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From Classroom to Street: Student Protests Rock France

Unit for Political Studies

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Between 5 and 9 October, a wave of student protests swept through Paris and several other major French cities, driven by the deepening decrepitude of the state education sector and declining expenditure on schools and universities. The protests peaked on 6 October, when more than a quarter of a million protestors turned out to demonstrate, according to Interior Ministry estimates. They surged again on 8 October.[1] Some of the demonstrations involved clashes with security forces, along with mass arrests. In response, the government announced measures to contain the crisis, including moves to hire additional teaching staff,[2] and accused "radical left–wing forces" of orchestrating the unrest.[3] The episode has highlighted escalating social tensions in France and presented the government with a difficult challenge: balancing demands for improved public services against mounting pressure to curb spending, in the face of a spiralling fiscal deficit. This comes as the country prepares for a Spring 2027 presidential election that the far right is hoping could bring it to gain power.

Background

For years, France has grappled with a succession of economic and social crises – intensified by the COVID–19 pandemic, the Russian war in Ukraine, and the subsequent US–Israeli war against Iran, all of which have raised energy prices and spurred high inflation.[4] It was in this context that thousands of high school students took to the streets in protest against deteriorating conditions at schools, shortages of teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and the poor state of school facilities.

The movement began with a student sit–in at a high school in the Paris suburbs, then spread to other high schools in the capital and eventually to other cities across France. Teachers and administrative staff joined the protests, and some private high school pupils expressed their solidarity with their public–school counterparts. The movement garnered further support from universities and labour unions, whose students and members deployed to protect demonstrators from police violence.[5] This gave the protests significance beyond the movement's initial demands, opening the door to broader questions over the state's economic and social policies, the status of young people in society, and the state's capacity to meet its obligations toward a generation facing an uncertain future – especially

1 Nicolas Garriga and Oleg Cetinic, "French riot police fire tear gas as more than 250,000 rally nationwide for school funding," *AP News*, 7/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLIH.

2 Manon Cruz and Dominique Vidalon, "French students keep up protest pressure with some demonstrations hit by violence," *Reuters*, 8/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNM7P.

3 Mariama Darame et al, "French government defends handling of high school protests as controversies grow," *Le monde*, 7/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLVg.

4 Shola Lawal and *Reuters*, "France Protests: What we know as schools face nationwide action," *Al Jazeera*, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMko; "French preliminary inflation up at 3.4% in September," *Reuters*, 30/9/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMwX; "In/9/2026, consumer prices should increase by 3.0% year on year," *Insee*, 30/9/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLFs.

5 Makini Brice and Dominique Vidalon, "French student protesters vow to keep up their fight after scoring first win," *Reuters*, 9/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLS1.

given that government–run schools, which in French republican ideology are linked to the principles of equal educational opportunity and social advancement, are no longer able to fulfil their role.[6]

France's looming presidential election has imbued the protests with an additional political dimension – despite the fact most of the demonstrators are under 18 and ineligible to vote. Some commentators on the right and far right have framed the protests as part of the electoral showdown, accusing left–wing party La France Insoumise (France Unbowed) of attempting to exploit student anger as part of its own campaign ahead of the presidential election.[7] As evidence, they have pointed to the presence of members of parliament and local elected officials at the protests, some of them wearing vests or badges identifying them as such, in an attempt to shield students from the police. The latter have faced harsh criticism over accounts of severe injuries and arbitrary arrests[8] at protests in which most of the participants were minors.

State Schools and Social Inequality

The students' demands reveal a deep–seated problem within the French education sector: a persistent shortage of teaching staff, which places mounting pressure on educational institutions and diminishes their capacity to provide a reasonable standard of education.[9] This deepens disparities in academic opportunity among students. The impact of the shortage is most acute in the suburbs and working–class neighbourhoods, where many schools suffer from a lack of resources and facilities, while pupils' families simultaneously grapple with economic and social pressures.[10] The crisis cannot be understood solely through its effect on academic performance. The decline seen in France – as in other Organisation for Economic Co–operation and Development (OECD) nations – raises important questions not only about the quality of education but also about the widening economic and social gaps between different parts of these societies.

While affluent families can secure a better standard of education for their children, low–income families remain dependent on the public school system, in which standards are in decline. This in turn limits their children's prospects for pursuing higher education, along with their future employment prospects. This means that schools, which should supposedly provide children from various social backgrounds with roughly equal opportunities for success, instead reproduce the inequalities found beyond their walls. While this is partly due to rapid social and educational shifts, changing student needs, and the difficulties educational institutions face in keeping pace with these transformations,

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6 Sylvie Lecherbonnier and Eléa Pommiers, "Why French high schoolers are protesting, and why their movement is already historic", *Le monde*, 5/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNM4A.

7 Mariama Darame and Nathalie Segaunes, "French government cornered by high school protests that threaten to escalate," *Le monde*, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMh9; "French government defends handling of high school protests as controversies grow."

8 Juliette Jabkhiro and Layli Foroudi, "French policing under scrutiny as student protest injuries mount," *Reuters*, 10/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMtI.

9 "French students renew protests as government announces 3,000 substitute teachers," *Reuters*, 10/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMGh.

10 Layli Foroudi, "High school students in Paris' deprived suburbs spark national protest movement," *Reuters*, 3/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLOM; Rémi Ducasse et al, "What students are saying during high school blockades: 'I am worried about my future and for all students in France'," *Le monde*, 3/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2026/10/06/what-students-are-voicing-during-high-school-blockades-i-am-worried-about-my-future-and-for-all-students-in-france_6758294_7.html.

such factors do not absolve the government of its responsibilities to provide teachers, improve their working conditions, maintain school facilities, and allocate the necessary resources to the most disadvantaged institutions. All of these are fundamental prerequisites for a high–quality education and for fulfilling the social role that public schools are expected to play.

Beyond Education

The issues raised by student protests in France were not limited to demands over education or similar local concerns. Rather, they extended to questions of justice within both local and international contexts. The appearance of Palestinian flags at certain gatherings – alongside slogans related to climate change, wars, and international conflicts – reflected a growing sense of values and a keen interest among a segment of French youth in issues that extend beyond both the school and the state.[11] This suggests that these young people have come to view their daily challenges as part of a global reality of intertwined economic, social, environmental, and political crises, the repercussions of which are shaping their lives and futures – yet over whose trajectory they have little to no influence.

This does not imply that those who took part in the protests were unified around particular political positions, or that their actions were rooted in any kind of political programme. Rather, it reflected a broadening scope of concerns among a generation increasingly aware of the interconnectedness between their own daily, lived challenges and the transformations underway around the world. This phenomenon has taken on particular significance in light of the approaching presidential election. A large segment of the students involved in these protests have not yet reached the legal voting age, leaving them unable to directly influence election results at the ballot box. However, the absence of the right to vote does not equate to a total lack of political influence. These protests have allowed young people to articulate their positions and participate in shaping public discourse, potentially compelling political parties and candidates to re–evaluate their priorities or pay greater attention to the issues these young people face. Nevertheless, it remains too early to gauge how such movements might impact the electoral landscape. The capacity for street mobilization does not automatically translate into electoral power, even if it does highlight social and political trends that could grow in significance in the coming years.

From Student Protest to National Movement

The significance of the latest protests extends beyond their specific demands to what it reveals about potential shifts in the nature of protest movements, their expanding scope, and the diverse forms through which they are expressed. In this context, one may identify five key indicators that can help us understand the movement's trajectory and its potential for evolution.

11 "High school protests draw tens of thousands across France for second time in a week," *Le monde*, 10/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMdU.

First is the broadening of the base of the movement, which has extended beyond sectoral demands. Participation in such protests is no longer confined to students from the schools most severely affected by resource shortages and poor educational conditions; it has expanded to encompass solidarity from students at elite universities – some of which are traditionally linked to right–leaning political and intellectual circles. The factors driving young people to protest are manifold, ranging from material conditions and state neglect of public education to issues of justice, identity, and meaning in the lives of young people. While this diversity does not necessarily imply that the protests have unified demands or shared motives, it signals a widening circle of discontent that now encompasses groups that do not suffer to the same extent from the poor quality of education. If this trend persists, it could pave the way for the movement to shift from demanding better educational conditions to a broader interrogation of the government's socio–economic policies and the nature of the relationship between young people and the political system, reminiscent of the 1968 student protests that triggered profound social and political transformations in France.[12]

Second is the growing role of social media in documenting confrontations and shaping public opinion. The wide circulation of videos capturing clashes between students and security forces has fuelled a public debate over police tactics in handling demonstrators and limits to the use of force against peaceful protestors. Although the impact of these clips to some extent depends on their credibility, their extensive circulation has helped shape public opinion regarding the protests, and nurtured public sympathy and solidarity with the protesting students. This reflects the growing role of digital platforms in influencing the trajectory of protest movements, which has gone beyond mobilization on the ground to shaping political and media discourse.[13]

Thirdly, mass arrests – of over 6,000 people, according to some estimates[14] – have sparked heated debate, even though the vast majority of those detained were released shortly afterwards. The conduct of the security forces has raised questions over the distinction between actions warranting legal prosecution and the exercise of the right to demonstrate and stage sit–ins, as well as whether police action against student protesters was proportionate to their alleged offenses. The number of arrests cannot be read as indicating that the authorities were successful in containing the movement. While stringent security measures may have temporarily curbed participation in protests, they could also deepen the sense of injustice and drive further solidarity with the protesters, thereby injecting further impetus into the movement to persist and spread.

Fourth is the potential for the movement to draw in other social and professional sectors. The call for a national demonstration on October 17, involving employees and workers from various sectors, alongside nurses and students, represents a crucial test of the protesters' ability to broaden the base of their movement. The success of the mobilization will depend not only on the number of participants, but also on their ability to agree on clear demands, maintain the independence of their movement,

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12 For more on the May 1968 protests, see: "1968: a Turning Point in History?" *CNRS,*17/4/2018, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMqt.

13 Estelle Nilsson-Julien, "Teen revolt or revolution? The student protests threatening France's presidential race," *Euronews,* 11/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMD2.

14 Jade Le Deley and Lorne Cook, "Police fire tear gas at barricaded Paris high school as student protests show no sign of ending," *AP News,* 9/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLLx.

and avoid letting it become a mere extension of party political or electoral conflicts. Furthermore, how the authorities choose to handle this mobilization will have significant effects on its trajectory.

Fifth is the possibility that the protests could spread beyond France. The student movement has not been confined to France; Belgium's capital Brussels and several cities in Italy, Germany, and Greece have also seen protests that have reflected, to varying degrees, a growing sense of anxiety among young people regarding their future.[15] These movements could resonate in other European countries – and even beyond the European Union – if the underlying issues fuelling them persist without a compelling political response. In such a scenario, treating each protest as an isolated, transient local crisis will not suffice. Instead, there will be a need for a broader review of European educational policies, rather than relying on piecemeal solutions or a security–focused approach.

Potential Outcomes

It is possible to trace out three potential scenarios for the movement's evolution, though it should be noted that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The first would see the protests contained through a partial response to the movement's demands. It is notable that Minister of Education Edouard Geffray announced the provision of 3,000 teachers, to be deployed to schools suffering from staff shortages "within hours"[16] – a move that raised questions as to why such measures were not taken sooner. However, the government's success in containing the current wave of protests does not necessarily mean that it has addressed the underlying causes, first and foremost the structural imbalances that have accumulated over years of shortages in both educational resources and personnel. Key indicators that this scenario is underway would be a gradual decline in the number of protestors, the resumption of regular classes, and a decrease in confrontations with security forces,[17] coinciding with the announcement of measures aimed at improving educational conditions.[18]

A second scenario would see the protests continue intermittently, as the government fails fully to contain the movement, yet the protesters also prove unable to expand it or transform it into a cohesive, nationwide protest movement. In this case, unrest could persist in particular schools and regions, resurfacing whenever new issues arise or the implementation of government pledges is delayed. This scenario would be evidenced through ongoing strikes, the closure of certain educational institutions, and recurring confrontations with security forces in various locations. This situation could persist for an extended period without leading to tangible political shifts, but it would keep the education crisis – and the authorities' approach to handling the protests – at

15 Rebecca Falconer, "Student protest unrest spreads across Europe," *Axios*, 7/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://www.axios.com/2026/10/07/europe-student-protests-france-belgium.

16 "French Student Protesters Vow;" "France vows to deploy 3,000 substitute teachers after fresh student protests," *The Local*, 8/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMjZ.

17 "Timetables top list of French high schoolers' grievances to government," *Le monde*, 10/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNMaF.

18 Makini Brice and Dominique Vidalon, "French student protesters vow to keep up their fight after scoring first win," *Reuters*, 9/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://www.reuters.com/world/french-student-protesters-vow-keep-up-their-fight-after-scoring-first-win-2026-10-09; Jon Henley, "French ministers scramble to appease students after 10 days of protests," *The Guardian*, 8/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBy2sxx.

the forefront of public discourse, ensuring that the potential for renewed mobilization remains whenever new grievances emerge.

Under the third scenario, the movement would metastasise, evolving into a broader political and social crisis. This scenario could unfold if student demands aligned with wider mobilization by labour unions or social groups, or if the use of force were to trigger a new wave of solidarity. Such a trajectory might mirror certain aspects of the Gilets Jaunes ("Yellow Vests") movement seen in France in 2018, which was marked by a widening base of participants as the movement evolved beyond its initial demands. The likelihood of this scenario would increase were the students to be joined by other social and political forces – including groups beyond the radical left, which has already expressed support for the current protests.[19]

Conclusion

The significance of the student protests in France lies not merely in the number of participants or their potential impact on upcoming elections, but in the questions they have raised over the future of the public education system and the relationship between their generation and the French state. Whether these demonstrations are contained through specific measures, persist intermittently, or evolve into a broader social movement, their trajectory will depend on the students' ability to sustain their momentum, and on how the authorities respond to their demands. While it may be too early to predict the trajectory the protests will take, ignoring their underlying causes will not make them disappear. The true test for the French state lies not only in its capacity to maintain order on the streets, but in its ability to convince young people that the education system still offers them fair opportunities – and that their future is not predetermined by their social circumstances.

19 "French high school protests grow and draw widespread support," *Le monde*, 7/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLIi; "Protests sweep France, as student walkouts tap into public discontent," *The Washington Post*, 6/10/2026, accessed on 15/10/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxNLUR.