French government survives confidence vote over austerity law

Antoine Lerougetel
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The Socialist Party (PS) government of Prime Minister Manuel Valls easily survived a censure motion presented after Valls used clause 49-3 of the French constitution on Wednesday to override parliament and impose the pro-austerity Macron Law without a vote. The censure motion received 234 votes, well below the majority of 289 required in the 577-seat National Assembly.

On Wednesday, it became clear that many PS deputies of the so-called "rebel" (*frondeur*) faction preferred not to vote openly for the law, designed by PS Economy Minister and former investment banker Emmanuel Macron. The law allows for large-scale privatizations of state assets, longer Sunday work without overtime pay, streamlining of layoff procedures and liberalization of medical and legal professions. Hollande's free-market economic policies, aligned with the reactionary demands of the European Union (EU), enjoyed a 3 percent approval rating in a poll late last year.

Numbering some 40 deputies, the PS "rebels" had pledged to vote down the law, along with the 10 Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) deputies as well as the Greens. Together with the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), this might have possibly formed a majority in the National Assembly and voted down Macron's reactionary law. This would have dealt the Valls government and President François Hollande a humiliating blow and created a crisis in France's relations with the EU, which all factions of the PS are determined to avoid.

Valls therefore spared his PS colleagues the embarrassment of voting for the law and resorted to clause 49-3. He then had to face a motion of no confidence drafted by the right-wing UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), which itself called for deeper austerity. If the PS government had lost the vote, it would have been forced to resign and parliament would have been dissolved.

Predictably, however, none of the PS "rebels" wanted to vote against the Valls government, to which they had already granted confidence in a vote last autumn.

They all fear that, in the case the fall of the government triggered new elections, they would be swept out on a wave of popular hostility to the PS. As *L'Obs* noted, "Even for the *frondeurs*, who threatened to deprive the government of a parliamentary majority over the Macron law, their hearts weren't necessarily in it."

"No one for a moment raised voting for the censure motion," explained PS *frondeur* spokesman Christian Paul. "We are full members of the parliamentary majority."

One PS "rebel," Benoît Hamon declared, "I have no wish to sanction the government which I support." He endorsed Valls' "education, foreign, defense and security policies."

In the event, none of the *frondeurs* voted against the government. The 234 votes against were the 198 UMP deputies, 30 of the conservative UDI (Union of Democrats and Independents), one Green, 6 of the 10 PCF deputies, and 2 of the neo-fascist National Front.

The law will now go through the Senate which, having a right-wing majority, will doubtless be amended in way that drives policy further to the right. It will then return to the National Assembly for a final vote.

The result of the censure vote highlights the bankruptcy of any attempt to oppose the austerity policies imposed on workers through the parliamentary system, instead of through the mobilization of the working class.

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The PS “rebels” and long-standing PS allies who have promoted them, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Left Front, stand exposed as reactionary political frauds. Despite their posturing, they have supported PS austerity measures ever since President François Hollande was elected in 2012.

The six PCF deputies who voted to censure the government—calculating that the PS majority was safe, and that they could afford the luxury of making an impotent “symbolic” protest—ended up further abasing themselves by voting for the UMP's reactionary censure motion.

They voted for a text that demands stepped up budget cuts and attacks on the working class, declaring, “By avoiding reforming the State, our pension system, trade union relations, and the labor code, this minimal measure [the Macron Law] is a missed opportunity to rebuild our country, like our European partners who have already carried out these reforms.”

The author also recommends:

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