

Daniel Bensaïd

France: “The question of a link between workers and students is immediate”

Daniel Bensaïd, in this interview with Socialist Worker, reflects on the current battle of the French students and its comparisons with student movements of the past.

Socialist Worker: *As someone who took part in the mobilisations of May 1968, what do you think are the principal similarities and differences between those events and what’s happening today?*

Daniel Bensaïd: There are many more differences than similarities. In reality, the student movement of 1968 was an important but minority movement even up to the “night of the barricades” on 10 May.

The other difference lies in the motives of the movement. In 1968, the spark was a demonstration against the war in Vietnam. The themes were very internationalist – solidarity with Vietnam, and with the German and Polish students.

Along with these issues were others like the question of mixed university halls of residence. The present movement is directly based on a social question – the destruction of workplace regulations and the generalised casualisation of employment, which is common both to youth in education and to workers. The question of the link, and not just solidarity, between the two is therefore immediate.

Finally, the fundamental difference is with the general context and in particular with the

way unemployment weighs on things. In 1968, the unemployed were counted in tens of thousands in a period of great expansion, so students had no worries about the future.

Today six million people are either without work or casually employed, and over the past few years we have experienced a series of social defeats, despite the big movements of 1995 over public services, and of 2003 over pensions. So the balance of forces that the present movement has intervened in is, at the outset, very unfavourable.

Socialist Worker: *In 1968, and again in 1986, the student movement was followed by strikes. What is the relationship between the present mobilisations and the labour movement?*

Daniel Bensaïd: The link is natural, and the labour movement is less closed, or even hostile, than it was towards students in 1968.

At the time this hostility, or wariness, was fostered in particular by the workerist demagoguery of the Communist Party and of the CGT trade union federation, which controlled the big bastions of the labour movement.

Today relations are not so closed. On the one hand the ability of the bureaucratic machines to control things has been considerably weakened. On the other the overall expansion of secondary and higher education means it is no longer possible to portray students as an exclusively middle class layer.

But the trade union bureaucracy continues to act as a brake, as we can see from their slowness to call a general strike. After the big demonstrations of 18 March this would be the only way to take things to another level and, perhaps, make the government give way.

Socialist Worker: *CGT union leader Bernard Thibault has raised the prospect of a general*

strike against the CPE. What role are the major trade union confederations - the CGT, Force Ouvrière and the CFDT - playing in the movement?

Daniel Bensaïd: All the unions have declared themselves against the CPE and have called for days of action. But on 7 March only Force Ouvrière gave official notice of strike action, thus allowing its members to take part. The CFDT is dragging its feet.

And the CGT did not do all it could have done on 18 March to mobilise beyond its apparatus (which is considerable). Up to now, apart from the FSU teachers’ federation, which is putting forward a clear proposal for strike action, it seems that the confederations are preparing for another mobilisation some way off – on 28 or 30 March – which for us is much too late.

This runs the risk of letting the movement degenerate, and brings back bad memories of the kind of bureaucratic stalling that characterised the manoeuvres which exhausted the 2003 movement against pension reform.

Socialist Worker: *Political organisations seem to have a low profile in the student movement. How do we explain this?*

Daniel Bensaïd: The political organisations are weak among students. The three most visible forces are a Socialist current (identifying with Socialist Party MP Henri Emmanuelli) which controls the UNEF students’ union, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), and a nebulous anarchist grouping.

The Communist Party backs the movement, but it is very weak among students. The majority within the Socialist Party would like to benefit from the way the government has been discredited, with a presidential election due in 2007.

At the same time it is afraid that if the movement becomes too strong it will deepen the party's contradictions and benefit, if only at the margins, the radical anti-neoliberal left. The LCR's Olivier Besancenot is the only prominent political figure who is both young and popular in the movement.

Socialist Worker: *A victory against the CPE will make it difficult for the government to pursue neo-liberal policies. Will it also make it easier for the left to unite against neo-liberalism?*

Daniel Bensaïd: This victory has not been won yet. There is a lot to be played for in the week ahead. A victory would be the first defeat inflicted by the street against the neo-liberal counter reforms for many years.

But that alone will not be enough to overturn the balance of forces and, above all, to give the social movement a credible means of political expression, because it will do little to modify the political balance of forces.

It is likely that the Socialist Party would be able to channel hopes into a change of government perceived as a lesser evil – even if Ségolène Royale, one of its leading candidates, is already singing the praises of Tony Blair.

The crucial question remains continued identification with the themes of the campaign for a left “no” in the referendum on the European Union constitution, and that of a future governmental alliance.

The most probable outcome is that former members of ex-prime minister Lionel Jospin's

coalition will become satellites of the Socialist Party in a scenario à la Romano Prodi (in Italy, where sections of the left have formed an electoral alliance with mainstream social democracy). The question of a genuine anti-capitalist alternative therefore remains the key issue.

This article was first published in *Socialist Worker* (UK) then by *International Viewpoint*. Interview by Jim Wolfreys.

Daniel Bensaïd is one of France's most prominent Marxist philosophers and has written extensively. He is a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).
March 2006