

Raffarin's law-and-order programme: a contribution from a reader in France

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The following commentary was submitted to the WSWS by Serge Lefort, a reader in Paris.

Jean-Pierre Raffarin, French President Jacques Chirac's prime minister, delivered his general policy statement to the National Assembly July 3. This speech has a special significance after the victory of the right in the presidential and legislative elections as it outlines the political perspectives of the president of the French Republic up to 2005.

Raffarin lost no time in reminding the deputies of their role: "It is with you that we shall take France along the path indicated by the head of state." [1] To put it bluntly: Jacques Chirac is the boss and Jean-Pierre Raffarin carries out his orders and the deputies are expected to vote for the laws "the head of state wants." Raffarin has asked them to be foot soldiers under orders, claiming that "Jacques Chirac was the bulwark against extremism and the centre of gravity of the coming together of all the republicans." He gave notice to the deputies that he intended to "legislate by edict," that is; to simply bypass parliamentary debate as General Charles De Gaulle had done in times of crisis. To become a rump parliament, [2] such is the lot reserved to the new "sky blue chamber." [3]

In his initiation speech before the Assembly, Jean-Pierre Raffarin boasted of having "proposed, according to a strict timetable, some concrete measures," but an analysis of his laborious speech reveals that this is far from being the case. The only measures spelled out in figures cover the increase in resources for law and order, [4] for justice, [5] for defence, [6] for businesses, [7] and for the privileged. [8] All the other promises are just hopes based on the hypothesis of a return to growth, over which the government has no control.

The prime minister's programme boils down to law-and-order measures to restore "the authority of the state" and the financing of businesses, which, he adds, is the "keystone of our strategy." This is intended to oblige thousands of young people to accept low-paid casual labour. Concerning law and order, the government goes a long way. It intends, in fact, to authorise the provisional detention of minors of 13 to 16, [9] to bring minors of 13 to 18 immediately before the courts, [10] and even to order "educational sanctions" [11] for children from the age of 10.

On the same day an appeal court in Paris declared a general

dismissal for lack of evidence in the case of contaminated blood. Ministerial advisors, the top bureaucrats and the doctors who covered up for the sale of blood contaminated by the AIDS virus will never face judgement, while a youth accused of a misdemeanour just on the basis of a police report will be put in jail and tried.

These repressive measures are intended to force thousands of youth to toe the line—youth who accept neither the dead-end of an education system based on selection which excludes them, nor dead-end jobs, while bourgeois society glorifies "the new lords" who "rake in all the profits" and is full of indulgence for the politicians suspected of or indicted for misappropriation of public funds.

In 1848 the French bourgeoisie massacred, deported and jailed tens of thousands of workers. It buried the Republic, too social for its tastes, and handed full powers to Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte to restore "order." In 2002 Jacques Chirac exploited *ad nauseam* the reports which state and independent television alike were only too pleased to air. Now that he has won the plebiscite, thanks to the complicity of the left, he is hastening to give exceptional resources to the police and restrict considerably the "presumption of innocence."

Dubbed "the crook" on the eve of the elections, he is taking advantage of a docile Assembly to provide himself with a police and judicial arsenal designed to "do" the youth, especially those from the working class suburbs and, above all, immigrant youth. After having used the fear of those excluded by capitalist society, the parliamentary right is setting up mechanisms that are, basically, in line with the policies of the far right.

The official left (Socialist and Communist parties), reduced to verbal opposition by its strategy of unreserved support for Chirac as well as its own social policies and electoral law-and-order campaign, confines itself to technical arguments in denouncing the "excesses" of Raffarin's law-and-order policies.

Paradoxically, it was François Bayrou, the conservative UDF (Union for French Democracy) chairman, who set the tone of the conflicts to come over the next five years: "In reality, you are facing the most onerous task which any authority, any government, any majority has had to carry out for forty years, since the tragedy of the Algerian war." He was alluding to the

threat of civil war.

Even those who benefit from the brewing crisis are aware of it: the “social divide” is deepening. On the one side, the rich are getting ever richer and, on the other, the poor ever poorer. The plan to privatise the EDF (Electricité de France—the state electricity company),[12] as well as the plan to question the right to strike in the public services, especially transport, represent further provocations against the workers.

The differences that have emerged within the government show that, despite its overwhelming majority, these gentlemen realise the fragility of their power. In 1993 the right had a majority with 257 deputies for the RPR (Gaullist Rally for the Republic) and 215 for the UDF, but they were also extremely divided. After Edouard Balladur’s candidature in 1995, the Gaullist Chirac feared that the UDF would not comply with his designs on the leadership of the right.

In 2002 the UMP (newly formed Union for a Presidential Majority), despite its 369 deputies, is no more than an empty shell, without standing, but owner of a treasure chest of some 18 million euros courtesy of the party finance law. This “thing,” as De Gaulle—who despised the machinations of the party hierarchies—would have put it, has been created to win the election. Alain Juppé, the UMP chairman, does not enjoy unanimous approval and Michèle Alliot-Marie, still RPR chairman, has asked that the future UMP chairman be elected by the membership.[13]

The law-and-order virulence of the right reflects its fear of losing the power it has just achieved by means of a plebiscite to defend the Republic from a much-exaggerated threat from the far right. They know that they are not immune from a shock as brutal as the 1997 dissolution of parliament, which enabled the left, led by Lionel Jospin, to cohabit with Jacques Chirac. Indeed, the latter has had only one aim for 26 years: to minimise the role of the centrists and the liberals.

At once inside and outside the new union of the right, the centrists retain the means to counter this plan. The composition of the Raffarin government reveals that the sharing of power between the two right-wing organisations is not necessarily to the advantage of the former Gaullists. The coming year will certainly be decisive in the fratricidal struggle between the RPR and the UDF over who controls the right.

Notes:

[1] Jacques Chirac was not elected on May 5, 2002 on the basis of a programme. Rather he rode to power on the anti-Le Pen upsurge and he profited from the mobilisation of the “far left” and the “Plural Left” for him. The unconditional surrender of all the reformists, who claim to represent the working class, enabled him to win, without conducting an election campaign, with a result worthy of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte’s in 1848. Three years later, on December 2, 1851, Bonaparte organised a *coup d’état* against the social Republic to re-establish the Empire and brutally repress the workers. The fascist bogeyman in 2002 took the place of the red scare of 1848.

[2] In 1640 the English parliament was summoned by Charles I, dissolved by Cromwell in 1653, and twice recalled at the whim of Cromwell, who ruled as lord protector.

[3] Assembly elected in 1919 thanks to the alliance of the conservative right and the centrists against the “Bolshevik peril,” which brutally repressed the great strikes of 1920.

[4] 13,500 job creations over five years for the police and the gendarmes.

[5] More than 10,000 jobs over five years.

[6] A new military act before the end of the year.

[7] Complete (retroactive) exoneration from contributions as of July 1, 2002 for firms that employ “poorly qualified youth.”

[8] A 5 percent lowering of income tax to be implemented next autumn. Even the bourgeois analysts are in agreement that the richest 10 percent of taxpayers will reap two thirds of the benefits from this reduction.

[9] This procedure reinforces police powers, thus weakening the power of the judiciary. Provisional detention also creates the conditions for a prison society in which the young offenders learn “the law of the underworld” (prostitution, drugs) and form relationships with the dealers.

[10] This measure, already contested in relation to adults, as it favours police accusations without giving the accused the means to defend himself, is particularly discriminatory for youth whom the police suspect of having a “delinquent personality,” on the pretext that their fathers are unemployed.

[11] What the prime minister delicately calls “educational centres” are borstals/reform schools (*maisons de correction*), which were previously abolished because of their inefficacy. The youth were jailed in wings for minors in ordinary prisons, where they were subjected to the violence of prison life.

[12] State-owned electricity company. After the privatisation of water, that of electricity is a new stage in the appropriation by the private sector of energy resources.

[13] The aim of Jacques Chirac, who noted the failure of the UEM (Unité en mouvement—unity in movement) led by François Fillon, is to create a single party of the right (Gaullists, centrists, “free-market” liberals). With Alain Juppé as chairman, the UMP will only become a party in the spring of 2003.



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