Beat: Politics

WHEN A CLASSROOM CRISIS BECAME A CAMPAIGN ISSUE: POLITICAL FRANCE DIVIDES

OVER STUDENT PROTESTS & POLICE RESPONSE

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USPA NEWS - France's high-school protest movement began with teachers sounding the alarm about staff shortages, overcrowded classrooms and deteriorating learning conditions. It did not remain at the school gates. As student blockades spread from CrEteil to towns and cities across the country, the conflict over education became a national political and public-order crisis. By 5 October, between 400 and 500 schools were expected to be fully or partly closed, while the Education Ministry said 24 establishments had been burned or ransacked and 78 education staff members injured since the start of the unrest.

The central question has therefore changed. It is no longer only whether pupils have enough teachers, safe buildings and uninterrupted lessons. It is also whether their original demands can survive a climate of confrontations, political division and the alleged takeover of some gatherings by violent individuals. The distinction must remain clear: pupils calling for a functioning school system are not interchangeable with those responsible for fires, damage or assaults.

For many young people, however, the message remains unchanged: they want schools that work and a future they can believe in. Yet, in the tense run-up to the 2027 presidential election, their mobilisation has become an object of political conflict. Blocked entrances, police deployments and demonstrations have been read through sharply different narratives as a spontaneous youth revolt, a crisis of public education, a breakdown in public order, or an opportunity for political forces to advance their own agenda.

For many pupils, the message remained unchanged: they wanted workable schools and a credible future. But in the charged atmosphere preceding the 2027 presidential election, their mobilisation became an object of political competition. Public figures interpreted the same images blocked entrances, police deployments and young demonstrators through sharply opposing narratives.

JEAN LUC MELENCHON, LEFTIST LEADER: SUPPORT FOR YOUTH, A CALL FOR NON-VIOLENCE
Jean-Luc Melenchon and his party, La France Insoumise, publicly supported the high-school students. LFI representatives attended demonstrations in their constituencies, saying they were there to stand with young people and to help protect minors during tense encounters with police. Jean-Luc Melenchon also said that the movement should use non-violent methods, while accusing the government of responding with excessive repression.

This position placed LFI at the heart of the crisis. Supporters saw the party's presence as solidarity with pupils whose educational grievances had been ignored. Opponents saw it as an attempt to turn youth frustration into electoral momentum. The dispute was no longer simply over what was happening outside schools; it was about the legitimacy of adults and elected officials entering a youth-led movement.

THE GOVERNMENT: CALM, SECURITY AND RESPONSIBILITY
President Emmanuel Macron said he understood young people's anxiety and anger, but stressed that no grievance or fear could justify violence. The government's message combined recognition of educational concerns with a firm insistence on protecting schools, staff, students and local residents.

Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu convened an emergency meeting and cancelled planned ministerial travel as the demonstrations spread. He accused LFI politicians of escalating tensions for partisan purposes, arguing that elected representatives have a duty to protect young people and call for calm.

The government and Education Minister Edouard Geffray also argued that the movement had changed in nature as violence emerged at some locations. They alleged that radical groups had taken advantage of the mobilisation. This remains the government's assessment and must be reported as such; it is not proof that the students who began the protests were responsible for the later acts

of violence.

MARINE LE PEN, FAR RIGHT LEADER: A HARDER POLITICAL ATTACK
Marine Le Pen, the National Rally figure expected to play a major role in the 2027 presidential race, used the unrest to launch a direct attack on LFI. She argued that the crisis had moved beyond student protest and alleged that political actors on the left bore serious responsibility for the violence.

Her intervention sharpened the political divide. Where LFI described a movement rooted in neglected schools and a forceful police response, Le Pen described a public-order crisis amplified by the far left. The gap between those interpretations was immense — and it left the students' original demands at risk of being drowned out by competing campaign messages.

A "SPONTANEOUS" MOVEMENT AT RISK OF LOSING ITS VOICE
The numbers reflected the scale of the pressure. More than 1,000 lycées were reported to have been affected by demonstrations at one point, while the Interior Ministry counted hundreds of blockades. As tensions increased, pupils, parents and teachers faced a difficult reality: a movement intended to defend education was beginning to disrupt education on a national level.

Political involvement can give a movement visibility, access to institutions and pressure for action. It can also turn students into symbols in a conflict controlled by adults. This was the danger confronting the mobilisation: every party wanted to define what the young people represented, but far fewer public figures were listening to what they had actually asked for at the beginning, enough teachers, smaller classes, safe schools and respect for their future

THE ARGUMENT CHANGED
By the end of this second phase, France was no longer debating only the state of its schools. It was debating police authority, political responsibility, the limits of protest and the approaching presidential campaign.

The next stage would be more alarming. With blockades spreading, school closures multiplying and confrontations becoming more frequent, the crisis was about to become national in scale and far more costly for students, staff and communities.

By the end of this second stage, the dispute had entered a new and dangerous terrain. It was no longer only about whether schools had enough teachers or whether pupils could learn in dignified conditions. It had become a struggle over authority, policing, youth anger and the 2027 presidential campaign.

Yet a vital distinction must remain: teachers and pupils who mobilised for education are not interchangeable with those who set fires, attack people or damage property. Political leaders may compete to define the crisis, but the first message from Créteil remains unchanged young people want schools that work. The next article follows the point at which that message began to be overwhelmed by nationwide closures, escalating violence and a growing sense of emergency. To be continued

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