

French President Hollande pledges austerity, war in prime time TV interview

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29 March 2013

In an hour-long France2 television interview last night, French President François Hollande sought to outline his policies amid rising popular anger with his government.

Hollande's interview aimed to reassure the ruling class that his Socialist Party (PS) government would continue with its wars and social cuts in defiance of public opinion.

Since coming to power 10 months ago, Hollande has imposed tens of billions of euros in budget cuts, mass sackings in the auto industry, including the closing of the Aulnay plant recently agreed with the union bureaucracy, and the invasion of Mali. France's economy is stagnant, with unemployment surging past 10 percent.

Hollande's approval ratings have sunk to 30 percent, a record low among French presidents since such polls have been kept, as Hollande loses support even among PS voters. Only 30 percent of youth and 32 percent of manual workers now approve of his administration.

PS officials discussing Hollande's speech with the press described the situation as "not good," with one adviser of Hollande telling *Le Monde*: "He must give a lucid overview of the situation, while avoiding giving the impression that everything is screwed."

On France2, Hollande signaled more attacks on pensions and social programs, escalations of wars in Mali and Syria, combined with attacks on the democratic rights of Muslims and homosexuals, aiming to divide the working class.

He declared, "My priority is jobs, the direction I'm going in is growth," calling for "simplification" of regulations facing businesses seeking to hire workers. He praised the labor law deregulation agreed last year with the union bureaucracy and employers' groups, aiming to facilitate sacking and low-wage employment.

Though his speech largely focused on the economy, he did not raise the main event in European economic life this month: the European Union (EU) bailout imposed upon Cyprus with the support of the Hollande government. This is because any honest portrayal of EU policy in Cyprus would explode the lie that the European bourgeoisie wants jobs and economic growth. In fact, their policy is aimed at intensifying the exploitation of the working class amid a ruthless war among competing sections of finance capital.

The EU is imposing a bailout that is widely expected to slash Cyprus' banking sector, double unemployment and destroy 10 to 25 percent of the island's economy.

In his interview, Hollande proceeded to outline a raft of social cuts in France that will further undermine workers' purchasing power and the broader economy.

Hollande signaled new pension cuts, negotiated with the union bureaucracy. He said, "As we live longer, life expectancy is increasing. We will have to have longer pay-in periods. This will be the subject of negotiations with the social partners [i.e., the unions and business groups] ... There will be a discussion of parameters, all parameters: the sums paid in, cost-of-living adjustments, and lengthening the pay-in period."

He also proposed to cut a €2 billion deficit in Social Security payments to families, by reducing the sums paid to higher-income families. For the ruling class, this is a step toward turning these programs into poverty programs, weakening support for them in the middle classes, and preparing their wholesale destruction.

These announcements underline the reactionary character of the PS government, and the fraud perpetrated on the electorate by pseudo-left tendencies such as the French Communist Party (PCF) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), which called for a

Hollande vote. These forces claimed that compared to conservative candidates, Hollande would be more willing to carry out left-wing policies if they were demanded by street demonstrations and protest strikes.

In fact, Hollande is inflexibly pursuing austerity policies in the interests of big business against elementary economic interests of the working class. As for the pseudo-left forces, they are not even attempting to organize protests against Hollande's social attacks. Indeed, they support and are helping to formulate these attacks, through their role in the trade union bureaucracy.

The rest of Hollande's speech was devoted to outlining his plans to deepen attacks on democratic rights and France's imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East.

Hollande signaled further attacks on Muslims inside France, implicitly criticizing a court decision throwing out the Baby-Loup day care center's decision to fire a worker for wearing a Muslim headscarf. He commented, "I think the law must intervene."

He suggested that the reactionary 2004 law banning headscarves in the public schools would also be extended to day care centers: "In what is known as the public service of early childhood, in publicly funded day care centers, there must be a certain similarity with what exists in schools."

Amid right-wing protests against his proposed law giving homosexuals the right to marry, Hollande also signaled a cowardly adaptation to the right. Noting that his bill did not guarantee the right to medically assisted procreation to homosexuals, he said he would conform to any court decision against it, also pledging to maintain a ban on surrogate mothers as long as he was in office.

Hollande also pledged to continue French imperialism's wars overseas. Responding to fears in ruling circles that spending cuts might affect these wars, he said that military spending would not fall from 2013 to 2014.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Marc Ayrault had pledged that France would maintain its nuclear arsenal and its ability to intervene overseas. He said, "Let's quit scaring ourselves with catastrophic scenarios that were never seriously considered, at least by the President of the Republic, myself, or the Defense Minister ... What France is doing in Mali, it will still be

able to do in five years."

On the war in Mali, while cynically claiming that France was a country of "deliverance and emancipation," Hollande outlined a policy of indefinite neo-colonial intervention in the Sahel. He announced that the French army would keep 2,000 troops in Mali until July and would still have 1,000 troops in Mali in December. He added that France would always have troops stationed around Mali.

On Syria, where France has been one of the main European drivers of the US-led proxy war with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Hollande reiterated demands to directly arm opposition forces. Though the Syrian opposition largely consists of Al Qaeda-linked groups such as the Al Nusra Front and other right-wing Islamist forces, Hollande dismissed the risk that weapons could fall into the hands of Islamic terrorists.



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