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Protests sweep France as National Assembly accepts Macron's pension cuts without a vote

Protests erupted across France yesterday evening, after the National Assembly failed to censure Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne's government for imposing President Emmanuel Macron's unpopular pension cuts without a parliamentary vote. Violent clashes between heavily-armed police and thousands of protesting youth and workers continued into the night in cities throughout France.

Only 279 deputies voted a censure motion presented by right-wing deputy Charles de Courson and backed by the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) of Marine Le Pen and the Unsubmissive France (LFI) party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This fell nine short of a majority in the 577-seat Assembly. Under the arcane and reactionary terms of Article 49, line 3 of France's 1958 constitution, Macron's cuts are thus formally adopted as law without a parliamentary vote.

These events constitute a historic exposure of the state as a class dictatorship of the capitalist oligarchy. Three-quarters of the French people oppose Macron's cuts, and two-thirds want a general strike to block the economy and prevent their adoption. But the Assembly trampled the will of the people underfoot. There is no parliamentary road to stop the looting of the French people by an entrenched ruling class determined to slash pensions by hundreds of billions of euros in order to fund bank bailouts for the rich and war with Russia.

The vote was also a devastating exposure of the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties like LFI. For weeks, at protests of millions of workers and youth, they claimed that just attending protests in large numbers could convince the Assembly to oppose Macron's cuts. The predictable outcome in the Assembly, which never had a majority to vote a

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censure motion against the Borne government or the cuts, exposes the political charlatans who peddled these illusions.

Instead, a direct confrontation is emerging between the working class and the capitalist police-state machine, as protests continue to escalate amid growing, palpable fear in ruling circles. Industrial action is continuing among airline, rail and refinery workers, whose strike is beginning to cause fuel shortages in southeastern France. There is also a growing movement among teachers to stop the holding of the baccalauréat end-of-high school exam in protest against Macron.

A nationwide protest strike is scheduled for March 23, and even in official media there is growing speculation that the trade unions may not be able to hold back an uncontrolled social explosion of strikes and protests after that date.

Last night, after the announcement of the failure of the censure vote in the Assembly, spontaneous protests erupted for a fifth night since Macron announced Thursday he would impose his cuts without a parliamentary vote. The Macron administration again launched a brutal police crackdown on the protests throughout the country. Riot police armed with plastic shields, pistols and assault rifles fired tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters and savagely beat protesters, including women, with batons.

There were clashes with police in Toulouse around the Jean-Jaurès station, in Strasbourg around Kléber square, in Lille on Republic Square, and in Lyon around Bellecour Square. In Strasbourg, police kettled and trapped protesters in narrow streets and shot multiple volleys of tear gas at them, leaving protesters to choke and pass out from the fumes.

In Paris, protesters gathered and were attacked by police in areas across the city including Vauban Square near the National Assembly, then at the St. Lazare train station and Châtelet and Bastille squares. Protesters marching from Bastille Square shouted chants on the 1789 French Revolution, saying: “Louis XVI we decapitated him, Macron fears we can start again.”

As large squads of heavily-armed police charged back and forth across central Paris, some cops also assaulted diners who happened to be eating at restaurants near where protests were taking place.

An objectively revolutionary situation is emerging, as the working class in France moves into a direct confrontation with the capitalist state machine. This takes place amid a wave of strikes against austerity and inflation by millions of workers across Europe, in Germany, Britain, Portugal, Greece, Belgium, the Netherlands and beyond. The critical

question posed, as the class struggle continues to mount, is on what perspective the fight against Macron can be waged.

If the path of “democratic” parliamentary opposition is closed, this means the working class is being pushed onto the path of socialist revolution. This means, first of all, taking the struggle out of the hands of trade union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties who tie the working class to the capitalist state machine via the perspective of “social dialog” with Macron, instead building its own rank-and-file organizations of struggle, on a perspective of fighting for workers power.

The flustered and panicked remarks of union officials and pseudo-left politicians, who yesterday peddled illusions in Macron, confirm that they are not seeking to lead, but to derail a movement of the working class against the capitalist state machine.

“I believe we are in a crisis of rule and that we are plunging into an unknown political moment,” declared Green parliamentarian Sandrine Rousseau on FranceInfo. She added that France is “at the end of the Fifth Republic” established in 1958. However, Rousseau’s allies in the New Popular Ecological and Social Union (NUPES) led by Mélenchon are advancing a perspective of negotiating deals with Macron or other forces on the political right.

Like Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) leader Fabien Roussel, LFI official François Ruffin impotently appealed to Macron to “pacify the country” and “not to promulgate” the pension cut he has rammed through without a vote.

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) issued a statement declaring that the failure of the censure motion “by only a few votes, changes nothing! ... Nothing can stop the determination of workers, the unemployed, the youth and retirees to reject a pension cut that everyone considers unjustified, unfair and brutal.” It called for workers to participate in its protest on March 23 “and after, if this is necessary.”

Mélenchon, significantly, has not at any point in this crisis called to mobilize the nearly 8 million people who voted for him in last year’s presidential election. His voters included majorities in the working class areas of most of France’s largest cities. He made no such appeal and did not even bother to present his own censure motion to the Assembly, deciding instead to support the “trans-partisan” censure motion led by the right-winger de Courson.

Last night, Mélenchon again peddled illusions that one-day protests will convince Macron to take back his law, declaring: “Because the process of parliamentary censure has not worked, the time has come to pass to popular censure. I express the wish that this censure

will express itself massively, in all places and under all circumstances, and that it allow us to force the law to be taken back ... It is through the methods of social democracy that we will have to change this decision. The people must get involved, and that is what it will do.”

Claims that nothing has changed after the explosive events of the recent weeks do not hold water. Macron’s anti-democratic imposition of a pension cut in the face of overwhelming popular opposition, the National Assembly’s capitulation to this, and the resort to mass police violence have lastingly discredited France’s capitalist police state. The working class is getting involved, not with “social democratic” methods, but in a powerful, incipiently insurrectionary movement.

This movement will find no other way forward than to build its own organizations of struggle, independent of the union bureaucracies, and transfer state power from the reactionary capitalist police-state machine to these workers organizations in a socialist revolution.

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