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# French Students and Workers Strike Against Sarkozy's Austerity Policies, 2009

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) student participants](#) [1]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [2]

## Timing

January

2009

to:

March

2009

## Location and Goals

Country:

France

Location City/State/Province:

Paris

Location Description:

Demonstrations occurred in over 200 cities around the country, but the Paris demonstrations were the largest

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Raise the minimum wage, prevent cuts in public sector jobs and social services

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 051. Walk-outs
- 062. Student strike>included blockades on campuses
- 117. General strike
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 051. Walk-outs
- 062. Student strike
- 117. General strike
- 162. Sit-in

Segment Length:

8 days

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- College students
- High School Students
- fast food workers
- private sector workers
- public sector workers
- transportation workers
- unions

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

French Trade Union Federations (particularly the CGT and Force Ouvrière), National Union of French Students

Involvement of social elites:

Members of Sarkozy's government, including the president of Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement majority in parliament, Jean-François Copé, spoke out in support of the strikes.

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- French Trade Union Federations
- National Union of French Students
- Unemployed youth

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

The trade unions only participated in the general strikes, but continued to organize and push against Sarkozy's policies

Segment Length:

8 days

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

President Sarkozy's Government

Campaigner violence:

The demonstrations were almost completely peaceful. After the demonstrations ended later in the evening approximately 100 Paris youth clashed with police at Place de l'Opéra. Some threw bottles at police and were arrested.

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Total points:

6 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Sarkozy made some minor concessions, but dissent for Sarkozy's policies increased following the strikes, even within his party.

The French General Strikes in 2009 came during the first quarter of the country's recession and was the first general strike in an industrialized nation since the global financial crisis in 2007 and 2008. Economic forecasts predicted that the economy would contract by 2 percent in 2009 and that unemployment would reach 10 percent by 2010. In response to these poor economic predictions, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a \$34 billion stimulus plan in December, which included capital infusions to banks of more than \$11 billion. However, Sarkozy simultaneously implemented austerity measures to reduce government spending by reducing the number of public sector jobs, especially in the post-secondary schooling. Facing falling wages and high unemployment, many middle class people across the country were angered by Sarkozy's cuts and the lack of support for consumers and workers. In particular, young people were frustrated by the combination of high

youth unemployment and cuts in funding to public primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools.

The strike also came after months of tension around Sarkozy's proposed austerity measures. High school students staged sit-ins, strikes, and other demonstrations in protest of proposed cuts in education. A radical union organized a strike that successfully shut down Paris's second largest railway station and left hundreds of thousands of commuters stranded. In an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to quell this unrest, Sarkozy made 17 speeches around the country in under a month.

As a result of Sarkozy's firm stance on austerity measures, eight major trade union federations came together to plan a general strike to call on Sarkozy to focus his stimulus less on companies and more on workers' job-protection and purchasing power. The strike began on 26 January 2009 with a strike by university lecturers and researchers over higher education reform.

On 29 January, the unions held a one-day general strike, calling on workers to join protest demonstrations instead of attending work. Participant estimates varied dramatically. Leading unions, CGT and Force Ouvrière, claimed that approximately 2.5 million people demonstrated across the country, including over 300,000 in Paris. Government estimates were significantly lower. The Interior Ministry estimated that only 1.1 million marched nationwide.

Unions targeted a wide range of businesses and institutions in both the private and public sectors. Participants included hospitals and national TV and radio stations workers, supermarkets and other retail employees, postal workers, bank clerks, tax inspectors, lawyers, magistrates, professors, and even staff from the company that operates the French stock exchange. More than 30 percent of public services workers, nearly half of rail and Paris metro workers, nearly half of primary teachers, and a third of secondary teachers joined the strike.

The strikes impacted the entire economy, but did not bring transportation to a halt. It closed schools, forced radio stations to play music on a loop, hindered the full operation of some utilities. Strikes by train drivers, airport staff, helicopter pilots, and car workers disrupted, but did not generally shut down transportation. The strike caused delays and cancellations at Paris's airports, forced transit companies to scale back bus, train, and subways service. However, unlike previous strikes that virtually shut down transportation in Paris and other cities, the January general strike did not cause a significant disruption. Lower than expected participation may have been due to a new law mandating a minimum level of transit service.

The demonstrations were almost completely peaceful. After the demonstrations ended later in the evening on 29 January, over 100 Paris youth clashed with police at Place de l'Opéra. Some threw bottles at police and police arrested nearly 100 youth.

Despite some disruption, the public strongly supported the strike. According to a CSA-Opinion poll for the *Le Parisien* newspaper, 69% of French citizens supported the strike. Following the strike, President Sarkozy agreed to meet with union leaders in February to discuss his stimulus and reform plans. Sarkozy also added \$3.2 billion to his stimulus plan. This expansion extended unemployment benefits, gave tax breaks for the poor, and offered a one-time payment of \$650 to unemployed youths who had been unemployed for too long to qualify for unemployment anymore. Moreover, the strike supported growing opposition to Sarkozy's austerity both from left-leaning parties like the Socialist Party, and from within his own conservative majority.

While the general strike was one day, university students and faculty across the country organized demonstrations, blockades, and strikes over the coming months. By 11 March, strikes affected 70 universities, and 25 universities were dealing with blockades.

Facing continued resistance from Sarkozy's government, demonstrations continued. The unions organized another general strike on 19 March 2009. They specifically called on Sarkozy to provide greater stimulus assistance to workers, end cuts of public sector jobs, end tax breaks for businesses and the wealthy. This strike

was even larger than the January strike.

Again, the government and unions disagreed on the estimated number of participants. Unions estimated that 3 million people participated nationwide, compared with 2.5 million in January. The police estimated that 1.2 million people participated. According to the Unions, over 300,000 people demonstrated in both Paris and Marseille. For the first time, the strike also included large numbers of retail and fast food workers calling on Sarkozy to increase the minimum wage, improve unemployment benefits, and expand employee protection against firings.

Despite more participants than in January, the strike actually caused less disruption than the January protest and Sarkozy did not make any direct concessions. However, support for March's strike was even higher with some polls placing support at nearly 80%. Following the strike, some even in Sarkozy's own government expressed support for the strike. The president of Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement majority in parliament, Jean-François Copé, described the protest as a "comprehensible" way of communicating "the main message of concern for [peoples'] jobs and purchasing power."

Though Sarkozy never made any direct concessions, the strikes likely contributed to disapproval of his leadership. In early 2009, his approval rating began to fall and by 2011 was at only 34 percent according to an Ifop poll, the lowest of any outgoing president in French history. In the 2012 elections, Sarkozy lost the 2012 election to François Hollande, the socialist candidate, who ran on an anti-austerity platform.

## Research Notes

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