Appeal on Behalf of Working-Class Youth in France

written by French Labor Unions | July 3, 2023

The tragic death of Nahel in Nanterre highlighted the tensions that are still very high in France's working-class neighborhoods, which go beyond police violence and are linked to the injustices and discrimination experienced on a daily basis. They require a short- and long-term political response.

As signatories of this letter, we are convinced that the future of society depends on the place it manages to give to all young people. We demand an ambitious plan that will enable us to find a way out of a situation that past and present governments have helped to create and that they have allowed to degenerate.

A large proportion of young people are subjected to racism on a daily basis, victims of prejudice, discrimination and violence. A general ideological climate stigmatizes Muslims in particular, or those perceived to be Muslims, and young people in particular.

This situation cannot continue. In working-class neighborhoods in particular, relations between the police and the population, particularly young people, are conflictual and discriminatory. It has been proven, for example, that young men perceived as Arab or black are twenty times more likely to be stopped by the police than others. We call for the repeal of the Police Use of Firearms (Relaxation) Act of 2017. We call for an end to the sole repressive response by the police in neighborhoods. We are also in favor of creating a department dedicated to discrimination affecting young people within the administrative authority chaired by the Human Rights Defender.

We call for the creation of an independent monitoring body to replace the Inspectorate General of the National Police (IGPN), and we support the creation and promotion of an online platform for posting images and videos of potential police violence. We call for the return of specialized prevention services, with the mass recruitment of street violence prevention educators who are qualified and trained to prevent conflicts between young people and the rest of the population and to provide educational support.

The social relegation of working-class youth is the result of policies that have all too often forgotten

young people and have all too often contributed to their marginalization. Public services, and schools in particular, have suffered years of job cuts that have also affected the most disadvantaged schools. Behind the supposedly proactive rhetoric, priority education has been dismantled in high schools. In lower secondary schools, it has been diluted by a series of measures in regional academic policies that have undermined the initial ambition of priority education. The economic crisis has continued to deepen social inequalities in the country, multiplying the number of schools that could fall under the social criteria of priority education. Work on revising and expanding the priority education map has not even begun.

Other public services have also disappeared from working-class neighborhoods, fueling a legitimate feeling of abandonment. How can we believe in equality when some neighborhoods are left without public services, when they remain isolated because of a lack of accessible transport, doctors and local hospitals, when housing in these neighborhoods is in a serious state of disrepair, accentuating the feeling of relegation, and when access to employment is more difficult for young people in these neighborhoods, as numerous studies have shown? These young people find themselves under social and geographical house arrest. It's a deadly renunciation for democracy. How can we fail to see that, by assigning young people to their social origins and locking these working-class young people into pre-determined destinies, we are creating a bitter and resentful break with the promises of the republican model?

Working-class neighborhoods also need public services that create social links, solidarity, proximity, and equality. They are the common denominator in a society, and more particularly in neighborhoods that no longer have one. The hope of a better future for working-class youth depends on a major investment plan for schools, transport, housing and employment.

Over the last few years, community associations have all suffered cuts in funding and increasingly tight controls under the pretext of respecting republican principles.

The necessary resources must be allocated to programs to prevent and combat discrimination in schools, where trained staff are assigned to support and guide pupils who are victims of discrimination. In addition, school curricula need to be evaluated and reviewed to ensure that they take satisfactory account of the history, studies and concepts associated with slavery, colonization, racism, the oppression of women and sexual minorities and the various related struggles for equality. A school that promotes the equal dignity of all its pupils, who are future citizens, is constantly concerned to ensure that its teaching content includes no omissions or blind spots on these issues and transmits knowledge that is useful for understanding the origins and mechanisms of discrimination in order to contribute effectively to their disappearance in the longer term.

First signers: Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), Fédération Syndicale Unitaire (FSU), Union Syndicale Solidaire (USS), Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne (ATTAC). [These are the largest labor federations and a social movement.]