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Macron's threat of dictatorship and the treachery of France's New Popular Front

On Wednesday, French media outlets reported that President Emmanuel Macron may invoke Article 16 of the constitution to suspend parliament and assume emergency powers. This starkly exposes critical issues posed to workers by the Ukraine war and snap elections in Britain and France: The threat of authoritarian rule does not come only from far-right forces like France's National Rally (RN). The entire capitalist establishment, desperate to escalate war with Russia and class war at home, is debating a turn to dictatorship.



French Communist Party (PCF) National Secretary and Member of Parliament Fabien Roussel shakes hands with France's President Emmanuel Macron after talks at the presidential Elysee Palace, in Paris, Monday, June 21, 2022. [AP Photo/Ludovic Marin]

Workers cannot fight these threats if they are subordinated to the social-democratic and pseudo-left forces such as the New Popular Front in France, which supports war with Russia. Macron's threat to suspend parliament exposes the New Popular Front's pledge to fight Macron and the RN at the ballot box by winning a parliamentary majority and forming a new capitalist government as empty and bankrupt.

Article 16 of France's constitution, if invoked by the president, grants him indefinite "emergency powers" to suspend parliament and rule unchecked. This article states:

If the institutions of the Republic, the Nation's independence, its territorial integrity or the respect of its international engagements are gravely threatened, and the normal functioning of constitutional authorities is interrupted, the President of the Republic takes the measures demanded by these circumstances, officially consulting the prime minister, the speakers of houses of parliament and the Constitutional Council. He informs the Nation in a message.

No reason has been given publicly for why Macron might invoke this article. Europe1 radio says he fears "excesses" in protests after the July 7 election, while the far-right CNews channel says it could be necessary "if no party obtains a [parliamentary] majority after the elections." Whatever the justification, invoking Article 16 would be an unconstitutional bid by Macron to become dictator by the divine right of the banks.

The decisive issue in Macron's snap elections, like UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's calling of July 4 snap elections in Britain, is NATO's war against Russia. These elections aim to carry out a far-right restructuring of official politics before the July 9 NATO summit in Washington, which will approve a massive escalation of the war.

The ruling classes of the NATO powers know that there is overwhelming popular opposition to their conspiracies, above all in the working class. A June 9 Eurasia Group poll found 94 percent of Americans and 88 percent of West Europeans want NATO to negotiate peace with Russia in Ukraine.

But NATO is determined to proceed with its stated war plans for a "strategic defeat" of Russia as part of a broader strategy of world conquest. NATO planners aim to force regime-change in Moscow, loot Russia's oil and strategic minerals, force Russia to withdraw military support from Syria and other countries targeted by NATO and ultimately use Russia as a base for a neo-colonial war on China. Macron's plotting of dictatorship is a warning: The capitalist class does not intend to let democracy or the workers stand in the way of its global war agenda.

Workers cannot stop the war by voting for the New Popular Front, the alliance of the big-business Socialist Party (PS), the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the Greens called by officials of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Unbowed (LFI) party. The New Popular Front is a full participant in the right-wing reorganization of the political establishment the ruling class is trying to carry out via the snap elections.

The New Popular Front is not the Popular Front of 1934-1938 that brought together mass workers' parties--the social-democratic French Section of the Workers international (SFIO) and the Stalinist Communist Party (PC)--with the bourgeois liberal Radical Party.

Trotsky warned against the counterrevolutionary role of this alliance, which tied the workers to bourgeois liberalism. It subordinated the masses of workers in the SFIO and PC to corrupt cliques in the Radical Party, led by figures like Edouard Herriot and Edouard Daladier. After selling out the 1936 French general strike and blocking a struggle for state power and socialism by the workers, the Popular Front collapsed and paved the way for the French ruling elite's 1940 collaboration with Nazism.

Trotskyists could, however, for a time enter into the SFIO, and despite the SFIO leadership's bitter hostility work among the SFIO rank-and-file. Indeed, the workers' parties in the Popular Front carried out policies unthinkable for today's New Popular Front. They formed the Always Ready to Serve (TPPS) workers' militia to fight attacks on the labor movement by fascist groups like the Cagoule, and proposed major social reforms, including the eight-hour day and paid holidays.

The New Popular Front brings together the PS, a longtime bourgeois party of French imperialism since its foundation in 1971, with parties of the affluent middle class. These include the PCF bureaucracy, which has lost its working class base over the decades since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the "populist" LFI party. It does not propose any significant social reforms and aggressively signals support for NATO's war with Russia.

Its election program calls for "delivery of appropriate weapons" and the "sending of peacekeepers" to Ukraine "to defeat the war of aggression of [Russian President] Vladimir Putin."

As Mélenchon declares his desire to "throw our differences into the river" and reconcile with the pro-austerity PS, New Popular Front officials are calling for a massive increase in military spending, which could only be funded by deep attacks on wages and social programs. Asked about his policy towards Russia, LFI official François Ruffin, who launched the first appeal to form the New Popular Front, said:

Let it start, very simply, by building our war industry. Europe must regain its sovereignty in arms, cannon, warplanes, the full gamut of weapons, materials and technology, it should no longer depend on the Americans. And it must give itself the means to do so. ... For the war effort, we must watch carefully over the unity of the nation.

Ruffin's call to enforce national unity to divert resources to the war machine is thoroughly reactionary. It also reveals why LFI backed the union bureaucracies' sell-out of explosive protests and mass strikes against Macron's pension cuts last year. These cuts took tens of billions of euros from retirees to finance Macron's record military budget increase, a policy Ruffin supports.

The union bureaucracies supporting the New Popular Front pose no obstacle to a shift far to the right in official politics. When worried BFM-TV journalists asked whether a general strike would erupt if the RN took power on July 7, General Confederation of Labor (CGT) Secretary Sophie Binet reassured them:

The CGT, in all its 130-year history, has never called a general strike. ... I cannot tell you what we would do on July 8. We would get together and take the most collective decision possible.

NATO escalation against Russia will provoke explosive opposition. But these events are an urgent warning: A movement against war and dictatorship can only be built from below, mobilizing rank-and-file workers independently of and against the bureaucracies.

Amid a mortal crisis of world capitalism, what is above all required is the building of the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), as the Trotskyist opposition to the New Popular Front. Just as there can be no socialism without democracy, there will be no democracy without a struggle of workers in France and internationally for socialism.