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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.06.2020

Macron announces mass bankruptcies and layoffs as coronavirus restrictions are ended

In a brief televised address on the COVID-19 pandemic on Sunday, Emmanuel Macron announced that his government would work closely with the trade unions to place the cost of the crisis on the backs of working class. Under conditions of global protests against police violence, two years after the start of the “yellow vests” movement, and after the historic transport strike this winter, Macron refused to make any concessions to demands from the population.

Macron noted that the government had spent €500 billion during the pandemic. This was “justified,” he said, “because of the exceptional circumstances we have just been through. But it is on top of our already existing debt.” He made clear that these massive handouts, which largely financed purchases of toxic securities held by the big banks and to stabilize the largest French corporations, came with no strings attached for any obligation on the part of the financial aristocracy to preserve jobs or economic activity.

On the contrary. France would “experience bankruptcies and multiple redundancy plans due to the global economic downturn,” he said. According to official forecasts, between 800,000 and 1 million workers will lose their jobs, and 40 percent of small and medium-sized businesses in the Ile-de-France region around Paris will go bankrupt in the coming months. This reflects an economic downturn of approximately 10 percent in a year in many countries in Europe and internationally—conditions not seen since the 1930s.

Macron insisted that it was unthinkable to force the ruling class to pay to protect jobs and small business, while French and European authorities are showering public money on the ruling class. “We will not finance this spending by raising taxes,” he said.

This is a declaration of war by the financial aristocracy, in France and throughout Europe and the world, on the working class. It has used the pandemic as a pretext to transfer hundreds of billions of euros to its bank accounts, at the expense of workers and small businesses. While US and European central banks are granting the super-rich trillions, the super-rich display their contempt for the threatened ruin of millions, even as hunger and misery increases in France and Europe.

The modern-day ruling class displays a level of parasitism and contempt unseen since the feudal nobility refused to pay taxes to the États-Généraux before the French Revolution.

This is the source of Macron’s assertion that “We have nothing to be ashamed of with our balance sheet. Tens of thousands of lives have been saved by our choices and actions.” On this basis, Macron announced the mandatory reopening of day-care centres, schools and universities from June 22, the reopening of cafes and restaurants from today, and unrestricted visits to retirement homes.

In fact, the pandemic’s toll is a stain that Macron and his European counterparts will carry forever. By refusing to provide masks to the population, to promptly explain and organize mass testing and social distancing, or to provide the health system and confined workers with the necessary financial resources, these governments have made themselves responsible for a catastrophe.

A few statistics illustrate this fact. In China—a country with 21 times the population of France, where COVID-19 first broke out and which therefore had to improvise treatments and containment methods that were known at the beginning of the pandemic in Europe—there were 4,634 deaths. In France there were more than 29,400. When Macron states that he is not ashamed of his record, it is a testament to his class contempt for the lives of the population.

As for what Macron calls his “choices” to confine workers and set up a testing infrastructure, it was the workers who imposed them on governments, not only in France but throughout Europe and internationally. Faced with waves of strikes in Italy, the United States and Brazil, the European ruling classes felt compelled to order large-scale confinement.

The French employers' organisation openly testified to this fact. "In all industrial sectors, including those where there is no ban on activity from health considerations, there is an extremely brutal change in the attitude of workers," Patrick Martin, the vice-president of the national employers association, said in March. He had denounced the "over-reaction" of workers to the deadly danger of COVID-19. This meant that corporate management "can no longer continue production because of pressure from workers."

Terrified by the growth of opposition among workers, the ruling class intends to pursue an authoritarian and violent policy to impose its diktat on workers, the self-employed and small businesses. Macron has therefore given his full support to the police officers in charge of suppressing mass demonstrations over the past two weeks.

In the face of worldwide protests against the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, and in France against the killing of Adama Traoré in police custody, Macron was content with a promise to be "tough on racism and anti-Semitism." This statement is preposterous from a president who at the beginning of his term of office joked about the drowning of refugees off the coast of Mayotte.

On the other hand, Macron, who in November 2018 called the collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain a "great soldier," as the riot police were preparing to attack the "yellow vests," reaffirmed his unflinching support for the police. "Nor will we build our future in disorder, without a republican order," he said. "This order is ensured by the police and gendarmes on our soil," adding that the police "deserve the support of the government and the recognition of the nation."

As protests take place around the world against police violence, this underscores the deeper issues facing workers and young people entering into struggle.

The reason Trump sought to deploy the military against the American protests is that the financial aristocracy considers a military dictatorship necessary to impose its criminal and socially destructive policies on the working class. Racist attitudes undoubtedly play a role in police violence. But it is impossible to stop police violence by trying to discredit racist attitudes, because such violence is based on material interests. It is the defence of the privileges of the financial aristocracy against a working class in revolt.

In actions against the "yellow vests," the police arrested more than 10,000, injured more than 4,400 demonstrators, disembowelled more than 25, ripped off five hands, and killed Zineb Redouane, an elderly woman.

As Macron and the ruling classes around the world prepare to impose massive attacks on workers to bear the cost of the coronavirus corporate handouts, larger class conflicts are brewing internationally. The magazine *Opinion* recently reported: “While minority groups stayed out of the ‘yellow vests,’ domestic intelligence is concerned about a ‘convergence of de facto struggles between the social and racial crisis’.”

For the time being, democratic and anti-racist slogans predominate in the mobilizations against police violence. The “yellow vests” movement largely avoided explicitly political demands. But the decisive question is not the present state of the consciousness of the workers and young people who have entered into struggle, but the political tasks the nascent international workers’ movement will have to address in response to the attacks by Macron and his international counterparts.

The two-year “yellow vests” movement and Macron’s determination to attack the national pension system make clear that there is nothing to negotiate with Macron. Workers must break from the discredited trade union apparatus, which Macron has welcomed by promising to coordinate his government’s policies with the “social partners.” At the same time, he announced that open-air rallies of more than 10 people would still be banned on the pretext of the pandemic, even as workers are to be forced to work in their hundreds in dangerous and poorly ventilated factories.

In France and throughout Europe, independent groups of “yellow vests,” youth and striking workers exist in neighbourhoods and on social media. The Socialist Equality Party seeks to raise the consciousness of the workers, to establish their independence from political parties and apparatuses of the capitalist class, and to arm workers with a perspective that expresses the objective logic of the struggles to come. These can be victorious only to the extent that they are based upon the building of a mass movement to transfer political power to the working class and the construction of a socialist society

World Socialist 16.06.2020