

**Christopher Newfield:** *You think the strikes lost?*

**Isabelle Bruno:** *Completely. We lost on all fronts. The unions don't want us to say this. They point out that it's not very motivating to say this. But I think it is more productive to admit we lost a battle in order to carry on the war.*

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The political life of the French university is punctuated by occasional elections to representative bodies whose functions have never been explained to me. In the weeks before the election, every voting member of the university community receives an envelope containing election ballots, which are the lists of candidates -- *titulaires* and *suppléants* (alternates) -- presented by the contending unions, as well as the *professions de foi* which explain what each list stands for. As far as I can tell, no provision is made for splitting one's vote among the different lists<sup>1</sup>; the first step of the accompanying instructions is to place the ballot inside the small envelope, taking care to avoid marks that might compromise the elector's anonymity. So for example, a voter who decided to make a point in this month's election to the CTPU<sup>2</sup> by voting only for women (4-7 out of 15, depending on the list) or for candidates with Arabic surnames (4 altogether among the 90 candidates on the six lists) would have no way of doing so.

This means that in practice one votes not for a collection of individual candidates but rather for a *profession de foi*. I suspect that just about everyone who takes the trouble to vote (to place the folded ballot inside the small envelope, to place the latter inside the big postage-paid envelope, and to slip the whole package into a mailbox) is actually voting on grounds of organizational loyalty and the *profession de foi* is a mere formality. When reading these platforms in the past I was mainly struck by the imbalance between guiding principles, the "foi" that candidates promise will motivate their action in the body in question, and concrete achievements by which one can evaluate their union's representatives past work. Briefly, the *profession* tended to be long on *foi* and short on results. This helps to explain why these periodic elections generate so little excitement, at least among the colleagues I know: the lists make promises that everyone knows they will be unable to carry out, because that is how it has always been.

A year after an unprecedented strike mobilization paralyzed universities all over France for months, with no consequences worth mentioning as far as government policy was concerned, the CTPU was inevitably an opportunity for the unions,

<sup>1</sup> The FERC-Sup CGT flyer explains that this is indeed the case: "élection à la proportionnelle sans panache".

<sup>2</sup> Comité Technique Paritaire des personnels enseignants titulaires et stagiaires de statut Universitaire.

overwhelmingly if ineffectually opposed to the government's "reform" scheme, to review the main points of contention. In this respect the FERC-Sup CGT flyer fit the classic pattern. The first side of the one-sheet *profession de foi* was covered with small print outlining the stakes of the "reform" of the past few years and the dangers they represent for the profession, concluding:

**La fonction Publique qui garantit l'égalité et les droits des fonctionnaires et des usagers sur l'ensemble du territoire est en péril.**

The second page detailed four specific areas where the "reform" represents a regression compared to the current state of affairs, concluding in each case with a concise statement of the union's position, for example

*La FERC-Sup CGT refuse l'assujettissement du contenu des formations aux stratégies industrielles et commerciales.*

No space is left to remind voters of the union's successful past actions in defense of its principles. This is not because these successes are so well-known that reminders are superfluous, but rather because there is nothing of which to be reminded. This is hardly the fault of the FERC-Sup CGT. The point is that whatever is discussed at the meetings of the CTPU has little or no bearing on the course of university "reform." I sincerely wish that my university colleagues would use the occasion of the election to make just this point, but for some reason they are unable to bring themselves to do so.

By limiting itself to restatements of general principles, the FERC-Sup CGT was at least honest enough not to make exaggerated claims for its past actions. In a more militant rhetorical register, the SNPRES-FO displayed similar modesty, listing six different occasions on which "FO a toujours combattu" this or that by "votant CONTRE"; not a word suggests that this consistent combativeness had any effect whatsoever on government plans. No, that's a little unfair: on the front page of its flyer SNPRES-FO does cite three instances in which their opposition to aspects of the "reform" was followed by concessions on the part of the ministry. But they do not attempt to argue that the opposition by their representatives had a causal connection to the subsequent ministerial decisions, only that the one preceded the other in time.

The other four lists are more explicit in their claims of agency. SUP Recherche are "Responsables et fiers de notre action" in obtaining technical amendements<sup>3</sup> to the "reform" project. What other trade union, they ask, can take credit for so many "constructive advances?" Well, SUP Recherche lists ten specific points, but by "action and negotiation" SGEN-CFDT "obtained" eleven! — and one can't help but notice an overlap between the two lists. The "opiniâtreté" of AUTONOMESUP, meanwhile, made it possible to find "un point d'équilibre entre l'autonomie des

<sup>3</sup> Most of them are really too technical to mention here. The most apparently substantial is the need to obtain the written agreement of a faculty member to any "modulation" in teaching time. As many of my colleagues pointed out during the endless weekly strike meetings, once the right of "modulation" has been acknowledged, the university authorities — meaning the president, in practice — have no shortage of means of pressure designed to convince the recalcitrant to provide written agreement to an increase in teaching load.

universités et le statut national des universitaires. Finally, SNESUP, "l'organisation syndicale la plus représentative au CPTU," precedes a full page of proposals that the CPTU has no power to implement with a list of three recent "successes" including "an improvement of the modalities of reclassification at the moment of hiring faculty."

What all these "successes" and "advances" have in common is that they can be cited to prove that the implementation of the "reform" would have been much worse were it not for the persistence and "opinionatedness" of the union representatives to the CTPU. But even a casual observer understands that a government sufficiently determined in its "reform" plans to be willing to provoke a four-month paralyzing strike is able to distinguish between core objectives and minor details. Without exception, the list of "successes" claimed by the unions represent mere cosmetic modifications that left the core of the "reform" untouched.

This outcome is all the more depressing when compared with the scope of the strike movement, really unlike anything seen in France since the legendary strikes of 1968. For once it was possible for once to get beyond sterile formulas and examine the gap between French universities' ambitions and their material circumstances. For once it was commonplace to understand government policy as a reflection of an international strategy, articulated with special clarity at the level of the European Union; the inevitable consequence of this understanding is the realization that the policy can only be durably countered through Europe-wide coordination. Had the unions been honestly capable of evaluating the balance of forces, they might have chosen an alternative to a strategy that could only lead to total defeat. On some campuses, for example, the local balance of forces must certainly have been in the strike's favor; an imaginative local leadership might have made use of the opportunity to take responsibility for local "autonomy" and to make use of the increased local powers to implement the vision of the universities that, after the defeat of the strike, exist merely as so many dead letters in the *professions de foi*. At the very least the unions and local strike leadership have the duty to analyze frankly how such a massive mobilization could rise and fizzle out with so little to show for it. Instead, by maintaining the fiction that the union representatives to the CTPU and other elective bodies are *partenaires sociaux* whose opinions really matter in framing policy, the *professions de foi* can only be read as an inadvertent confession of the failure of the chosen strategy. For the academics who will be forced to bear the consequences of this failure, the most rational reactions are disillusionment and cynicism.