Episode Book

EPISODE #5752

Two Frances, One Protest: Reading the Same Streets Differently

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SYNOPSIS

It started on September 17 at a single high school in Créteil, where staff walked out over vacant teaching posts and crumbling buildings. By October 6, France's Interior Ministry counted 250,000 protesters nationwide; organizers said 450,000. That gap — a factor of nearly two on the same day, counting the same crowds — is the whole story in miniature. This episode walks through the documented facts first: the 9.8% of teaching hours that went untaught in 2024-25, the €54 billion in proposed 2027 savings, the 215 injured teenagers, the 6,100+ arrests, and the fifteen-year-old who lost his hand to a stun grenade. Then it turns to the harder question: how the same barricades get read as inspiring student-led protest by one half of Facebook and as immigration-driven collapse by the other — and why a leaderless, Instagram-organized movement with no central text is uniquely vulnerable to that kind of projection.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Hannah sent us something this week, and it's the most relatable thing anyone's ever handed us for this show.



Herman

Which part?



Corn

The part where she says she hasn't been following the news at all, and has no idea what's happening in France, but she keeps opening Facebook and seeing two completely different countries. Her left-leaning American friends are posting about inspiring student-led protests. Her right-leaning friends, mostly outside the States, are posting about immigration, Islam, demographic collapse. Same barricades, two realities.



Herman

And she wants a factual rundown first.



Corn

Facts first. Who's protesting, what triggered it, what they're demanding. And then the harder question, which is how much of what she's seeing is people projecting their own politics onto the situation, and why the left and right seem to be reading the exact same events through completely incompatible lenses.



Herman

Right. Because the facts are actually not that complicated.



Corn

So let's do the boring part first. The actual facts. And then the interesting part, which is why nobody agrees on them.



Herman

The scale first, because the scale is the tell. On the sixth of October, the Interior Ministry put the nationwide protest at two hundred and fifty thousand people. The organizers said four hundred and fifty thousand.



Corn

That's not a rounding error.



Herman

That's a factor of nearly two, on the same day, in the same country, counting the same crowds. And that gap is basically the whole episode in miniature. Before anyone has even said the word immigration, the French state and the French street can't agree on how many people are in it.



Corn

So what actually is it? Because the short version I've got is that it started over schools.



Herman

It started over schools. Every wire service, Reuters, AP, Al Jazeera, the French education ministry, all of them trace it to the same place. A high school in Créteil, that's a Paris suburb, Lycée Saint-Exupéry. On the seventeenth of September the staff walked out over vacant teaching posts and a lack of resources. The students joined them.



Corn

And that's it? That's the spark?



Herman

Some sources date the first boycotts to the twenty-first, in the deprived Paris areas, but the trigger is the same story. Positions that were funded and never filled. Classes too big. Buildings falling apart. And once it lit in Créteil it spread through the banlieues and then it went national.



Corn

So the immigration framing is coming from somewhere else entirely.



Herman

It's coming from Trump, from Mike Waltz, from Tommy Robinson, from Alex Jones. None of them cite any evidence, because there isn't any. The students are protesting their schools.



Corn

Let's do the timeline, because the trigger matters more than people think, and the chain from one school to a national movement is the part that gets skipped.



Herman

The seventeenth is the strike at Saint-Exupéry. Then it spreads block by block. By the first of October the government has called an interministerial crisis meeting on school blockades. That's two weeks after one school walked out. By the fourth, the Prime Minister, Lecornu, is ordering work on five areas: making sure lessons actually happen, improving the buildings, reorganizing the school day, making Parcoursup more transparent, and giving students more of a say.



Corn

Which is a list, not a policy.



Herman

It's a list. The fifth, Mélenchon calls it the most powerful movement of high school and college students since May 1968. The sixth is the big day, two hundred and fifty thousand or four hundred and fifty thousand, depending who you ask. And by the seventh, today, the Interior Minister has suspended the use of stun grenades against high-school protesters.



Corn

Suspended them because of something specific.



Herman

Because a fifteen-year-old lost his hand. Up to the elbow. To a stun grenade fired by police.



Corn

That's the part that doesn't make it into the American timeline.



Herman

It doesn't. And it's the most documented thing in the entire story, which is worth holding onto. Eighteen internal police probes are open. Amnesty International put out a statement urging France to end what it called the disproportionate police repression during the student protests. France's own human rights commission, the CNCDH, criticized the force used against minors.



Corn

Give me the grievance list properly, because "crumbling schools" is the kind of phrase that hides everything.



Herman

The concrete number is nine point eight percent. That's the share of teaching hours in French public secondary schools that went untaught in the 2024-25 year. Nearly a tenth of the instruction the state is paying for, not delivered. Mostly because absent teachers



Herman (continued)

aren't replaced.



Corn

So a kid shows up to a class that doesn't exist.



Herman

Repeatedly. Add overcrowded classrooms, buildings with rodents, school days that run long, and inequality between schools, so the school you're zoned into determines the education you get more than anything else. Then add the money. The proposed 2027 budget targets fifty-four billion euros in savings. Two billion of that comes from freezing public-sector salaries. The education budget rises one point seven percent, to sixty-five and a half billion, which is below inflation.



Corn

So it's a cut in real terms.



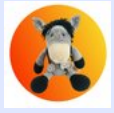
Herman

It's a cut in real terms, dressed as an increase. And then the summer heatwave, in buildings with no air conditioning.



Corn

The toilets.



Herman

That's going to come up later.



Corn

I want to flag the mechanism now, because it's the key to everything else. This movement is leaderless.



Herman

Completely. It's organized on Instagram and TikTok. There is no single body representing the protesters. There's no delegation, no spokesperson, no one who can walk into the Matignon and say here's what ends this.



Corn

Which everyone reads as a weakness.



Herman

It's read as a weakness because we're trained to expect a demand you can negotiate against. But it's not a gap, it's a genuine finding. There is no single set of demands that would end this, because there's no single set of people who could agree on them. It's four hundred different schools with four hundred different worst problems.



Corn

Which is exactly why both framings can attach to it without being contradicted by anything the movement itself says. There's no central text to check them against.



Herman

There's no central text. That's the mechanical reason the projection works.



Corn

Who's actually in it now?



Herman

It broadened. Parents joined. University students joined. Teachers and the unions joined. On the sixth, roughly forty percent of public higher-education institutions were disrupted. The CGT, one of the big unions, formed human chains between riot police and the students. So you have a movement that started with high-schoolers and now has labor muscle standing between them and the police.



Corn

And the violence is real, partially.



Herman

Real and partial, and both halves matter. At least twenty-four schools burned or ransacked. A fifteen-year-old arrested in Marseille for firing a homemade flamethrower at a woman. A sixteen-year-old in Tours lost the use of an eye. That's a lot of damage and a lot of injuries.



Corn

And then the other half.



Herman

The other half is that many rallies were peaceful, and the photos show a mixed crowd. Young white students smiling at gatherings that stayed calm, next to masked agitators, next to far-left placards. All in the same frame, on the same afternoon.



Corn

Let me get the injury numbers straight, because they cut in a way people don't expect.



Herman

Two hundred and fifteen teenagers injured. Eighty-five school staff injured. The Education Minister, Edouard Geffray, put high-school students injured at a hundred and ninety. Lecornu put injured police officers at over seven hundred.



Corn

So the cops take the most injuries, and the kids take the worst ones.



Herman

That's the shape of it. Batman arrests on the sixth alone, forty-three to forty-eight police injured that day. Since the movement began, over six thousand one hundred arrests, eighteen hundred being prosecuted, and of those, one thousand four hundred and eighty-three are minors.



Corn

Fifteen hundred kids in the criminal pipeline.



Herman

Out of a movement that started over unfilled teaching posts.



Corn

So that's what's happening. Now here's where it gets strange, because the fight over what this movement means is being conducted almost entirely by people who aren't in it.



Herman

Domestically first, and the domestic fight is a rehearsal for the real thing.



Corn

Mélenchon and La France Insoumise.



Herman

Mélenchon calls it the biggest youth movement since May 1968, says the country is fortunate to have a young generation involved in its destiny, and describes it as a point of departure toward 2027. LFI actively supports the blockades while condemning the violence.



Corn

That's a very specific posture.



Herman

It's a double-edged one, and they know it's double-edged. Backing the blockades shores up their youth base, and the youth base is real. A Cluster17 poll had forty-seven percent of under-thirty-fives planning to vote Mélenchon.



Corn

And the other edge?



Herman

The other edge is that when the movement produces burned schools and a kid with no hand, LFI is standing next to it. The same poll found seventy-three percent of all voters say there's little to no chance they'd ever vote for him.



Corn

Seventeen percent of the country can't be the ceiling on that number.



Herman

It's not a base, it's a floor with a very low ceiling.



Corn

Le Pen.



Herman

Backs the police completely. Says this is no longer about high school student protests. And puts down her own marker: a shadow budget with a hundred and forty billion in cuts by 2032. She concedes some student grievances, higher teacher pay, school security, but the frame is order.



Corn

And the government's position is the strangest of the three.



Herman

Lecornu's office says the intelligence agencies share the assessment that LFI and its allies helped foment the protests. LFI denies it. No public evidence has been presented. And the movement started at a single school before LFI was anywhere near it.



Corn

So the government is accusing its own opposition of manufacturing a revolt that began without it.



Herman

And simultaneously, Lecornu is defending the police, saying accidents happen, while promising a political response and saying the voice of high school students is precious and must be heard.



Corn

He's running both lanes. Order and sympathy.



Herman

Both lanes. And there's a detail that undercuts the order lane entirely. Lecornu himself has described the school system's situation as the heaviest toll in decades.



Corn

If the government's own prime minister says it's the worst it's been in decades, then the response stops looking proportionate.



Herman

It stops looking proportionate. And the numbers back it. Nine point eight percent of teaching hours untaught. Buildings with rodents. A real-terms cut to the education budget.



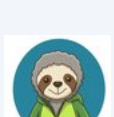
Corn

Now the subtext nobody says out loud, which is that none of this is really about the protests.



Herman

It's about April and May 2027. The presidential election. Le Pen is leading the first round. A late-September Toluna-Harris poll had her beating Mélenchon sixty-nine to thirty-one in a runoff.



Corn

Sixty-nine to thirty-one.



Herman

That's not a race, that's a landslide. And Mélenchon's entire play here is consolidating the youth vote to change that arithmetic. Le Pen's play is to look like the only person standing between the country and the fires.



Corn

So the protests are a proxy battle in a presidential campaign that hasn't officially started.



Herman

Both sides are using the same teenagers to audition for 2027, and neither has any particular interest in whether the toilets get fixed.



Corn

Now the international layer, which is what Hannah is actually seeing on her feed.



Herman

Trump, on the sixth, on Truth Social. I'll read it. "What's happening in France is nothing less than out of control mass migration. This isn't about schools, this is about Islam wanting to take over a once great Country."



Corn

That's the entire right-wing framing in two sentences.



Herman

Mike Waltz links the unrest to open borders and unchecked immigration. Tommy Robinson posts that the events are an act of jihad rather than student protests, and shares a video he labels an invader youth. Alex Jones, four days earlier, warned of France's total collapse.



Corn

And what do they cite?



Herman

Nothing. No evidence at all. WA Today explicitly labels these false claims, on the record, in print.



Corn

So that's one side of the projection.



Herman

That's one side. The other side is the inspiring Gen-Z uprising framing, which is the one Hannah's American left-leaning friends are sharing. And that one is also a projection, just a better-sourced one.



Corn

Better-sourced because of the police brutality.



Herman

The stun grenade suspended after a fifteen-year-old lost his hand. The sixteen-year-old who lost an eye in Tours. The eighteen internal probes. Amnesty's statement. The human rights commission criticizing force against minors. All of that is documented. So when a left-leaning American friend posts about kids being brutalized by police, they're responding to something real.



Corn

They're responding to something real and then layering a story on top of it.



Herman

They're layering a story on top of it. The story is that this is an inspiring youth uprising against a failing system, which isn't false exactly, but it isn't the whole thing either. It's a curation. It picks the kids and the tear gas and leaves out the twenty-four burned schools and the homemade flamethrower.



Corn

And the right picks the burned schools and leaves out the kid with no hand and the unfilled teaching posts.



Herman

Both do the same operation. Select the frame that confirms the prior.



Corn

So what does the crowd actually look like?



Herman

Mixed, mixed, and that's why the cherry-picking works. The photos show young white students smiling at largely peaceful gatherings. The same set of protest photos show masked agitators from migrant backgrounds setting fires. Palestinian flags and Communist placards are real, and they are a minority of participants, not the movement's stated cause.



Corn

Both are true. Both are in the record. So everyone can point at a photo and say see.



Herman

Everyone can point at a photo and say see, and nobody is lying about what's in the photo. They're lying by omission about the other photos.



Corn

There's a quote that's the whole episode, I think.



Herman

Emma, seventeen. "We appreciate that left-wing politicians came to support us at the school. But this is our fight; we don't want to be co-opted by left-wing parties or used as tools by the right."



Corn

She names the exact thing we've been describing.



Herman

She names it from the inside, at seventeen, while it's happening. The students understand what's being done to their protest better than most of the commentators doing it.



Corn

Which raises the question underneath all of this. Why does the left see an inspiring uprising and the right see a civilizational collapse off the same footage?



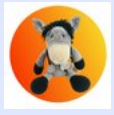
Herman

Because the footage is ambiguous, and ambiguity is the raw material of projection. The movement has no central text, no manifesto, no demands that would falsify either reading. There's nothing to contradict the person who's already decided what they're looking at.



Corn

A movement with a leader would kill both framings.



Herman

A movement with a leader would kill both framings, because a leader has to say something, and then you can check whether they said it. The leaderlessness is what makes this the perfect screen to project onto.



Corn

And the projection says more about the projector than the French.



Herman

It says everything about the projector. The American audience is fighting its own school-funding fight, its own immigration fight, its own youth-radicalization fight, and France is just a stock image to put behind it. Nobody arguing about this on Facebook is arguing about Créteil.



Corn

So Hannah's answer is: both of her feeds are wrong in the same direction.



Herman

Both of her feeds are wrong in the same way. The left is right that the trigger is schools. The right is wrong about the trigger but right that there's real violence happening. Neither is watching the students, and the students noticed.



Herman

Speaking of people watching, and not in it, Hilbert has been sitting over at the desk and I'm fairly sure he's been waiting to say something since the word toilets came up.



Hilbert

I spent a year in a lycée. Not here. Saint-Gaudens, in the southwest, if you know it. I was a student there, not a teacher, and I remember the toilets. The doors didn't lock. That's all I'm saying about the plumbing, but the doors didn't lock, and there was one working sink for a corridor of a hundred and forty boys.



Corn

That's a specific memory.



Hilbert

It's not a memory, it's a measurement. And I agree with what you said about the immigration, for the record. But you're wrong that the crumbling-schools story is new. That building was falling down in the eighties. Nothing has been fixed. That's the point. The reason it's on the internet now isn't that the buildings got worse, it's that the kids got a camera and a place to compare notes.



Herman

Two out of five students won't use the school toilets.



Hilbert

One in two are reluctant, one in ten won't go at all, that's the University of Tours numbers, and they were in Le Monde. I read it. It's a bathroom. For fifty years it's been a bathroom, and for fifty years the answer has been that it's not the priority. The students aren't angry about the toilets. They're angry that the toilets tell them the truth.



Corn

The truth being that nobody's coming.



Hilbert

Nobody's coming. And what I'd add, since you two have been arguing about which story is real, is that the toilets are the answer. It's not an inspiring uprising and it's not a civilizational collapse. It's a hundred and forty boys and one working sink, and that doesn't fit either of those stories, so both sides just stopped seeing it.



Corn

That's the least glamorous grievance in the whole movement.



Hilbert

That's why it's the strongest one. You can't project onto a sink.



Corn

So if the movement is leaderless, and there's no one to negotiate with, what does resolution even look like?



Herman

That's the question nobody in the Matignon has an answer to. Lecornu's version is a half-day of class time for dialogue, across five areas: making sure lessons happen, improving buildings, reorganizing the school days, Parcoursup transparency, giving students more say.



Corn

Which is an agenda for a meeting.



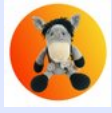
Herman

It's an agenda for a meeting with people who don't have a representative. There's nobody at the table. The government's response is essentially an invitation addressed to a movement that has no address.



Corn

And the clock is running.



Herman

The clock is April and May 2027. Le Pen is running as the order candidate and got sixty-nine to thirty-one over Mélenchon in the last runoff poll. Mélenchon is running as the youth candidate and is standing on the barricades. Neither of them is going to let the schools question get answered, because the schools question is the least useful thing either of them has.



Corn

The students said this is our fight.



Herman

They said it and they meant the fight, and the fight over what the fight means is being conducted entirely by people who are not in it.



Corn

One thing before we go, which is that Hilbert's sink is the answer to Hannah's actual question. Both of her feeds are fighting a war about France using a country that isn't actually doing what either feed says it is. The answer to which version is real is that neither is, because the real one is a building full of untaught hours and unlocked bathroom doors, and that's the version neither side can use.



Herman

That's the version that ended the episode. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to keep the lights on, leave us a review wherever you're listening. We'll be back soon.