

French youth protest Le Pen-Macron second round in presidential elections

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Thousands of high school students protested, blockaded their schools and marched in cities across France Thursday amid growing anger over a second round of the presidential election limited to two right-wing candidates, ex-banker Emmanuel Macron and National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen.

Millions of working people understand that this election offers them only the choice of which president will oversee an authoritarian and militarist regime in France. Le Pen is a neo-fascist. As for Macron, youth widely despise him for his role as economy minister in the current Socialist Party (PS) government, which brutally repressed strikes and mass youth protests last year against the regressive PS labor law.

Thousands of youth marched yesterday and several high schools were blockaded in Paris, Rennes, and Nantes. Slogans included “a choice between plague and cholera” and “neither Marine nor Macron, neither fatherland nor boss.”

In Paris, 20 high schools were blockaded or hit by protests. An unauthorized demonstration by thousands of students broke out on Republic Square opposing both Le Pen and Macron under the slogan “Neither fascism nor free-market capitalism,” and clashes between police and students broke out at a protest on Bastille Square. Among those high school students old enough to vote, many said they planned to cast blank votes.

Some students compared the present run-off with that of 2002, the only other time that the FN advanced to the second round. In 2002, this provoked spontaneous mass protests. Today, “I am shocked that no one is protesting,” said Elise. “Everyone was expecting that Marine Le Pen would be on the second round, but that’s just it: it’s horrible that everyone was expecting it! We decided we had to do something against the FN

to defend our values. Even if we are not old enough to vote, it is our future. And we do not want a racist and xenophobic party in power.”

Student groups will hold another election protest today at 7 p.m. in front of Paris City Hall.

In Rennes, thousands of protesters marched peacefully before clashing with police when security forces tried to block the march from proceeding to the center of town and fired tear gas. Clashes then spread across the downtown as youth chanted “Macron, Le Pen, we don’t want them.” Referring to the FN’s demagogic claim to be an “anti-system” party, youth also chanted: “The real anti-system forces are us.”

Other protests took place in cities including Lyon, Toulouse and Dijon. Hundreds marched in Dijon to slogans including “neither the banker nor the fascist.”

The youth protests are initial indications of deep social anger throughout the population over the presidential elections, which saw the elimination of the candidates of France’s two traditional parties of government, the ruling Socialist Party and The Republicans (LR). Voters repeatedly shifted in their preferences and expressed their frustration with a campaign dominated by corruption charges and law-and-order hysteria. Both Macron and Le Pen are widely hated.

The eruption of youth protests underscores the timeliness of the call by the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) for an active boycott of the second round, in order to mobilize political opposition among workers and youth to both candidates and prepare a political struggle of the working class against whichever reactionary candidate wins the election.

After years of war, mass unemployment and a state of emergency suspending basic democratic rights under the PS government of President François Hollande,

there is explosive social anger in the working class. A general strike erupted in the French overseas department of Guyana only a few weeks before the first round.

The critical issue facing youth protesting the elections is to turn to the working class, in defiance of the reactionary pro-Macron propaganda of the media, to mobilize it in political struggle against the entire ruling class.

To contain rising class anger and preserve Macron's fragile lead over Le Pen—polls show her receiving an unprecedented 40 percent of the vote—the press is unleashing a torrent of hypocritical propaganda, slandering those who oppose Macron from the left as allies of neo-fascism. The French daily *Libération* published yesterday an open letter by journalist Johan Hufnagel. Addressed to “my friends on the left who will not vote against Le Pen,” it raised and dismissed the fate of Whirlpool workers in Amiens facing an imminent plant closure and the loss of their jobs.

“I look at it from all sides, to try to understand your unease about voting for a candidate supported by the right, big business, free-marketeers who would happily sacrifice Whirlpool workers to their big exciting plans. I can't believe you will not go to the ballot boxes,” he wrote, adding; “Emmanuel Macron appears to some of you to be an adversary, but he is not an enemy. It is Marine Le Pen who is the enemy of democracy, of the Republic, the ally of racists, anti-Semites, of Holocaust deniers, of ultra-violent and homophobic groups.”

These lines are a political fraud. They combine two distinctive features of the bankrupt, upper-middle-class “left” layers that have orbited around the PS since its foundation in 1971: disregard for democratic rights and contempt for the working class.

Firstly, Macron too is an enemy of democracy. A top adviser to Hollande, he supported the PS as it imposed a perpetually extended state of emergency that allows for arbitrary detentions, police seizures and press censorship. As for the issue of racism and Republican principles, the same PS government in which Macron had a ministerial portfolio carried out a sinister policy of ethnic deportation of the Roma that flagrantly violates Republican principles of ethnic neutrality.

Secondly, Hufnagel's casual dismissal of the fate of Whirlpool workers itself exemplifies the class forces driving the dangerous rise of the FN. The domination

over decades of what passed for “left” politics by affluent middle-class operatives, who are totally indifferent as to whether thousands of workers are thrown onto the unemployment lines, has allowed far-right populists to posture as the true defenders of working families.

The fate of Whirlpool workers in Amiens, whose plant may soon be shipped to Poland, is a case in point. Macron had planned to meet with Whirlpool union officials in a cynical attempt to exploit the Whirlpool plant for publicity. He did not dare visit the plant, however, or speak to the workers, who bitterly denounced him to the press. One of them told a union delegate going to meet Macron: “Don't shake his hand. Anyway, he won't want to touch your dirty worker's hands.”

Sybille, a Whirlpool worker, told the WSWS: “We'll all be fired, for sure. Everything is against us. So we have no hopes in Macron. He just thinks we're illiterates, that our IQ isn't high enough to vote for him.”

A friend of a retired Whirlpool worker added: “We are working class, so we don't vote Macron.”

Le Pen took the opportunity to upstage Macron, exploiting the well known class divide between the workers and France's state-funded union bureaucracies. She made a surprise visit to the Whirlpool plant to speak to the workers and denounce Macron's behavior. “I thought it showed so much contempt for what the Whirlpool workers are going through that I decided to come see you,” she said, mocking Macron for eating “fancy cakes” with the unions.

Le Pen's populist demagogy in Amiens is a warning: amid explosive anger in the working class, those who try to suppress opposition to Macron from the left only strengthen the FN. The PES will not compromise itself by any association with Macron whatsoever, but seek to mobilize opposition to both right-wing candidates on a socialist and internationalist program.



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