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By Anthony Torres

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France: Delevoye report prepares the slashing of pensions by Macron

After 18 months of consultations, the high commissioner for pension reform, Jean Paul Delevoye, will today provide French President Emmanuel Macron with his recommendations for an attack on pensions to be implemented in the autumn. The announcement will be of great social and political significance. Despite widespread social anger and the isolation of the ruling class revealed in the mass “yellow vest” protests, the Macron government is making no concessions. It is accelerating the campaign to destroy the social rights established after the Second World War and the fall of fascism.

This morning, Delevoye, together with the minister of health and solidarity, Agnès Buzyn, will receive the trade unions and employers who have been involved in the consultations for more than a year, before submitting his report to Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. The pension reform bill will be introduced in the fall. However, it will not be debated in Parliament until 2020, after the municipal elections, given its obvious unpopularity, and will come into force in 2025.

The new “universal” points-based pension system will replace the 42 current pension schemes. Pensions will be calculated based on the number of quarters that an employee has worked. They will no longer be calculated using the best 25 years for private employees and the last six months of work in the case of civil servants. This will equate to major reductions in pension payments, particularly since the “points” accrued by workers have no fixed value, and can be lowered at any time by the government.

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While the retirement age will formally remain 62, in practice it will be determined by a so-called equilibrium age of 64. Those who retire before 64 will have their payment cut, as for workers who currently leave before the retirement age. In other words, the effective retirement age for a full pension is being raised by two years.

While the financial aristocracy is building up the repressive apparatus of the state to mobilise against the working class, these professions will not be affected by the pension cuts. The police, which physically repress workers and young people, as well as customs officers and prison guards, will retain their early retirement age of 57 or even 52 years.

In contrast, urgent care workers in the public hospital system, who have struck against the lack of resources and the onerous conditions of work, will retire under the same terms as their private colleagues. Even with a clause accounting for the physically taxing nature of their work, they will be able to retire on a full pension at 60 at the earliest.

A further reduction has been planned in the subsidy provided to workers who make so-called insufficient contributions to their pension, in the name of balancing the pension system by 2025. However, the government has opted not to implement this in the current budget, as had been foreshadowed. This is in order to ensure the implementation of the overall pension reform, and reduce the threat of mass opposition in the working class escaping outside the control of the trade unions—which have already been weakened by the “yellow vest” protests. The measure will be postponed until either after the municipal elections of 2020 or the social security financing bill of 2021.

When asked about the presentation of the Delevoye report, the unions hypocritically sought to cover their long collaboration with the government in negotiating the attack. Frédéric Sève of the CFDT said on Thursday, “[W]e hope there will be a credible, constructive approach that takes into account the reality of work and the difficulty of certain professions, to avoid a brutal standardisation.”

The award for hypocrisy went to Philippe Martinez, the head of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). “The main victims of this reform will be the precarious, the temporary workers, who will not have a full career,” he said. He added the claim that the retirement age being maintained at 62 was “really taking us for fools.” Having said all this, however, Martinez added casually that “something must be done” to finance pensions.

As with the other reforms of Macron and his predecessors, the unions have participated in the so-called social dialogue to work out the destruction of the Labour Code, the privatisation of the national railway network, and the slashing of unemployment benefits.

The criticisms that the unions are now theatrically proclaiming have already been worked out behind the scenes with the employers and the government for 18 months. The unions know what is being carried out by the government and support it.

It is a lie that these cuts are necessary because there is no money. Billionaires in France have tripled their assets since the 2008 crash. Bernard Arnault, the head of the luxury fashion group LVMH, recently surpassed the \$100 billion threshold, and surpassed Bill Gates as the world's second richest man. The European Central Bank has showered billions in public funds upon the financial institutions and banks over the past decade. But corporations and governments are seeking to boost profitability and competitiveness while slashing social spending to free up resources for massive military budget increases and preparations for war.

The ruling class directly finances the majority of the trade unions' revenues, which is why these corporatist apparatuses and their political allies refused to mobilise any struggle in support of the "yellow vest" protests or in opposition to Macron's anti-social policies. Instead, the unions, with Martinez at the forefront, slandered the "yellow vests" and declared they were in the pay of the bosses and the far right.

Social opposition is growing across Europe to militarism and austerity, expressed in this year's national teachers' strike in Poland and strikes in Portugal, Belgium and Germany against the freezing of inflation-adjusted wage increases. The ruling class, however, is offering no social concessions. The banks are imposing an authoritarian policy, riding roughshod over the views of the vast majority of the population.

Confronted with the growing opposition of workers and youth, Macron is basing himself on and expanding the police-state measures enacted in the wake of the former Socialist Party government's state of emergency. The attacks now being carried out against the working class can only be carried out only through the building of an authoritarian regime. Thus, Macron hails Pétain, the leader of the Vichy collaborationist regime, and arrests hundreds of "yellow vests" who protested his government on Bastille Day, leading them to empty warehouses surrounded by barbed wire.

The unions, which are hostile to any movement against Macron, have presented the legitimate demands for social equality of the "yellow vests" as the actions of the far right. This is a lie. Macron's pension cuts show that the unions are the accomplices of the employers and the government in imposing austerity and covering the preparations for an authoritarian regime.

The way forward is the preparation of an international struggle of the working class, independent of the trade union apparatuses, in a movement to overthrow capitalism and transfer power to the workers.

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