



Fighting the neoliberal university: a French perspective

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In France, the strength of public services' and students' protests delayed the worst reforms of the global neoliberal transformation of higher education. It remains almost free and most staff are public servants. In recent years, however, a growing number of exceptions have greatly weakened this standard. After 20 years of gradual and indirect attacks on the right to free higher education, Macron's government has now embarked on straightforward commercialization. First, from 2019/20, public universities were urged to increase their tuition fees by 1 600% for non-European students (€2990 a year for a Bachelor's, €3990 a year for Master's), paving the way for generalising high fees in the future.

Then, in 2020, the new multi-year research programming law (LPPR) was meant to be the second major step; its central aim is to fund research after the fact, according to quantitative evaluation. While this would sound familiar to academics in Britain and many other countries, these mechanisms are far less developed in France, which is why the CEO of France's main research agency, CNRS, greeted it as a 'welcome unfair and Darwinian law'.

Block grants remain the major source of funding for higher education. However, they have been substantially displaced over the past 30 years by ex-ante competition: academics have to respond to calls for projects released by specialised agencies to access public funding. LPPR's financing mechanism would further intensify this trend, which has already led to the concentration of public resources in a few universities, clustered in 11 so-called excellence initiatives, whose creation strengthened the duality of higher education and the research system: on one side, these new, well-endowed, first-class universities; on the other, most other universities, dealing with reduced budgets and increasing numbers of undergraduate students. LPPR's logic is indeed Darwinian: the second-class universities find themselves disadvantaged when evaluated through their past research output, since they have received less funding and had to deliver more teaching. Funding research after the fact reproduces and worsens existing present inequalities among universities, and, consequently, students.

This mirrors a fundamental transformation of academics' working conditions. Currently, academics are on average 35 years old when they get a permanent position. The bill states that permanent posts should be much reduced (150 yearly for the whole country - two or three per discipline) and subjected to a tenure track. After a PhD, two or three postdocs, and having

been selected among the three best researchers of your field, you'd need to prove again your productivity for five or six more years, while your unlucky colleagues would be subjected to long-lasting job insecurity. Currently, 130 000 adjunct teachers are paid by the hour, below the minimum wage, while fewer permanent positions become available, and earnings are constantly decreasing in real terms. This bill pushes further along the same path and encourages private funding of research. Lastly, LPPR also increases working hours of non-academic staff by 8% and teaching hours for academics deemed to be 'underperforming' in research.

A movement within the movement

On 5 December 2019, rail and public transport workers started a six-week strike against the reform of the pension system from a defined-benefit to a defined-contribution scheme. A train accident crystallized the anger of rail workers against job restriction policies and inadequate maintenance budgets and speeded up the mobilisation schedule. In parallel, the health and education sectors were mobilizing against other reform projects. The 5 December general strike in defence of the pension system incorporated these growing discontents.

This historic strike had uncommonly high participation rates, disrupting the national train network and effectively halting Paris's transport system. Solidarity committees emerged in universities, whose staff would be negatively affected by the pension reform because of low wages, the high level of precarity and late-starting careers. Their pensions would be curtailed by a quarter or a third of their current value. Besides, the unemployment insurance reform worried numerous casualized higher education and research workers. A few events had contributed to maintaining a low-intensity political agitation throughout 2019: the tuition fees reform *Bienvenue en France*, the attack on academic autonomy in the CNRS by its technocratic administration, and finally the immolation of a student in Lyon, who left a letter explaining his decision as a political act of protest against student precariousness.

The academics thus mobilized first against the pension reform. In many ways, the law reforming the public sector enforced in August 2019 had already anticipated key measures of the LPPR. News about its upcoming only strengthened the movement. Three general assemblies took place in December and January, with the number of participants increasing exponentially. A

punch action at the Station F start-up incubator, where the Minister for Higher Education and Research was invited to an official event - effectively preventing her from delivering the standard governmental speech - provided the incipient mobilization with greater visibility. Echoes of discordant voices began to be heard outside the higher education system. The column was steadily growing during the rallies, marching with the national education sector ('from kindergarten to university'). Meanwhile, collectives of precarious workers, mainly but not only teachers and researchers, started to build links, structure common demands and plan moves, such as a wildcat demonstration following a symbolic act involving fake blood in front of Paris's city hall.

Holding the picket line

While the transport strike decreased in intensity after six weeks of huge but unsuccessful struggle, the relative demoralization did not stop the mobilization in the higher education and research sector. The first national coordination issued a call for a general mobilization day in the universities and laboratories on 5 March. Over 25 000 people in Paris, and even more thousands in many other cities - administrative, technical, teaching and research staff and students - marched together. A few days before the lockdown started, a second national coordination gathered 500 representatives of local struggles.

While differences in temporalities initially made common action difficult between the trade unions and the autonomous committee for the mobilization of universities and research centres (Facs et Labos en Lutte, FLL), starting from February, FLL delegates were included in the weekly inter-trade union meetings. This helped incorporate the key issues of students' and workers' increased precariousness in the discussions. Employees working on fixed-term contracts represented the bulk of the contestation and the most proactive militants, along with politicized students. Initially, their tenured, civil-servant colleagues adopted an ambivalent wait-and-see approach, while no broad student movement existed. The nothing-to-lose workers faced increasingly heavy repression, both inside and outside the universities and research centres. While some were threatened with not having their contracts renewed for the following academic year, others were confronted with arbitrary police detention and prosecution.

In parallel, the movement had started to engage with oppression in the sector, as patriarchal and racist oppression thrive on the unacceptable precariousness of students and workers which was a key theme articulating all these initiatives. As the campaign remained strongly dependent on women's involvement, it led to questioning women's positions in the university and those of racialized people and foreigners, and of the moral, sexist or sexual violence and economic discrimination these groups endure.

Lockdown and perspectives

More than 100 universities and schools, nearly 300 laboratories and 145 scientific journals in the humanities and social sciences had taken part in this struggle. The largest strike the higher education and research system had known in more than ten years did not vanish during the Covid-19 lockdown. Online assemblies drafted emergency measures. National and local solidarity funds were set up to help students and workers whose financial situation worsened because of the lockdown.

The mobilization continued during the lockdown, though in a digital format, for three main reasons. First, the government only postponed the pension reform and never gave up on the LPPR. Second, the lockdown has greatly amplified the inequalities among students. Finally, the lockdown is being used as a laboratory for many upcoming neoliberal reforms, such as generalizing online classes to reduce the workforce, or the increasing control of university executives over working and studying conditions, which would further transform the universities' president into employers. As the lockdown is being lifted, the mobilization takes off again.

Meanwhile, the case for the block grant as the major source of financing for research has strengthened. It is now acknowledged that neoliberal reforms of healthcare provision in past decades greatly contributed to the severity of the Covid-19 crisis. Besides - unlike what is frequently asserted - the constant governmental injunction to maintain 'pedagogical continuity' during the lockdown has shown that paralysis of academic activities is a source of concern for the ruling class. A general strike in the higher education industry cannot be discarded as innocuous. On the contrary, it would greatly help recognition that higher education's workers don't stand as a separate body with special interests. We also need more coordination among various national protests to counter the worldwide drift toward a neoliberal academia. For now, with the end of the lockdown, the struggle has restarted with no less intensity than previously. Without withdrawal of the reforms, no going back to classes.

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The GLC is supported in 2020 by the ICDD at Kassel University and the Center for Global Workers' Rights at Penn State University.