



France: Macron prepares his offensive

Marc Lassalle, Paris Wed, 02/08/2017 - 20:31

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The new French President, Emmanuel Macron, speaking at a business start-up event, declared in imperfect English, 'Entrepreneur is the new France?'. His initial measures certainly openly serve the interests of the social class that created him out of nowhere as a political figure, that supported him and funded his campaign and his new movement, that is, the big bourgeoisie.

Now it is payback time for his backers. First, he and his new Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, a member of the conservative Republicans, have assembled a government packed with conservative politicians and employers. Bruno Le Maire, from the conservative Republicans, is economy minister. He has been advocating a free-market economic agenda, including the privatisation of France's labour offices, the end of job subsidies and a cap on welfare benefits. Other ministers include Muriel Penicaud, former personnel director of the food conglomerate Danone, who, as Minister of Labour will be in charge of pushing through the 'reform' of the French Labour Code in favour of the bosses. A publishing company CEO, Françoise Nyssen, is Minister of Culture and Elizabeth Borne, a former top executive of SNCF, the state rail company, is in charge of transport.

This government is now implementing a policy of wide ranging austerity, the reduction of the public sector and other cuts in social spending. For instance, special allowances that reduce rents for students and workers below the poverty level will be slashed while, at the same time, the government is planning a major cut in the tax on the super-rich, the Impôt sur la Fortune, one beneficiary of which will be Macron himself. In other words, the new president is a playing Robin Hood in reverse, robbing the poor to help the rich.

The main course on this disgusting menu is the demolition of the Code du Travail, the collection of protective legislation covering hiring and firing, work time, health, safety, rights to trade union representation and national contracts and many other aspects of workers' lives. The bosses have been demanding a 'simplification' of these rules and Macron will continue the deregulation that was initiated by the previous President, François Hollande, but was delayed and limited by last year's mass protests and days of action.

A few examples will be enough to demonstrate what 'simplification' means. According to the present regulations, every worker illegally sacked can sue their boss and receive compensation, fixed by special employment tribunals, some of whose members are elected by workers. The Macron government is preparing a new law that will cap this compensation at a low level. This means giving bosses full freedom to fire workers illegally with negligible consequences. However, in Orwellian Newspeak, this objective is described as 'freeing enterprise, fighting against unemployment and stopping precarité?.

Even more vicious is what is called 'inversion of the hierarchy of norms?', a deceptively fancy name for a simple concept: until now, agreements between bosses and trade unions could be signed within each business sector or individual workplace, provided they were more advantageous to the workers than the Code du Travail, which acts as a kind of safety net, providing basic rights and rules for everybody. The new law will reverse this and allow local agreements to become the rule. As workers are clearly the weaker party in a workplace by workplace situation, they can be blackmailed by their bosses with the threat that 'You sign or the site closes and your job is gone?', this effectively means the end of the Code du Travail and, therefore, a total deregulation that will be to the immense advantage of the bosses.

No wonder then that Macron is expecting resistance. Last year there was widespread and effective opposition to the Loi el-Khomri, named after the minister in charge of its passage through parliament. The normal legislative procedure allowed both time and a focus for mass actions and protests. This time, Macron is trying to evade that problem by enacting the reform by decree. The new law will be prepared at the speed of light, during the summer, with a special procedure practically bypassing any discussion in Parliament. And this despite the fact that Macron has an overwhelming majority there.

Worse still, citing his huge electoral mandate, although in fact a majority abstained or spoilt their ballots, all the major French trades unions, including the Confédération générale du travail, CGT, entered into obviously fake negotiations on the Labour Code reform. Macron has even succeeded in attracting Force Ouvriere, FO, a major union that supported last year's movement, into making several positive declarations, "Inside the government there is a real will to discuss", and it probably will not directly oppose the new law. Unless, that is, a mass movement drags the FO leaders into action.

The attacks of the new government do not, however, stop there. Knowing he will need their assistance, Macron is reinforcing the armed wing of the bourgeoisie's class power: the army, the police and the repressive laws. In this vein, the state of emergency has been extended for the sixth time and its content is now to become normal procedure, thanks to a new law. Night police raids, renamed "visits", will be authorised as well as the requisition of electronic devices. Limits to the freedom of movement, assigning citizens to restricted areas, will also be allowed for "suspects" who have not been charged with anything. And "security zones" can be declared, within which police have extraordinary powers. This whole antidemocratic legal arsenal, denounced even by Amnesty International, has already been unleashed against social movements, and this will certainly continue, making the state of emergency permanent.

Macron has visited the French army in Mali, where the imperialist intervention has already lasted several years. Despite this year's cut to the army budget, which provoked the resignation of General Pierre de Villiers, the head of the army, and was much discussed in the media, the reality is that the army budget will be increased to 2 percent of GDP in succeeding years. Moreover, Macron certainly does not intend to renounce its repeated use as an essential tool of French imperialism. On the contrary, he aims to play a more aggressive role as the leader of European imperialism. On the military playing field, he is a bigger force than Angela Merkel and Germany and this can make up for France's relative economic weakness.

This strategy was openly displayed with the invitations to Putin, Trump and Netanyahu to visit Paris. Recently, Macron has shown his willingness to play a major role in Libya, where he plans to install "hot spots" to filter the migrants. This is a continuation of the EU's cynical line of making deals with tyrants like Gadaffi or Erdogan provided they maintain "order" at whatever cost and block the flow of refugees to the other side of the Mediterranean.

Referring to the upwards of 100,000 migrants, most of whom are living outdoors in terrible conditions, around Nice, in Paris and in Calais, Macron recently declared, "Before the end of the year I do not want to see women and men on the streets or in the woods". While this might sound humanitarian, it means in reality that the arbitrary selection between refugees and economic migrants will be carried out much faster, and that deportation will be massively increased. 2,700 migrants in Paris have been rounded up recently in the 34th police operation in two years. The reality behind the humanitarian declarations is that sometimes even the distribution of food and water by NGOs is stopped by the police.

Fighting Back

Macron's electoral mandate, and the method of avoiding any parliamentary delays by rushing through decrees, means that there is much less time to organise resistance than there was during the attacks of presidents Hollande and Sarkozy. Time is not on the side of French workers, youth or the immigrant communities under police attack.

A recently formed movement, the Front Social, composed of radical unionists and other activists, has already organised three demonstrations, each about 2,000 strong, against Macron's reforms. They were absolutely right to launch the struggle from day one, but mass forces need to be mobilised in a powerful united front if the poster boy of European free market liberalism is to be defeated.

Clearly, united resistance to Macron's reactionary reforms is urgently necessary. The unions, the youth and students need to come out onto the streets, or occupy their workplaces and campuses, *Tous ensemble! All Together!*, as many did against the El Khomri Law last year. Philippe Martinez, the secretary of the more militant of the larger union federations, the CGT, has a day of strike action and demonstrations planned for September 12, supported by the *Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques, SUD*, union. But the *Confédération française démocratique du travail, CFDT*, now the largest union federation with 875,000 members against the CGT's 710,000 and 310,000 for FO, has indicated that, like FO, it will not support strike action against the 'reform'.

Another weakness of the resistance lies in the political divisions on the left, especially where these are an obstacle to the formation of a united front to struggle against Macron. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's assumption of the role of leader of the resistance, and his boosting of his France Unbowed populist movement, only alienates other forces in the working class movement.

His social patriotism, indeed outright national chauvinism, was on display when he condemned Macron for sacking General De Villiers and cutting defence spending, because 'France needs her army'. Likewise, he denounced Macron's apology on behalf of the French state for the Vel d'Hiv round up and deportation of Parisian Jews in 1942, exclaiming 'Non, non, Vichy ce n'est pas la France!' that is, 'No, no, Vichy is not France'. Mélenchon, who has swapped the red flag for the tricolor and the Internationale for the Marseillaise, embodies the most retrograde trend on the left and is unfitted to be the leader of the resistance to Macron. Since the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, he has been waging a vendetta against the French Communist Party, PCF, and the remnants of the French Socialists, PS. He has called his own demonstration for September 20.

Clearly, the absence of a sizeable and militant anticapitalist and revolutionary party that could provide strategic leadership in the class struggle has allowed the flourishing of this populist diversion. Meanwhile, divisions inside the New Anticapitalist Party, NPA, between those who tend towards Mélenchon and those who want an independent intervention in the resistance, within the Front Social, probably mean that its role will be very weak when it comes to political leadership. Since its foundation, splits and internal struggles, which have produced no positive resolution in terms of adopting a programme of action, have resulted in a serious loss of members.

While it is certain that there will be resistance on the streets, the social movement needs to organise itself at the rank and file level, in committees of action. Otherwise, as happened in the past, the government will take advantage of the cowardice and reformism of the TU leaders to weaken and divide the movement and impose attacks that could lead to a strategic defeat for the most militant working class in Western Europe.

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