

French government threatens ban on protests against labor law

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On Wednesday, following the broad mobilization of workers in Tuesday's protest against the Socialist Party (PS) government's regressive labor law, President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls threatened to impose an outright ban on further protests against the law.

Appearing on France Inter radio in the morning, Valls called for an end to demonstrations such as those in Paris the previous day involving at least 75,000 workers, according to conservative estimates by the police. Referring to the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, Valls said: "I ask them not to organize protests in Paris anymore."

Valls made clear that the PS planned to defy the protests and impose the law, which is opposed by 75 percent of the French people, without even the fig leaf of minor changes. "The government will not change a text that is already the outcome of negotiations with the unions... It's a text that is good for employees and for companies and creates new rights," he said.

He asserted that the demonstrations could no longer be held safely and declared, "When one is incapable of ensuring security at a protest, when 700 or 800 rioters are allowed to infiltrate the protest and get out of control, one does not organize such demonstrations, which can quickly degenerate."

He concluded that the PS could ban further protests against the labor law. If the CGT requested authorization for new protests, Valls said, "On a case by case basis, we will fulfill our responsibilities."

Valls' threat to ban protests against the labor law were reiterated by Hollande personally at a cabinet meeting Wednesday, according to his spokesman Stéphane Le Foll. Hollande said, "At a time when France is hosting the Euro 2016 [football tournament], when it is faced with terrorism, demonstrations can no longer be authorized if property, people and public property cannot be

safeguarded."

In a recent interview with Europe1 radio, Hollande stressed that the PS would impose the law without any substantial changes. "Too many governments have given in" to similar opposition in the past, he said. "This law, which is being debated including on the street, will pass."

PS First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis echoed these remarks, calling for "a pause in the demonstrations, because they are degenerating into violence." He said the CGT was being "used as a tool by rioters."

Right-wing politicians supported the Socialist Party's call for a ban on protests or indicated their agreement. "We can no longer accept repeated protests in big cities in France," declared former prime minister François Fillon, while Marion Maréchal-Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) said, "The question of the legitimacy of these protests can be posed. If the unions cannot avoid the sort of violence we have seen for weeks, these protests must at all costs stop."

The claim that a ban on protests is required to prevent street violence is a transparently fraudulent pretext for trampling on the democratic rights of the working class. Valls and Hollande argue as if a few hundred unidentified rioters had succeeded in overpowering the tens of thousands of police deployed in Paris, as in other cities across France, and had sacked and pillaged large parts of the city.

The reality is quite different. Youth and workers overwhelmingly engaged in peaceful demonstrations have been subjected to violent assaults by riot police. When clashes have erupted with security forces, peaceful protesters have been quickly kettled and surrounded. Nonetheless, opposition in the working class has continued to grow and become more determined.

Shaken by this rising opposition in the working class, the PS and the entire French ruling class are signaling that they are prepared to shred democratic rights and

criminalize any expression of working class opposition. The logic of this policy is the establishment of a police state regime to impose the austerity agenda of the European capitalist class.

The Socialist Party's call to ban protests has momentous political and historical significance. Moves to implement it will provoke deeply rooted political opposition in the working class. Such a policy amounts to the destruction of the democratic rights won by the working class in the struggle against European fascism and against the US-backed bourgeois regimes set up immediately after World War II.

The European ruling classes averted social revolution, despite their historic crimes under the fascist regimes, due above all to the role of the Stalinist parties, which blocked a struggle of the working class for power. Nonetheless, they faced explosive anti-capitalist sentiment, the growing influence of the Trotskyist movement in many European countries, including France, and the danger of socialist revolution as embodied in the continued existence of the USSR. They were forced to make vast concessions on social and democratic rights.

Article 7 of the preamble of the French Constitution, adopted in 1946, formally guaranteed the right to strike, which had been denied under the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime.

Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, drafted in 1950 and signed by France and many other countries across Europe, formally guaranteed the right to assemble and demonstrate.

What is being revealed today are the political implications of the dissolution of the USSR a quarter-century ago and the austerity drive that has been carried out by the banks and the European governments ever since, particularly since the 2008 economic crisis. The rights guaranteed in the French Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights are incompatible with the austerity assault on the working class across Europe. The ruling class is moving to dispense with these rights and deal with social opposition by repression, relying on its vast and growing police and electronic spying apparatus.

In France, this exposes the significance of the state of emergency imposed by the PS after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris. The *World Socialist Web Site* repeatedly warned that its main target was not Islamist terror networks—which the NATO powers tolerate insofar as they are useful as assets in their proxy war for regime-change in Syria—but the working class. Only a few months

later, the PS is moving to outlaw opposition in the working class to its austerity agenda.

The struggle to defend democratic rights raises above all the question of the formation of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class. The CGT and the various pseudo-left organizations that are allied to it, such as the Left Front, will prove impotent and hostile to a struggle to mobilize opposition to the PS in the working class.

The statements of Valls and Hollande show that CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez's meeting with Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri today can accomplish nothing except prepare a sellout. Martinez told the press, "The government is wrong to refuse to negotiate and to dictate preconditions to all discussion... I hope that Friday we will remove the preconditions and that the discussions will allow us to advance."

It is now obvious, however, that the PS will not change the law and does not intend to negotiate anything with Martinez except the terms of surrender.

The more it becomes clear that the only way forward is an intransigent political struggle against the PS, the more the CGT and the Left Front will oppose such a struggle. The Left Front consists of longstanding political allies of the PS. It voted for the state of emergency in the National Assembly. It even sent a leading member, Eric Coquerel, to attend a neo-fascist demonstration in support of the police last month. It will prove bitterly hostile to a defense of democratic rights against the PS.

The critical question facing workers in France is the mobilization of support in the international working class. The PS worked out the labor law, modeled on the Hartz laws in Germany, with leading officials across Europe. When it encountered the first wave of mass protests in March, the PS held a meeting to coordinate policy with social democratic politicians from Germany, Italy and Portugal. There is explosive social opposition to austerity and police state measures among workers in all these countries, and it is there that workers in France will find their most important allies.



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