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French prime minister announces further social cuts and attacks on immigrants

In an address to the National Assembly last night, French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a series of far-reaching austerity measures, particularly targeting pensions and unemployment payments, as well as new attacks against immigrants and Muslims.

That such a speech would take place was announced in the immediate aftermath of the European election vote May 26. It would signal “Act II,” corresponding to the second half of President Emmanuel Macron’s five-year term. Macron’s party narrowly lost the European vote to the far-right National Rally (RN) of Marine Le Pen, which was able to exploit social anger over inequality and the austerity measures imposed by Macron and his Socialist Party (PS) predecessor, François Hollande.

Philippe’s statements made clear that the response of the Macron government will be to shift further to the right. While it faces growing left-wing opposition in the working class, expressed in a growth in strikes and protests by hospital workers and teachers in recent months, as well as the “yellow vest” protests against social inequality, the Macron government is determined to meet the demands of the financial elite for the funneling of ever greater wealth into its pockets. The policy outlined by Philippe yesterday consisted of continuing the destruction of the social entitlements won by the French working class in the 20th century.

His government is also adopting the RN’s anti-immigrant policies to whip up xenophobic hysteria and divert social anger produced by its policies.

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The most significant measure announced by Philippe is the effective lengthening of the retirement age by two years. The government will introduce a new “equilibrium age” of 64 while keeping the legal minimum retirement age at 62, with “inducements to work longer” by cutting benefits for those under 64. This will force already retired workers to return to poverty-level jobs to survive.

“Everyone will be able to make their own choice, in freedom and responsibility,” Philippe said, with all the grandiloquent hypocrisy of the French bourgeoisie. The elderly will be driven to labor for longer, with the announcement of a “great plan of employment for seniors.”

Philippe also referred to a restructuring of the national pension system scheduled to be announced this year. It will abolish the 42 different pension entitlements according to industry and employer, and replace them with a single national retirement system. This will tear up the more generous retirement benefits won by certain sections of workers, including national railway workers, teachers and other public employees. These plans are to be replaced by a system of retirement “by points,” whose value the state can arbitrarily modify according to its financial interests up until the time a worker takes his or her retirement.

Unemployment benefits will also be slashed. “The second objective of this reform is to ensure that work pays more than inactivity,” he said. While this is “in general [already] the case,” there are “situations where the monthly unemployment payment is more than the monthly salary. We must put an end to it.”

On June 7, *Les Echos* published an exclusive report on the government’s plans to slash unemployment benefits, based on comments by unnamed government officials. The full details are to be revealed June 17. The plan will reportedly include raising eligibility requirements for receiving payments: whereas presently a worker must have been employed for the equivalent of four months over the previous 28 months, this will be increased to at least six months over the previous 24 months.

The National Union for Employment in Industry and Commerce (Unédic) stated that even without changing the timeframe from 28 to 24 months, the increase from four months to half a year in work requirements will automatically cut off benefits for 236,000 unemployed people, or 11 percent of the total.

These social attacks are being combined with tax cuts totaling some 5 billion euros [\$US5.6 billion] per year. The full details are yet to be announced, and they will no doubt

provide further concessions to the rich and sections of the upper middle class. Philippe stated only that for those in the first- and second-lowest income brackets, the cuts would lead to derisory reductions of 350 euros and 180 euros, respectively. At the same time, the property tax, calculated by property value, is being eliminated, disproportionately benefiting the rich.

At the same time spending that benefits the most vulnerable sections of the working class is to be slashed, Philippe reaffirmed his government's commitment to provide billions of euros to fund the military and the police forces tasked with repressing working-class opposition. "To keep control means above all to guarantee public order," Philippe said, "and one of our first decisions was to launch a great recruitment and equipment program for the police." Macron's pledge to raise military spending to two percent of GDP in line with European Union targets is "a massive effort," he said, "but it is necessary to be consistent."

The authoritarian content of Philippe's speech emerged most clearly when he launched into a rant against immigrants, asylum seekers and the growth of "Islamism."

His statements were in line with the lies of the Trump administration and extreme right-wing parties internationally that immigrant workers fleeing war and poverty caused by the policies of European and US imperialism and exercising their legal right to seek asylum are "abusing" the "system."

"The number of asylum seekers had dropped by 10 percent in Europe last year, but continues to go on in France on the order of 22 percent." France must "get control over this immigration flow," he declared. "The right to asylum is a treasure," Philippe said, "but we must fight with firmness against abuses... We must be sure that asylum seekers choose France for its values, for its history, for its language, and not because our system is more favorable than those put in place by our neighbors in Europe."

This suggests that the government will further attack the conditions for immigrants in France, which Macron had already suggested in the wake of the European elections. *Le Monde* published a report on Monday headlined "New offensive by the executive on immigration," based on anonymous statements from Macron government officials. It noted that at an internal meeting last week the interior minister spoke "about the too great attractiveness of France" for immigrants.

Macron held a meeting with ministers on April 30, during which he declared that the "question of immigration is once again before us."

Philippe announced that the Macron government will organize an annual debate in parliament on “asylum and immigration,” the first edition of which will be held in September, because it “goes to the fundamentals of our sovereignty and our principles.” This will be little more than a platform for denunciations of immigrants and the whipping up of xenophobia by the entire political establishment.

Philippe’s speech was a demonstration of the far-right trajectory of the political establishment in France and internationally. Terrified by the growing struggles of the working class against more than a decade of social attacks and preparing for major wars, the ruling class is building up the forces of a police-state and promoting nationalism and anti-immigrant scapegoating.

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