

New French prime minister outlines anti-working class program

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In his first major policy statement July 3, French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin outlined the program of austerity measures and repression that his administration intends to implement. The right-wing regime, with a majority in the National Assembly and backed by President Jacques Chirac, is preparing a massive reduction in social spending, an expansion of the military and an increase in the power of the state.

Using vague and bombastic language, Raffarin called for a “new humanism,” which would rest on four “pillars”: the “attentive state,” “the shared Republic,” “a creative France,” and “humanized globalization.”

The new government is not simply relying on such phrases. It is making preparations for an all-out confrontation with the working class. Raffarin has asked the heads of public services—above all, in public transportation, whose workers were particularly combative during the strike movement of 1995—to prepare mechanisms to “ensure the continuity of services in the case of strikes.”

Raffarin’s four “pillars” need to be decoded. Making the French state more “attentive” means strengthening the role of the police and the military. Lamenting the “dispersion” of the state, Raffarin declared his intention to “restore Republican authority” by creating 13,500 new jobs in the police forces and making the administration of justice more “serene,” by increasing its personnel by 10,100. He also proposes to reform the 1945 ordinance that bans the imprisonment of minors, to “make young delinquents face their responsibilities.” Raffarin promised as well to increase the military budget so as to modernize its equipment and “improve the conditions of the military.”

The “shared Republic” is a code phrase for cutting spending and shrinking the role of the state in the economy. Raffarin suggested eliminating 900,000 public sector workers’ jobs between 2001 and 2016 through attrition—thus cutting 40 percent of a workforce of roughly 2.3 million. He wants to avoid “an overly quick increase in costs” of health insurance by limiting the state regulation and creating the “necessary flexibility” to assure the “performance” of

hospitals (presumably a reference to the increase in health workers’ salaries, which the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* considers exorbitant). He declared that health care would be financed according to the principles of “clear roles” and “everyone assuming their responsibilities.” The average person will presumably pay more for health care.

Raffarin also proposed a dramatic reshaping of the pension system by June 2003. While the financial press complains bitterly of the number of workers who do not work beyond the ages of 50 or 55, Raffarin wants “those who wish to prolong their working life beyond [the age of 60 to be able] to do so,” simultaneously announcing—with a straight face—that the right to “retire at the age of 60 ... will not be jeopardized.” Similarly, while he recommends “greater equality between Frenchmen,” he states that “everyone must have the opportunity to complete his pension”—which will inevitably favor more prosperous social layers.

Raffarin, whose political origins are in regional administration, made decentralization a centerpiece of his speech. Presented as a way of making government “closer” to citizens by transferring decision-making power to regional governments, its principal aim is a constitutional reform “authoriz[ing] local experimentation” which would, according to President Chirac, allow smaller areas to serve as guinea pigs for “full-scale reforms.”

“Creative France” is a code phrase for massive reduction in taxation and decreasing employers’ outlays, supposedly to stimulate the creation of small businesses and, hence, jobs. Raffarin thus proposed to decrease payroll taxes, to reduce income taxes by 5 percent, and to maintain his policy of not giving the minimum wage (SMIC) the traditional raise given by each incoming administration. It is clear, however, that these proposals do not principally aim to create jobs, but simply to lighten employers’ fiscal burdens. Raffarin wants increased “flexibility” in the law setting the workweek at 35 hours, so as to not “frustrate the desires of certain employees to work longer hours”—and if workers work longer hours, companies will obviously need fewer of them.

Raffarin did not openly suggest the privatization of the

national electricity and natural gas companies (Electricité de France [EDF] and Gaz de France [GDF]). However, he spoke of “two large companies with international reputations” in the energy sector whose “juridical form will be modified to allow for a progressive opening-up of their capital,” i.e., which will be privatized. *Le Figaro* immediately identified the companies Raffarin had in mind.

To drive home his vision of unbridled capitalism, Raffarin added that “generally, the state does best to refrain from competing with private enterprise, except when strategic interests are at stake.”

“Humanized globalization” occupied only a few minutes of the 90-minute speech. Raffarin proclaimed the importance of Franco-German relations inside Europe (relations sorely strained by the proposed reform of the Common Agricultural Policy supported by Germany, which Raffarin explicitly opposed elsewhere in his speech), the importance of creating a “European identity” (without explaining what a united Europe would do) and the necessity to intervene in any discussion of “globalization’s human dimension,” an object which he did not define.

To understand Raffarin’s approach, and his nervousness, one must recall the last time a right-wing French government tried to impose drastic cuts in social spending. In November-December 1995 the so-called Juppé Plan (named for then Prime Minister Alain Juppé) provoked a near general strike in the public sector. Millions of workers walked out and demonstrated against the government.

The right-wing regime, despite an overwhelming parliamentary majority, proved to be isolated and generally despised. Several weeks into the strike, pollsters found that more than 60 percent of the population still supported the strikers. The CGT and FO, the Stalinists of the French Communist Party (PCF) and the “far left” radicals managed to prevent the mass movement from bringing down the government, but the strikes left the regime badly shaken. Juppé, now the head of the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP—the current ruling party), remains extremely unpopular to this day.

François Hollande, interim leader of the Socialist Party (PS), responded to Raffarin’s speech by warning the new government of the potential consequences of its actions. Noting the “decreased protection for low-wage workers,” he asserted, “You will need a lot of dexterity to ... convince the country to give up its social gains.” The PS leadership agrees on the need for austerity and “reform” of the pension scheme and other social programs. They are concerned, however, that a frontal assault will provoke another mass eruption.

An article in *Figaro Magazine* (a weekly supplement to the newspaper) put the question bluntly in an article entitled

“Is France still governable?” The article explained that the government must convince public opinion: “An impossible challenge? The one on which Alain Juppé stumbled in 1995? Not necessarily.” Its author claimed that public opinion is not “the street (a few thousand demonstrators, two or three tractors) ... or the unions.”

This provocative language, as well as the announcement that the new government was openly making strike-breaking preparations, provides a glimpse of the real state of class relations in France.

The official left responded to the plans for strike-breaking with a few miserable phrases. Jean-Christophe Cambadélis of the PS called them a “posthumous revenge for 1995, a way to punish the public sector workers who took to the streets against Juppé.” Cambadélis went on to suggest changing the PS from a “party of elected representatives” into a “party of combat,” which he nevertheless wants to see led by hardened apologists for capitalism such as Hollande, Laurent Fabius and Jack Lang.

In the meantime, a social confrontation is brewing. The vague and confusing language of Raffarin’s speech did not calm the electorate’s doubts—the approval ratings of Chirac and Raffarin fell by 3 percent and 2 percent to 47 percent and 56 percent respectively during the first week of July. Wide layers of the population are mistrustful of a majority party and an administration stained by corruption scandals.

The government and big business are incurring increasing hostility from wide layers of the population. The casualization of labor is continuing, with 75 percent of French companies using temporary workers in 2002, compared to 56 percent in 1999, and 62 percent of firms calculating working hours on a yearly basis compared to 22 percent in 1999. Undocumented immigrants have begun to occupy churches to escape police, fearing the offensive against them proclaimed by Raffarin in his speech. The refusal to increase the minimum wage angered low-wage and minimum-wage workers (*smicards*), like the bakery cashier who, when interviewed by *Le Parisien*, said: “It’s nauseating, all these politicians who promise us a better life, when it’s exactly the opposite that’s going on.”



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