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Hélène Buisson-Fenet

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DOCUMENT DE TRAVAIL - L.E.S.T.-UMR 6123
Université de Provence (U1) et Université de la Méditerranée (U2) - 35 avenue J. FERRY - 13626 AIX-EN-PROVENCE CEDEX
Tél. : Standard : 04.42.37.85.00 - Fax : 04.42. 26.79.37 Email lest@univ-aix.fr
http://lest.univ-aix.fr

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The "Allegre crisis" and the counter-liberalist turn of the teaching protest in France

Hélène Buisson Fenet

Among all the distinctive features one can read about French society, the high degree of conflictuality, and specifically the instability of professional relations, is one of the more acute. In his book *The French Passions*, the British historian Zeev Sternhell studies carefully this long-term conflictuality. Numerous comparative professional relations studies show, in the case of France, a high tension between wage-earners and employers, in particular in the public sector, and a very original use of srikes, to open a negociation and not to unblock the conflict.

Several theses have been proposed, and the aim of our paper is not to explain them in their range. Actually, we're going to consider in the field of this Conference the conflictualization of educational policies in France, through the recent educational crisis at the end of which the socialist Secretary of Education, Mr Claude Allègre (under the acronym of CA in this paper), was forces to resign.

In this paper, I will rather try to achieve a double aim :

- on one hand, I will clarify and comment the chronology of facts, which will allow to describe this conflictualization in the field of educational policies ;
- on the other hand, I will show how this conflict illustrates, in a peculiar professional field, both the crisis and the renewal of a neo-corporatist militancy, and what is the link with the shape of the recent contesting social movements.

Educational policies in France seem to be a highly ideologised decisionnal system. A.Prost, a French historian of education, notice that the French republican model is constituted both of the universal suffrage, and the free, laïc and compulsory primary school – and each school reform is perceived by most of teachers as a debate on this political model.

From this point of view, the educational crisis during Allègre Minister seems to be a climax.

At the end of 90's, the structure of political opportunities is caractérized by 2 elements :

1 - a high level of legitimacy after the parliamentary elections, which replaced a rightist government by a socialist one ;

2 – a high level of political skills in the field of Education ; Lionel Jospin, the new socialist Prime Minister, was secretary of Education in 1989, and at the time he promoted the Education Act which is still in force today.

In the same way, we can briefly describe the structure of educational opportunities by 2 other elements :

1 – The necessity to revitalize the process of reform, when the massification of the upper secondary school has come to a standstill, and when the rate of access to the academic Baccalaureat is stabilized at 62 % of an age-range.

2 – A primary development of pluralism on the teacher-unionis' scene, because the main monoipolistic teacher-unionist Federation (the FEN) was much less powerful since the break which happened in 1992 and led to the creation of a rival Federation (the FSU), and because the FSU itself, closed to the CGT and to the Communist Party tried to create a more constructive dynamic, and to jump into the bandwagoon of school reforms.

I – Recapitulating the fact : a press review from 3 daily newspapers

A first period goes from June 97 to July 98 and Liberation call it the New Deal of Education.

Claude Allègre, a well-known astro-physician who received the Crafoord Price (equivalent of the Nobel) in 1986, special councellor of Lionel Jospin when this was Secretary of Education, pdt of the expert group of the Socialist Party, is succeding François Bayrou and announce rapidly a wide sery of qualitative measures, such as :

- the developpement of information networks in school (1 million euros in 3 years)
- the creation of civic education courses to prevent violence
- the valorization of technology
- a wide reform of curriculum and the introduction of interdisciplinary programs for the upper secondary school

For this, he takes on 75 000 « aides-éducateurs », and the Education Nationale is becoming the first employer of the « subsidised employment for young people »" created by the Labor Office.

Concurrently, CA chooses to bump into the teachers, criticizing them for their absenteism, the time they spare in formation, the lack of collective work between them. He compares the educational system with the Russian Army, and refuses to encounter their principal trade-

unionist representative, the SNES, and declares : "co-management is over", "Take care of your wages, and let me do what I have to do with the educational policy."
This "parler-vrai" makes him popular, even for the teaching unions opposite to the conservatism of SNES, and the first day of test-strike organised by the SNES in october 97 failed.

A second stage goes from Nov 97 to August 98, from the consultation on the secondary-school to the Charter of the high school, from the Seine-Saint-Denis movement to the pupil demonstrations.
Considering the failure of the strike, and in accordance with the voluntee of modifying the curriculum in leaning on the scholar public's expectations, CA starts a consultation on the "High School for the next century" and command a report on the educational condition of the Seine St Denis, whose conclusions play a part in the strike of 60 lower and upper establishments in this district, the most socially unfair in the region of Ile de France.
On the field, the strike devides the teachers between those who want to sustain their pupils and accept the first measures of the government, and those who widely denounce a structural pauperization and connect with the associative movement to rise the bid.
When the movement decrease, in June 98, CA has renounced to redefine the teaching schedule (15 or 18 hours per week), but he persists in deconcentrating the system of teaching transfers. In september, another movement grows : pupils demonstrate for more rights, a lighter curriculum, open to renewed shapes of pedagogic relations.
While sustaining the movement, CA is urged by his political party to negociate with the SNES : he commits himself to do it through the press media, placing the SNES in a difficult situation, facing with its more radical militants.
But to the opinion of the progressist teacher unions like the SGEN, this strategy of "main tendue" endangers the necessary reform process.

A 3rd period goes from January 99 to June 99, remarkable for the increase of all grievances against CA.
First of all, the expression "culture commune" appearing in the second version of the Charter is tranlated by "lycée light" and "culture Mac Do", and a wide range of trade-unions, from the extreme-left wing Sud-Education to the very conservative SNALC, sign together a text on. "We've attained the breaking-down point" declares Mrs Vuaillat, the General Secretary of SNES.

Secondly, the payment of overtime is reduced in the Preparatory Schools for the French "Grandes Ecoles", and 2 lobbies are created to defend this very selective system they declare in danger.
If the 2d period showed a socialization of the conflict on the ground on inequalities (with the collective action of the Seine-St Denis), this 3d one tips to a "pedagogization" of the conflict on the ground of methods and curricula, "what pupils have to know, and how we must teach them." The web becomes a tool of mobilization, and you can sign petitions on line against School in a sale, you can spread proclamations against "light school", and so on.
The SNES itself seems unable to direct the grumblers, and after the postponement of a day-strike planned for September 24th, an independant Comittee for Allegre resignation is created.

The last stage, which goes from September 99 to March 2000, begins quietly with the introduction of civic education and interdiciplinary curricula. But in March, the first strike mobilizes the teachers in technology who refuse a reduced but more flexible duty, and who drag with them the academic education teachers in upper secondary schools who don't want a reform of the Baccalauréat assessment. In mars, 16th, Lionel Jospin, the socialist Prime Minister, criticizes publicly the lack of social dialog between his Educational Secretary and the teacher-unions. It sounds like a political denial for the lobbies sustaining the resignation of CA, and the 2 strikes of March, 16th and March, 24th, gathering respectively 200 000 and 300 000 demonstrators in Paris and moreover in all the country, emerge on the resignation of CA, replaced by Jack Lang in March, 29th.

II - A tense period at glance : some elements of interpreting

1 – *A trade-union leadership neglected in the social dialog, but entrusted with a mission by the teachers themselves.*

In their book intitled *Patterns of Corporatist Intermediation*, Schmitter and Lehmbruch refuse a strict opposition between the State and the so-called Civil Society, and show that neo-corporatism develop the partnership between the State and the lobbies outside of legal ties. The structures of institutional dialogue are reduced, especially when the files are technical.
We can apply this analysis to describe the FSU as a "teacher fortress" which gathers about 120 000 members. The Federation is caractérized by 4 main features :
– a cultural separation between the teaching world and the remainder of the labour forces ;

– an internal division, according to the different grades and status : before the break with the FSU, the old FEN has coalised 48 national teacher-unions ;

– an integration in a wider network of professional associations, of mutual insurances, of friendly corporations ;

– the attendance of high technical skills to defend juridical files, and a role of legal adviser for the employees which is sommon up to manage the regulation of the educational institution, especially for the professional transfers and assignments.

But this "neo-corporatism" depends on the trend of relations between the ministerial staff and the teacher-unions in the process of political decision.

The new tactic of CA is to denounce a system of relations which mingles a defence of the labour interests with the management of pedagogical files. He wants to clarify the division of labour between a Ministry which decides on reforms, and a teacher-unionist representation which negociates professional attributes and the content of what A.Abbott called "the licence".

This attempt to disconnect professional interests and educational values would probably have served the reform if CA had not heckled the teaching profession with such agressivity – a rough tone which strengthened the most agonistic unions, which led the SNES to radicalize its positions, and above all, which produced a gliding move from a defensive position to protect the vested interests, to an offensive one to denounce the liberalization of the educational system.

2 – *Beyond the resignation of a Secretary of State, the crisis of the teaching neo-corporatism* :

The French rate of trade-union membership is the lowest in the European Union (about 7 %) : teacher-unions don't escape the crisis that has already stroke the private sector, but they parry it with their profound involvement in a joint regulation of their professional field with the State public services. During the period we're intersted in, the teacher-unionism increases its fragmentation. Three exemples :

- in September 97, the main trade-union of technologic and professional education leaves the FSU they blame for being submitted to the CGT since the great social conflict of 1995.

- in May-June 98, the first National Congress of Sud-Education scores a big success. It benefits from the conflict of the Seine-St Denis, during which the alliance between radical minorities rested on a large associative network, including AC! (against unemployment) and ATTAC and DAL.

- in April 99, during its National Congress, SNES notes the departure of 28 000 members, who blame it for the compromise with the Ministry. Most of those deceived supporters leave for Sud-Education.

This fragmentation, sustained by the web activism, ie.the use of chats and websites on-line, is also a radicalization of theteaching militancy, which collect the discontents. It reveals a wide criticism of unionist mediations, blamed to be too heavy to be efficient or really democratic, and expresses a multiplicity of contest positions.

The increasing phenomenon of independant groups of professional interests (the « coordinations ») doesn't sound like what Mellucci (1977) called a "new social movement" in the field of Education, but like a rise-up of anarcho-trade-unionism, with its vindication of the "basement militancy" and the priority of "direct action", mobilized by young generation teachers who gave politics up as lost.

3 – Finally, I would like to put forward 2 *elements of a renewal of the teaching collective action*, which could be either disastrous for neo-corporatism, or energizing for it.

The first one is the connection with other topics, concurrently developped by several social movements opposed to the so called "neo-liberalism". From this counter-economist point of view, school is going to be submitted to the powers of money – through public-private partnerships, through the development of the merchant e-learning, through the increasing competition between establishments, and through the new professional model of the headmasters, described as managers, of the teachers, described as reflexive practitionners (Marsh), and last but not least, through a standard of competence (the common core curriculum) lergely disseminated by the EU's educational authorities.

In this way, Sud-Education or the left-wing of the FSU make it up with the arguments of the association ATTAC (Action pour une Taxe Tobin d'Aide aux Citoyens) and enlarge their claims and demands to a non-global criticism. For instance, the Scientific Research Institute of the FSU published a book in 2002, intitled The new worldwide educational order, in which the authors (C.Laval and L.Weber) analyse the educational dogma of 4 international organizations (the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the OECD, the European Commission), and conclude that there is a common point of view between these authorities, which conducts to implement a process of liberal globalization of Education, a process which has 2 main features :

1 – it gives the priority to economic goals over humanitarian goals ;

2 – it builts step by step a new worldwide educational order in which Education is considered as a commodity.

The educational policy of CA is discerned as an exemple of an incentive to private interests. The link between the reformative decisions (to improve the alignment of the French Universities on a European model, to develop partnerships with the private sector, to sustain the de-centralization of the educational system) are directly linked with the growing role of market, and the encrease of social-scholar disparities. "School is not a company", "Education is not a commodity" : the criticism of an invasive managerial rhetoric benefits from a new legitimacy, because the persistancy of inequities and the so-called power of international institutions taking very seriously the cost of Education in account, seems to reproduce the old opposition between the proletarian masses and the mighty, anonymous, and international capitalist powers early described by Rosa Luxembourg.

The main limit of this rhetorical development is that it transforms the practical and organized revendications of a working group into a wide protest, much less constructive. And this limit is also a paradox for the militants of Sud-Education : how to be constructive from within a system you criticize the substance itself ?

The second element of a renewal is the role of the schoolusers, both the pupils and their families, in the functioning of the French educational system. During its governmental stay, CA has promoted the development of scholar rights, always opened by Lionel Jospin in the Education Secretary (the right to contest a decision, to express publicly its opinion, to discuss the internal functionning of an establishment, to be defended by a lawyer…), and he has enlarged to the attendance of parental associations in the High Council of Education, in the Superior Council of Evaluation, in the Academic Council of Education Nationale…). A general legal law seems nowadays to compete with a multiplicity of common laws. This appears to be a challenge for the teacher-unions, urged to change their functionning from a neo-corporatist one to a shape closely related with what Richardson and Jordan called "policy community". From this point of view, and in the peculiar case of France, we can say that if neo-corporatism was an efficient way to overcome the lack of pluralism in a centralized educational system, this is probably not the worst way to cope with the transformation of educational challenges when Education becomes an object of widespread social debate.