

Incoming French Prime Minister Valls pledges austerity, appeals to far right

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In his speech yesterday outlining his political agenda, incoming Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister Manuel Valls laid out plans for deep social cuts and made militaristic, law-and-order appeals to the neo-fascist National Front's (FN) growing political base.

Valls' speech testifies to the disintegration of bourgeois "left" politics in France and Europe as a whole. The Socialist Party's response to its unprecedented defeat in last month's municipal elections, due to popular anger over mass unemployment and austerity measures, is a violent shift to the right. Given the choice between making concessions to the working class or slashing workers' living standards while stoking up pro-FN sentiment, the PS has chosen to promote the neo-fascists.

Valls, whose speechwriters evidently read the police reports he received in his previous post as interior minister, began by raising the existence of deep popular alienation from official politics. "I have seen many closed faces, shaking voices, tightened lips," he said. "To say things more simply, many of our fellow citizens do not believe us anymore. They do not hear us anymore. For them, public life has become a dead letter."

Valls then made a series of appeals to far-right sentiment, calling for targeting "delinquency" as well as "anti-Christian" acts, as part of a broader campaign supposedly targeting racism.

He saluted the French army and its wars in Mali and the Central African Republic, brazenly denying France's well-documented support for the Rwandan Hutu regime's 1994 genocide of the Tutsis. "Our voice—that of our head of state, our diplomacy, of our armies—is respected," he said. "I do not accept unjust accusations that France might have been the accomplice of genocide, whereas France always stakes

its honor on its role of separating belligerents."

He grotesquely praised French chauvinism, declaring: "France is not obscure nationalism; it is the light of what is universal. France, yes, it is the arrogance to believe that what we do here is what the entire world should be doing."

This right-wing trash is to be the pretext for a campaign to massively lower living standards, slash social spending, and funnel vast amounts of money to the rich. Valls pledged to meet this week with the trade union bureaucracy and employers' groups to discuss new favors for business and the planned €50 billion cut in yearly public spending under President François Hollande's so-called "Responsibility Pact." This includes €19 billion in cuts to the public sector wage bill and €10 billion in health care cuts.

Valls openly stated that he aims to slash workers' living standards, which he called the "cost of labor." He said, "The time of decision has come. First of all, there is the cost of labor. It must fall. It is one of our main levers for competitiveness—not the only one, but a major one."

He proposed tax incentives for businesses to hire workers on salaries between 100 and 130 percent of the minimum wage. These would include the elimination of taxes paid by businesses on their wages to fund health care and pensions. The aim of this policy is the development of France as a low-wage export economy—in which social programs would be systematically starved of funding and workers would have to step up the already widespread practice of buying private health insurance to supplement the national health plan.

Valls also laid out plans for a massive reorganization and cut in spending by authorities at the various levels of French local government, from regions to

departments to communes or municipalities.

He called for cutting the number of regions in France by half and eliminating elected councils at the departmental level by 2021. He also called for eliminating the “general competence clause,” which stipulates that local governments can undertake projects on any subject of public interest, unless responsibility for it is specifically allocated to other authorities.

Valls’ predecessor, PS Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, had already called for this measure as part of a “simplification shock” to slash local government spending and more directly subordinate it to the central government and the banks.

Like the Responsibility Pact and his nationalist appeals, Valls’ calls for local government cuts are aligned with the demands of the financial aristocracy. They underscore the significance of investment bank JPMorgan’s calls last year for “political reforms” to better suppress opposition to social cuts across Europe. (See: JPMorgan calls for authoritarian regimes in Europe).

JP Morgan wrote that European political systems “were established in the aftermath of dictatorship, and were defined by that experience.”

It continued: “Constitutions tend to show a strong socialist influence, reflecting the political strength that left-wing parties gained after the defeat of fascism. Political systems around the periphery typically display several of the following features: weak executives; weak central states relative to regions; constitutional protections of labor rights; consensus-building systems which foster political clientelism; and the right to protest if unwelcome changes are made to the political status quo. The shortcomings of this political legacy have been revealed by the crisis.”

The PS’ moves to undermine labor rights, wages and public spending while simultaneously promoting the far right are taken directly from JPMorgan’s playbook for dismantling all the gains won by the working class in the post-World War II period. The fact that this is being carried out by the political descendants of the organizations JPMorgan called “left-wing,” such as the PS and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), underscores the historical correctness of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s struggle against social democracy and Stalinism.

The Socialist Party’s public adoption of a platform of

wage-cutting and social regression justified through appeals to far-right sentiment marks a further step in the decomposition of European bourgeois “left” politics. Like the discredited Greek PASOK party, the PS is setting up a confrontation between the working class and a capitalist elite that is rapidly shifting towards the far right.

The National Assembly voted 306 to 236 to approve Valls’ policy speech, with the bulk of the opposition coming from the right-wing Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). Eleven PS, six Green, and three Left Radical deputies abstained, but the overwhelming majority of the bourgeois “left” deputies supported the speech.

This shows the empty hypocrisy of a demand by 100 PS legislators for a “contract” with Valls before they could endorse his government, and the Greens’ decision to withdraw from the PS-led government after the election defeat. Despite their feeble attempts to posture as critics of Valls, the PS and its various political allies all support Valls’ agenda.

As for the Left Front, the alliance of long-time PS allies led by the PCF and former PS minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon, their vote against Valls is an empty gesture that will be seen as such. Their members within the trade union bureaucracy will, in any case, soon be negotiating the next round of social cuts, as Valls made clear in his speech.

It is the suppression of deep popular opposition to the reactionary agenda of the ruling class by petty-bourgeois forces such as the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party that allows the FN to rise, by posturing as the only opponent of attacks on the population.



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