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A generation takes notes

France's school crisis exposes a deeper failure: a state struggling to deliver equality but quick to enforce order

A classroom with no teacher is a political lesson. And that lesson is now being learned across France. On 21 September, at the Saint-Exupéry high school in Créteil, in the Paris suburbs, students joined their teachers in protest over vacant posts and shortages of staff and resources.

The mobilisation spread rapidly: by 30 September, 356 high schools were affected across the country. Students have protested against overcrowded classes, deteriorating buildings, staff shortages, exhausting timetables and an admissions system that many experience as a machine sorting their futures without offering meaningful opportunity. Teachers, parents and university students have joined them.

The protests have already produced the familiar images of French unrest, from barricades and tear gas to police lines and arrests. Yet reading this movement through the old template of French rebellion would obscure what is happening. This is not the ghost of May 1968 returning in teenage form. But it is clearly a diagnosis of France in 2026.

A question of political legitimacy

Its social geography tells part of the story. The movement emerged from the banlieues, where the republic's promise of equality has long been tested against the hard geography of social class. France has traditionally presented public education as one of the institutions through which republican universalism becomes real. A child may be born into inequality, but the school is supposed to loosen the grip of origin on destiny.

For many young people, that promise now rings hollow.

The immediate anger over vacant posts was sharpened by the 2026 budget, which removed 3 256 existing teaching posts from public schools, even as the reform of teacher training created roughly 8 000 trainee posts.

French public secondary schools serve around 250 000 more students than they did in 2008, yet employ fewer teachers. Large classes have become routine, while shortages are especially severe in the poorer suburbs, where a union survey found that two-thirds of schools in Seine-Saint-Denis had unfilled teaching posts.

These are administrative failures, but, more critically, they shape how young people understand their position in society. Inequality becomes visible and concrete in the absent teacher, the overcrowded classroom, the leaking roof and the anxiety of wondering whether one's postcode has already narrowed one's future.

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This is where an education crisis turns into a crisis of political legitimacy. The French state now appears to many students in two sharply different forms. Inside the school gates, it can look exhausted, unable to fill posts, repair buildings or guarantee comparable conditions across neighbourhoods. Once anger crosses those gates and reaches the street, however, the same state can be remarkably energetic. Police deployments, more than 5 000 arrests by 5 October, tear gas and crowd-control weapons demonstrate the capacities of a state that suddenly seems far less constrained.

A government can become less capable of providing security in its social sense while remaining highly capable of enforcing order in its coercive sense. Young citizens notice this contradiction. Many are experiencing it before they have voted, paid taxes or entered the labour market. Their first sustained encounter with politics may therefore come through a peculiar lesson. And in that lesson, they learn bitterly that the state which struggles to provide resources for its students can still find considerable strength to police them.

That experience is political socialisation. A generation does not learn democracy only from civics classes; young people also experience democracy through their encounters with institutions. When schools work, rights are respected, and mobility appears possible, democratic promises acquire substance. When public institutions retreat while coercive institutions advance, however, another lesson is learned. The state assumes a selective presence: distant when resources are requested, immediately visible when obedience is demanded.

A warning sign

France should therefore concern the rest of Europe. Across the continent, governments face fiscal pressure, ageing public infrastructure, teacher shortages, housing crises and growing demands on welfare systems. Young Europeans are reaching adulthood after the financial crisis, the pandemic, war on the continent, inflation and years of being told that public budgets leave little room for ambition. They are asked again and again to moderate their expectations while wealth, property and opportunity remain stubbornly unequal.

Democracies can survive protest. They need it. Yet the greater danger comes when young people stop believing that institutional politics can alter the conditions of their lives. Then the street becomes more than a place of protest. It hosts those young people as another classroom of citizenship, one whose lessons and methods they determine for themselves.

French authorities therefore face a choice larger than reopening blockaded schools or restoring public order. Treating the movement chiefly as a security problem would deepen the distrust that brought young people onto the streets. The government must address teacher recruitment, deteriorating infrastructure, unequal educational provision and the pressures surrounding access to higher education. But money alone cannot repair political confidence. Students also need evidence that raising their voices produces something other than surveillance, arrest or dismissal.

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Europe's social contract has always rested on more than elections. It contains an implicit bargain. Citizens accept the authority of democratic institutions because those institutions offer a credible path towards security, human dignity and societal advancement. Public education occupies a special place in that bargain because it converts the abstract language of equality into an everyday experience.

When schools are unable to perform that role, the consequences travel far beyond their walls. The teenagers demonstrating across France are asking for teachers, smaller classes, functioning buildings and better futures. Beneath those demands lies a deeper question about citizenship itself: does the republic still intend to honour its side of that bargain by making equality real in the lives of those growing up within it?

Europe should listen to France's students too. Social contracts seldom collapse all at once. They erode when legitimate demands go unanswered, until a generation learns, disappointingly and on the streets, that the state can be absent when support is needed and overwhelmingly present when social dissent begins.

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