Beat: Politics

UNDER THE COBBLESTONES, ANGER: FRANCE'S STUDENT MOVEMENT REFUSES TO FADE

BASTILLE TAGUED WITH MAI 68 SLOGANS

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USPA NEWS - From the Bastille to Nantes, high-school protests are spreading into universities and moving towards a broader convergence of struggles ahead of 13 and 17 October. France's high-school movement is far from running out of breath. If anything, it is changing shape, spilling beyond school gates and moving towards a wider convergence of struggles. After another round of blockades and demonstrations, student and education unions have called for a nationwide day of strikes and protests on Tuesday, 13 October. Four days later, on Saturday, 17 October, a separate and still unpredictable mobilisation is expected under the revived banner of the Yellow Vests, fuelled by rising petrol prices and the cost-of-living crisis.

What began in mid-September as a revolt over missing teachers, overcrowded classrooms and deteriorating school buildings has now reached universities and some of France's most prestigious institutions. Sciences Po Paris was blocked in solidarity with high-school students, while mobilisation also appeared at Jussieu, the École normale supérieure and campuses outside the capital. The movement is no longer merely demanding that individual schools reopen under better conditions.

FROM BASTILLE TO NATION, THE SYMBOLS OF REVOLT EVOKING 1789 REVOLUTION & MAI 68 SLOGANS
On Thursday, 8 October, 71,500 people demonstrated across France, including 24,500 in Paris, according to the Interior Ministry. Thousands of high-school and university students gathered at Place de la Bastille, where a largely energetic and musical protest deteriorated into clashes involving projectiles, police charges, tear gas and water cannon. After the square was cleared, smaller groups moved towards Place de la Nation, extending the confrontation through two of Paris's most politically charged landmarks.

The symbolism was impossible to miss. Bastille carries the memory of 1789; République and Nation embody the republican promise born from revolution. At the centre of the square, however, the July Column commemorates the Revolution of 1830. Its base was covered in hundreds of inscriptions calling for revolution, condemning police violence and demanding greater resources for public education.

Above the graffiti seemed to hover the familiar ghosts of May 1968: "Under the cobblestones, the beach" and "It is forbidden to forbid." Whether written on the monument itself or resurfacing in the political imagination surrounding the protests, those slogans connected the present anger with an older French mythology the belief that beneath the orderly surface of power, another country is always waiting to erupt.

Yet the comparison with May 1968 must not be overstated. Today's movement was not born from an abstract desire to overturn society. Its demands are immediate and concrete. Student organizations are seeking an emergency investment package of €10 billion to renovate dilapidated school buildings, recruit and replace more teachers and reduce overcrowding. They also want an end to selection through Parcoursup, the digital platform allocating students to higher-education programs, and less punishing, better-organised timetables.

The political turning point is the movement's expansion into higher education. By entering Sciences Po and other universities, the protest has crossed the boundary between school grievance and generational mobilisation. What was a succession of local blockades is becoming a wider alliance of high-school students, university students, teachers and public-education unions. Tuesday, 13 October, will determine whether this remains an education-centred revolt or becomes the first stage of a broader social confrontation.

IN NANTES, CONVERGENCE TURNS INTO DESTRUCTION OF A UNIVERSITY FULLY VANDALISED

The expansion of the movement has also produced its darkest images. At Nantes University, the Censive building on the Tertre campus was occupied from Wednesday, 7 October, following a general assembly held in support of the high-school mobilisation. Police evacuated the site early on Saturday, 10 October, after four days of occupation. The operation ended without major clashes, and four people were arrested.

What university staff discovered inside was devastating: computers and other equipment destroyed, a piano broken, walls covered in graffiti and trade-union offices vandalised. University president Carine Bernault said she was “disgusted” and described the building as having been “totally ransacked,” while carefully distinguishing those responsible for the destruction from the sincere high-school and university students taking part in the wider movement.

The Nantes destruction exposes the central fragility of any protest seeking to unite different struggles. How can legitimate anger expand without surrendering its meaning to groups interested primarily in confrontation and damage? Violence may make a crisis visible, but it can also devour its political message, handing the government pictures of chaos while silencing the thousands of young people asking for something as basic as a teacher in every classroom and a school building fit for education.

The national figures show how dangerous the spiral has become. More than 6,800 people have been placed in police custody since mid-September, 86% of them minors, while 24 investigations have been referred to the IGPN, France’s police-oversight body. Official figures also record more than 200 injured high-school and university students and more than 800 injured police officers and gendarmes. These numbers do not distribute responsibility equally, but they reveal how rapidly an educational crisis has turned into an alarming arithmetic of injured bodies, arrests and investigations.

THE GOVERNMENT ACTS, AFTER THE FIRE

Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu has tried to balance uncompromising language on violence with an appeal for dialogue. Before the National Assembly, he condemned the “ultra-violence” surrounding some protests and declared that “burning down a high school does not improve the physical condition of high schools” and that “lynching a teacher does not improve the teacher replacement rate.” He also accused La France Insoumise of pursuing a political strategy intended to “create chaos in the country” before the presidential election.

But the Prime Minister has also acknowledged that the government has a duty to listen. “High-school students are demonstrating; that is their right, including when they are protesting against the government,” he said. Lecornu announced a temporary suspension of classes to create a “time for internal democracy,” while the government consultation platform received more than 40,000 contributions from students.

He has launched five policy projects covering teacher replacements, school buildings, timetables, Parcoursup and the representation of students within school democracy. Initial decisions are expected by the end of October. On policing, however, he has remained firm: “The security forces have not been instructed to confront high-school students,” he insisted, promising that serious injuries would be transparently investigated.

Education Minister Edouard Geffray has meanwhile announced the emergency deployment of 3,000 replacement teachers to the schools experiencing the most serious shortages. A new mapping system identified 114 high schools in a “red” critical category and another 400 in “orange.” Edouard Geffray also acknowledged “an influx of teacher absences in September and October” and said rectors would be allowed to recruit beyond their previous limits.

However, these are not 3,000 newly recruited teachers. Many are already employed as replacement teachers but had not yet been assigned where they were most needed. Their urgent mobilisation raises an uncomfortable question: why did it take several weeks of blockades, thousands of detentions, damaged schools and mounting public anger to locate and deploy teachers who were already available?

The announcement may bring relief to some schools, but it also gives the impression of a late response extracted by pressure from the

streets. Artificial intelligence may help the ministry map shortages more efficiently; it cannot explain why those shortages were allowed to deepen until pupils themselves felt compelled to raise the alarm.

Interior Minister Laurent Nunez has also altered the policing doctrine by suspending the use of stun grenades during the high-school protests. The decision followed the grave injury of a 15-year-old boy whose hand was torn off in Lens. “I am suspending their use for the high-school movement until full light has been shed on what happened in this case,” Nunez said.

He also delivered the starkest sentence of this crisis: “No one should lose a hand at a demonstration.”

The suspension concerns this specific category of stun grenade and does not amount to a withdrawal of all crowd-control weapons. Tear gas, water cannon and other authorised intermediate weapons remain available to police. The IGPN investigation must determine the precise circumstances of the Lens incident and whether the weapon was used in accordance with regulations.

A COUNTRY BOILING OVER WAITING FOR 13 AND 17 OCTOBER

Tuesday, 13 October, will test whether high-school students, university students and education workers can turn a moment of agitation into a lasting political movement without allowing violence to confiscate their demands. The mobilisation has already shown that it can survive government appeals for calm and extend beyond the schools where it began.

Four days later, the announced return of the Yellow Vests could introduce another current of anger: fuel prices, declining purchasing power and the sense that working people have once again been abandoned. Calls for action on 17 October are circulating widely online, but their real strength remains difficult to assess because the mobilisation is decentralised and lacks a clearly identified national leadership.

France is therefore entering a decisive week. From Bastille to Nation, from school gates to university campuses, a generation is searching for the road that leads from anger to political force. The government is finally responding, but only after classrooms were closed, streets filled with tear gas and a 15-year-old lost his hand.

Beneath the cobblestones, there may still be a beach. But unless dialogue replaces escalation, the stones could end up burying the very demands this movement began by defending: the right to learn, to be heard and to enter the future with something more than an algorithm and an absent teacher.

DISCLAIMER

This article is based on official government statements, publicly available figures, reporting by French and international media, and field observations concerning the high-school and university mobilisation. Arrest, injury and damage assessments from the youngsters and the policemen, may continue to evolve. Judicial and administrative investigations into alleged police violence and the serious injury in Lens remain ongoing. References to May 1968 are used as historical and political interpretation and do not imply that the present movement is identical in scale, structure or ideology.

SOURCES

French Ministry of the Interior: mobilisation figures, policing measures, arrests and injuries.

French Ministry of National Education: affected schools, teacher shortages and deployment of replacement staff.

Prime Minister’s Office and National Assembly: statements by Sebastien Lecornu and the government’s five education projects.

IGPN and Béthune Public Prosecutor’s Office: investigations into police interventions and the serious injury in Lens.

Nantes University and Loire-Atlantique authorities: occupation, evacuation and damage to the Censive building.

Reporting by Le Monde, Franceinfo, France 3 Régions, TF1 Info, France 24, RTL, BFMTV, La Croix, Le Figaro, Les Echos, AFP and

regional French media.

Public reporting on the 13 October education mobilisation and the 17 October Yellow Vest calls.

Field notes and visual observations gathered during the French high-school and university movement of September, October 2026.

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UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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