

French president's New Year message: an agenda for militarism and class war

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8 January 2014

In a December 31 televised address, French President François Hollande of the ruling Socialist Party (PS) delivered his New Year “wishes”. Vaunting the neo-colonial wars his government waged in 2013 he announced what amounted to a declaration of war on the working class’ living standards, and social and democratic rights.

His call for “respect for the rules of security, liberty and justice” rang hollow. In fact, 2013 was a year in which France, working with the United States, nearly succeeded in starting a war with Syria that could have escalated into a war with Iran and possibly Russia. Hollande's austerity policies and anti-immigrant measures have made his the most unpopular government since World War II and have created the conditions for the neo-fascist National Front to be the highest polling party for the European elections next March.

It testifies to the bankruptcy of capitalism and of France's bourgeois “left” parties that, despite the disastrous impact of these policies, Hollande had nothing to offer except more of the same.

Attempting to enhance his popularity by posing as a war leader, he declared that “France has carried out its duty at the time of grave international crises: Mali, Syria, the Central African Republic.” He peppered his speech with jingoistic rhetoric: “France is always in front, and I'm proud of it, serving peace. It is her honour. It is her duty. That is why we intervened in Mali, to fight terrorism. Why we act to avoid the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Why we are present in Central Africa to save human lives.”

Such bloodstained appeals to “honour” and “duty” cannot mask the fact that his interventions in Africa are part of an imperialist scramble for control of the continent's resources at the expense of its impoverished

population.

His claim that his support for the intervention in Syria by France and the US was to prevent the use of chemical weapons in Syria is a bare-faced lie. There is overwhelming proof that it is the jihadist proxy forces armed by France and its allies that used these weapons. False accusations that the Syrian army had used Sarin gas against its people were designed to provoke a NATO intervention and rescue the imperialist-backed intervention from military defeat.

This set the tone for Hollande's proposals for an assault on the working class through what he called a “responsibility pact.” Accordingly, Hollande “saluted the social partners”—that is, the union bureaucracy and employers—for negotiating the National Industrial Agreement (ANI) reached in January 2013 on the “security of employment”.

This led to a law enabling employers to cut wages and tear up the labour code and implement mass layoffs to increase competitiveness in “ailing” factories. The destruction of jobs has continued relentlessly since. The major example of this was the closure last year of the PSA auto plant at Aulnay near Paris, which employed 3,000 workers.

It was agreed to by all the unions, and engineered by the CGT union led by a member of the Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) pseudo-left group, in line with the policy of the PS government, which described the closure as “ineluctable”.

Hollande's “responsibility pact” outlined three points to cover the concerns of French Employers Federation (Medef) boss Pierre Gattaz. He promised employers billions of euros cut from their payroll taxes, paid for by drastic social spending reductions. Also, employers will have fewer “constraints” on their activities—that is, even greater flexibility for exploitation of the workers.

In exchange, Hollande claimed these attacks will be linked to promises by employers to create jobs.

Gattaz exclaimed, “We are ready to play the game”. This is unsurprising since this was the Medef plan sent to Hollande in November. For the Medef this translates into the formation of a large low-wage sector with no job security.

This is well underway with Hollande creating government “subsidised contracts” (*contrats aidés*) forcing the unemployed into work. Moreover, most jobs on offer are short term contracts or temporary agency employment. The latter have doubled since 1994 to 580,000.

In a January 6 *Le Monde* interview, Gattaz said, “I am satisfied. He [Hollande] has launched a general project to get the country out of the rut and show the way which suits us fine.” Gattaz claimed a million jobs could be created provided “we are liberated from a certain number of brakes, obstacles, taboos, dogmas which are like rocks in our backpack.”

Gattaz bluntly laid out the sums he expected Hollande to cut for business: €50 billion in labour costs and €50 billion in taxes over five years. He railed against tax and social security contributions of 46 percent of GDP, compared to a European average of 40 percent. To this end, Gattaz claimed “the ideal would be to make €100 billion savings in public spending over five years,” singling out family benefits and sickness insurance in particular for cuts.

Hollande justified his new assault on workers because “the crisis turned out to be longer, deeper than we had forecast”, as if his government had no responsibility for imposing it on the backs of society’s producers. The stock market exploded, however, gaining 18 percent in 2013.

The latest unemployment figures for November of an increase of 17,800 jobless give the lie to Hollande’s electoral promises to reverse rising unemployment by the end of 2013. Official unemployment has reached 3.29 million, though in reality is 5 million, if one includes jobless workers who are no longer registered in the system.

Hollande warned that 2014 will be the year of “strong decisions”, vowing to “first of all reduce public spending”. The responsibility for cuts to services by the PS government will be passed on to local government.

The previous hand-out to employers by Hollande of

the so-called “tax credit for competitiveness” in 2012 now costs €20 billion a year and coming from pockets of the hardest hit through a rise in sales taxes (VAT) from January 1. Most goods and services taxed at 19.6 percent have increased to 20 percent. Transport and Catering are now taxed at 10 percent instead of 7 percent. Workers can expect similar hikes with the latest “responsibility pact”.



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