reason that the suppression of these social gains will benefit the stockholders and ultra-rich who will be able to privatise the SNCF, in exploiting the network of railroads that historically belonged to the state. This will not benefit the popular classes or the middle class.”

Iris, a student at Paris I, said: “I support them [the rail workers] at my level. I find that it is important to defend them because even if I have nothing to do with it—they aren’t attacking me directly, or someone in my family—it is still important because an attack on the rail workers is something significant. In hitting the agreements made on an industry-wide level or the public workers, they are targeting parts of the population that are already exhausted, or are already in a difficult situation. They are told in the press that they are privileged, but this is nonsense.”

Youen, a youth who came to support the students’ struggle, said that he was on the campus to “attend a general assembly that brought together 300, 400 people”

He also said that he is “In solidarity [with the rail workers]. There we see a sector [of workers] that is traditionally combative, that is under attack by the leaders of the SNCF, and obviously by the state. The objective of the government and the leaders of the SNCF is to prepare the privatisation of the SNCF, and one must know that the rail workers have been slapped in the face for years.

“This is a battle for work conditions and it’s a battle that can inspire the combativity of other sectors that are also being attacked, in the private and public sectors. Because of this, the government is very scared. The rail workers must receive the support of all students in struggle.”

Asked about government repression, he pointed to the example of the Nanterre campus where “there were around 100 students [on April 9], who met for an assembly of students. The President [of the university] decided to send some cops. There were seven arrests, of which three have criminal charges and proceedings.”

Youen said that he thought the military strikes in

Syria by the French government were “disgusting ... It is to add more chaos in a region of the world that is already devastated by all of the military interventions and all of the interventions by big powers, whether this is Russia, the US, France, the UK, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, etc. This means that we are witnessing militarist, imperialist politics that support the interests of the large weapons dealers and the geopolitical solutions of the big powers.”

Youen added that “this context of the student movement, this context of the situation of the working class, must allow us to affirm more loudly the fact that everyone has the right to move to choose the place where they live. The proletariat does not have borders. We must take advantage of this moment of social anger to affirm our solidarity with the migrants who are victims and who are not responsible for unemployment and insecurity in France.”

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