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The Cretins of Amiens

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Rioting broke out in the French town of Amiens last week while I was vacationing in France. A few days after the youths clashed with the police, the authorities detained two young men who had taken advantage of the disturbances to set fire to a school. During police questioning, it became evident that the pair had difficulty reading the police report, and they said that they had acted out of anger toward their strict teachers.

Leftist politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon immediately labeled the two men — a certain Christophe and Wilfrid — as the "Amiens cretins."

It is very significant that Mélenchon was more outspoken than other politicians in expressing his outrage. After all, the French system of education is still one of the best in Europe and, at a time when the French left is trying to protect educational institutions from commercialization and budget cuts, the two "Amiens cretins" set fire to their school to avenge what they perceived as overly strict teachers. However, judging by the social status of the arsonists, they are doubtless victims of the system.

The problem is that even the very best education cannot solve societal problems. Worse, the contrast between the discipline, rigor and effectiveness of the school system and the growing disorganization of social life is becoming a source of psychological and cultural tensions.

Only a generation ago, everything was clear. A good school provided a "social boost" for young people from the lower classes of society. Immigrants and the poorest native French children knew that they had to study well, follow the rules, memorize verses by Jean Racine and Pierre Corneille, bone up on math and master the history of the country to get a good job and make their way in life. French schools have always been strict, authoritarian and difficult. And that is how it should be. Any school where the studies are easy and fun is useless. It has long been known that the axiom "The harder you train, the easier you'll fight" is the key to any good education.

In the past, such efforts were rewarded and therefore justified. French society welcomed and valued educated people by giving them jobs and career opportunities.

But all of that changed over the last 20 years. French education has remained just as strict, demanding and pedantic as ever. Schools continue to require that students show a command of the subject matter that no amount of rote memorization or copying from Wikipedia can replace. But French society no longer offers the same opportunities to graduates, and the situation was further aggravated with the onset of the global economic crisis. Unemployment among young people is rising sharply, and the job opportunities that do exist fail to provide the same social boost as before.

Not long ago, a teacher who was a strict disciplinarian and who rigorously tested students' knowledge was considered a true authority by both children and parents. Now, many view such educators as little more than sadists. Students recoil by attempting to protect themselves from the psychological abuse and, at the same time, knowledge. The more demanding the school system becomes, the greater the rift that forms between the authorities and youths like the "Amiens cretins." Unfortunately, this is true not only in France.

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