

French President Hollande's prime-time speech promises austerity, war

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On November 13 French President François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS) gave a televised address and interview to some 400 journalists assembled at the Elysée presidential palace. With his poll ratings collapsing from over 60 percent after his election in May to the current 36 percent, Hollande reassured the ruling elite that he would continue with pro-business policies of war and social austerity in defiance of public opinion.

The AFP news agency commented that Hollande was “responding to urgent appeals from [EU headquarters in] Brussels, Germany, and the main international economic organizations.” They are all “impatient to see France resolutely taking the road to structural reforms (flexibility of the labor market, reductions in public expenditure),” AFP wrote.

Hollande proposed a cut of €12 billion (US\$15.4 billion) in public spending each year, so that such spending would fall €60 billion by the end of Hollande's five-year term. This would require major cuts in social spending, particularly those provided by local authorities, as well as further cuts to health care and pensions.

As in Greece and other southern European countries, such social cuts undermine the broader economy, as working people forced to compensate for cuts in critical services spend less on other items. Hollande bluntly predicted that until the end of 2013, “we will have a continual rise in unemployment.” Official unemployment already tops 10 percent.

Hollande feigned concern for the victims of his policies, observing: “Families, regions, and companies

will find this difficult to live through.”

He promised to move ahead with reactionary changes to labor laws and the “competitiveness pact” aimed at slashing French employers' labor costs. After accepting the pro-business Gallois Report's conclusions, Hollande has proposed €20 billion in corporate tax cuts. (See “French social democrats adopt new cuts after accepting pro-austerity Gallois report”)

Planned increases in sales taxes will take some €6 billion from the pockets of consumers, hitting workers most harshly. They already face sharp rises in the prices of basic necessities.

Revealingly, Hollande said that the need to cut labor costs “is not everything,” but “is anything but unimportant.”

The French president asked the union bureaucracy and employers' organizations to press ahead with labor law “reforms,” saying: “This negotiation is the most important in a long time. I call on all trade union and employers' organizations: they must reach a historic compromise.” He warned that if the unions and employers' organizations failed to reach an agreement, however, his government would act without it.

Hollande summarily dismissed concerns that his policies were unpopular: “I am not working for the next election; I am working for the next generation.”

He indicated that he would pursue the escalation of imperialist intervention—begun under his predecessor, conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, with the 2011 NATO war in Libya—in Mali and Syria, two former

French colonies.

Hollande hailed the Islamist-dominated Syrian opposition coalition assembled by Washington to wage its proxy war against President Bashar al-Assad: “France recognizes the Syrian National Coalition as the only representative of the Syrian people and thus as the future government of democratic Syria, making it possible to finish off the regime of Bashar al-Assad.”

His was the first Western government to recognize this coalition of imperialist stooges hand-picked by the US government; the US and Britain have for now stopped short of recognizing it as a government-in-exile.

Hollande added that open weapons deliveries to Syria would be possible “as soon as there is a legitimate government in Syria.”

In addition to continuing French imperialist wars and intensifying attacks on workers’ social rights, Hollande has kept up the assault on democratic rights carried out by Sarkozy. He is expelling Roma from France and dismantling their camps, and enforcing Islamophobic laws banning Muslim headscarves in school and the wearing of the burqa in public.

Hollande’s speech underscored the bankruptcy of the petty-bourgeois “left” forces—such as the French Communist Party (PCF) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA)—who supported him, claiming Hollande could be pushed to the left. In fact, he responds to rising popular opposition by sharpening his right-wing policies. This again demonstrates the necessity of a break with these forces and the mobilization of the working class in a revolutionary struggle against the PS government.

Asked by journalists about his pro-business agenda, Hollande responded by claiming there was some relationship between his policies and socialism: “There were always two conceptions, one productive conception—one could even speak of a supply-side socialism—and a more traditional conception where one spoke of demand-side socialism.”

Hollande’s “supply-side” vocabulary, drawn from the lexicon of right-wing Republican politicians in the United States and not from any socialist tradition, highlights the anti-working class character of his policies.

The press itself no longer bothers to hide the deception involved in Hollande’s attempts to give his pro-business policies a mild “left” guise. In its editorial on Hollande’s speech, entitled “Speaking clearly and truthfully, at least to a point,” *Le Monde* wrote: “Asked finally if his economic strategy did not constitute ‘a Copernican revolution’ ... François Hollande preferred to decline to answer. Despite his desire to speak clearly and truthfully, it was probably too early to admit it.”

That is to say, given that Hollande is only a few months into his presidency and already deeply unpopular, the French ruling elite feels it is too early to state what everyone knows or senses: the axis of the PS policies is not what millions of people hoped it would be. Rather, it is built on the defense of wealth and social privilege against the working population.



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