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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

11 January 2019

By Alex Lantier

12.01.2019

Macron launches fraudulent “national debate” on “yellow vest” protests

The announcement yesterday by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe of next week’s launch of a “great national debate” on the demands of “yellow vest” protesters was a debacle. Like his previous offer of temporarily increasing the minimum wage via an increase in bonuses, it is a blatant attempt to strangle mounting opposition while continuing reactionary policies of austerity and militarism under cover of a few empty phrases.

Even before Philippe spoke to summarize the conclusions of a ministerial meeting at the Elysée presidential palace, the National Commission on Public Debate (CNDP) was discredited. Its president, right-wing politician Chantal Jouanno, had announced that, outraged at the public outcry over her €176,400 yearly salary, she was refusing to organize the debate. Nonetheless, she refused to step down and is still drawing her exorbitant salary, even though she refuses to do the work that she is supposedly being paid to do.

This provoked broad anger among “yellow vests” and workers. As journalist Vincent Jauvert noted on *France Info*, French Senate investigations have established that “leaders of such high administrative authorities are often extremely well paid...for minimal work.”

This observation on the fictitious character of the work of Jouanno and other top state officials speaks volumes about the character of the “great national debate” Macron wants her commission to organize. He intends for this debate not to result in a realignment of his policies to reflect popular opposition to austerity, social inequality, and war, but to issue a few propaganda phrases to “sell” the diktat of the banks Macron is imposing.

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Philippe's speech at the Elysée proved to be so vacuous that even BFMTV journalists were left to complain that "much uncertainty" remains as to the content of the "great national debate."

"In the current phase in our country, we must be both extremely open to a useful and productive debate, and obviously extremely firm on the functioning of Republican institutions," Philippe declared. While he said that he would only reveal the details on Monday, he proposed to organize it in various forums: "local initiative meetings," "mobile stands," digital platforms, or "regional citizens conferences" whose attendees would be selected by the state, supposedly at random.

No details emerged on what policies Philippe was proposing. The four themes for debate raised by all the ministers who since have spoken out on the subject are taxes, the effectiveness of state policies, the ecological transition, and citizenship. The last element appears to be the xenophobic debate on national identity and secularism—that is to say, against foreigners and Muslim religious clothing—that Macron mentioned on December 10, as he proposed the "great national debate."

Since Macron obstinately refuses to go back on his cancellation of the Tax on Wealth, the debate on taxes and state effectiveness will boil down to defending the fortunes of the financial aristocracy by slashing taxes and intensifying austerity policies targeting workers above all. The government is giving itself room to maneuver by trying to ram through these antidemocratic policies under cover of either "ecological" or frankly xenophobic and neo-fascistic rhetoric.

Attempts to give a progressive coloration to the debate are marred by hypocrisy and lies. Urban Minister Julien Denormandie has declared that the abolition of the death penalty and of democratic rights linked to sexuality would be off limits in the national debate. He explained, "A great debate is not a great surrender. ... The right to abortion, the abolition of the death penalty, and gay marriage are social advances. But we all remember the extremely bitter and divisive debates that took place on the issue of gay marriage. So there can be no question of going back on this social progress."

This is a cynical maneuver, aiming to reassure the narrow layers of the affluent middle class that emerged from the Green and post-1968 student movement, who are indifferent to workers' economic conditions, fear the "yellow vests," and are obsessed only with their own lifestyles.

The idea that the Macron government is defending democratic rights against the population is a political fraud. The "yellow vest" protests are not hostile to abortion or gay

marriage or demanding the reinstatement of the death penalty. The Macron government is not defending democratic rights but the wealth and power of the financial aristocracy, mobilizing armored vehicles and tens of thousands of riot police. With his declaration of support for fascist dictator Philippe Pétain, Macron has made clear that he intends to build a police state.

In this context, the main danger to abortion and gay marriage is that the state itself could attack these rights that were written into law by the Socialist Party (PS), a big business party that is now widely hated, as it seeks to cultivate its base in the riot police and other layers close to the far right.

As the WSWS and the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) have insisted throughout the “yellow vest” protests, workers will get nothing from Macron or his backers in the European Union (EU). The beginning of his “great national debate” has only confirmed this assessment. As the class struggle rises in France and across the world, the only way forward is the mobilization and organization of the working class, independently of the trade unions, in a political struggle against the EU and the capitalist class.

In this struggle, the PES insists that the only viable perspective for workers is to transfer power to the independent organizations created by the working class. All the offers of aid or debate by procapitalist politicians or parties will prove to be traps for the workers. The demands of “yellow vests” for social equality, wage increases and an end to war and police repression are incompatible with capitalism and require an international struggle of the working class for socialism.

Claims that the “yellow vests” can ally with the various bourgeois populist parties across Europe are political lies. The only way to satisfy the urgent social needs of workers and oppressed sections of the middle class is a determined expropriation of the financial aristocracies on an international scale.

This emerges also from the analysis of popular demands presented to the Association of French Rural Mayors (AMRF) in the context of the government’s “complaint notebooks” campaign, made by AMRF President Vanik Berberian.

Berberian told *Le Point* that “the top concern is the question of purchasing power. The second is social injustice. Today, the French people do not have common living standards and the gaps between them are ever greater. Augmenting a tax on fuel may not cause problems for a manager who is working, but it is disastrous for a retiree who is on 500 euros a month and who has no other choice but to take his car. The questions of overseas tax optimization are also perceived as an intolerable social injustice.”

He added, “Another source of concern is the observation that there is a broad decline in living standards, including in upper layers of the middle class, who feel dragged towards the bottom. Finally, the disappearance of public services in rural areas feeds a feeling of exclusion.”

Asked about immigration, he said: “The demands indicate that this is not a subject of major concern, in rural areas in any case, as it only arrives in 8th position. This confirms what we have said for years: if the neo fascists sometimes get enormous votes in rural areas where there are few or no foreigners, it is that another problem is in fact involved. ... I invite you to go see yourself, there are many villages where foreigners are living without it causing any problems, on the contrary.”