

Macron speaks to assembled houses of French parliament in Versailles

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4 July 2017

On Monday, newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron called together the two houses of the French parliament to deliver an extended address on his government's policies. Macron called for military escalation in Africa and broad-ranging changes to the basic institutions of the French government, in line with the historic attacks he is preparing on social and democratic rights in France. These, he said, would be implemented in close collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy.

Macron's decision to address the joint parliament in the royal palace at Versailles was highly unusual. On the two previous occasions such an address was delivered at Versailles, the context was an immediate emergency.

In 2009, Nicolas Sarkozy spoke in the aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street crash. In 2015, following the terror attacks in Paris, François Hollande called such an assembly to justify his government's escalation of attacks on democratic rights, which culminated in the imposition of a state of emergency.

This time, Macron forced the parliament to assemble so he could deliver a speech discussing his government's drive to escalate neo-colonial wars in Africa, write the state of emergency into law, impose social cuts by decree and fundamentally restructure the French state. It was widely remarked in the media that the address would overshadow the traditional governmental address to the National Assembly that Prime Minister Edouard Philippe is slated to deliver today.

Macron's decision to summon together the houses of parliament in Versailles was not, however, simply an act of personal arrogance. It was a recognition that his initiatives have consequences as far-reaching as a market crash that threatened to take down the world financial system or Hollande's decision to suspend indefinitely basic democratic rights guaranteed by the French Constitution.

These wide-ranging attacks on basic social and democratic rights face enormous opposition in France, and particularly from the working class—a point that is widely remarked in the world press. The German *Süddeutsche*

Zeitung bluntly titled its article on Macron's speech "Macron acts like a king and control freak: This can't end well."

In his speech, Macron essentially acknowledged the deep popular opposition to his government and its anti-social agenda. After announcing that he would discuss "the mandate that the people have given us," he noted that "the forces of alienation are extremely powerful: alienation from the new division of labor, due to misery, due to poverty."

Macron referred to French society's "sclerotic systems," to the fact that many Frenchmen "feel themselves prisoners of their social origins, their conditions, a trajectory to which they are fated," and warned that France "is a country that rebels when it feels it is not being respected."

Nonetheless, he went on to defend his reactionary agenda of rewriting French labor law in favor of the corporations, and doing so by decree, and incorporating the state of emergency into law. He denounced "false accusations" made against his policies: "Are we discussing liberalizing the labor code? We are told we are obeying the diktat of Brussels. Are we talking of escaping the state of emergency? We are told that our freedoms are being traded away... None of that is true."

It is Macron's assurances, not the widespread sentiment in the population, that are untrue. His reactionary plan to facilitate mass sackings and allow corporations to violate the labor code, in line with the original plans of the previous Socialist Party (PS) government's labor law, was worked out in close collaboration with Berlin and the European Union bureaucracy in Brussels. Similarly, by permanently granting police the right to impose house arrest on individuals and ban protests, Macron aims to gut basic democratic rights with the stroke of a pen.

Deep popular opposition to Macron's program, which is defended by all of France's traditional parties of government, underlay the decision of millions of voters to cast blank ballots in the presidential elections, and of an unprecedented 57 percent of voters to abstain in the legislative elections.

The rest of Macron's speech was an attempt to legitimize his unpopular agenda through appeals to nationalism and militarism, as well as promises to make far-reaching changes to the different branches of the French government and calls for negotiations with the trade union bureaucracy.

Macron, who was just back from a trip to Mali to discuss with African heads of state plans for a permanent deployment of 5,000 French troops in France's former West African colonial empire, hailed the armed forces: "France will remain true to its alliances. We need a strategic and tactical renewal of our armies... Everywhere, we must act to protect our interests and our security, in our interests and in those of the peoples concerned, and I observe here the role of our armed forces in Africa, in the Sahel. Such interventions are effective only if they are carried out in the long term."

Macron also proposed to redraw France's electoral map and carry out broad changes to France's legislative and judicial branches. He called for a one-third reduction in the number of parliamentarians in the National Assembly and the Senate, and for the election of the National Assembly by means of "a dose of proportional representation." He also called for the imposition of term limits, and for limits on the power of the Republic's Court of Justice, which rules on allegations of wrongdoing against state officials.

Above all, Macron signaled that he would rely politically on close collaboration with the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), that is, the main body where the French trade unions coordinate their policies with the state and the business federations. This is aimed at providing Macron's social attacks with a false veneer of legitimacy. But while Macron plans to negotiate his policies with the union bureaucracies, they remain massively unpopular.

"The Economic, Social and Environmental Council must become the chamber of the future, where all the living forces of the nation express themselves," he declared. "For that, we must review from top to bottom the way it represents its constituencies, all the while reducing the number of members by a third."

He added that the CESE would be turned into the basic planning body through which attacks on workers' social and democratic rights would be prepared and approved: "The number of consultative organizations has multiplied. It's impossible even to list them all. By reforming the CESE, we will make it the sole consultative body used by all of our legislative texts."

The speech confirms the warnings made by the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* that opposition to Macron's reactionary program must take the form of an independent political movement rallying the opposition to austerity and war in the

working class in Europe and internationally.

Workers face a situation where, after the electoral collapse of the PS, the trade unions and allied political tendencies such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (UF) work to provide a pseudo-left cover for the negotiation and passage of Macron's reforms.

UF and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) deputies boycotted Macron's speech at Versailles, and Mélenchon himself criticized Macron's remarks.

"There was an interminable rain of truisms in Versailles: false marble, overplayed Bonapartism, bleating pro-European sentiment, horrible boredom," Mélenchon wrote on Facebook. "Beyond that, there were so many obscure passages, lists of beautiful sentiments and sugary ways of presenting ferocious and unalloyed social attacks... Overall, it was written at the level of a chamber of commerce dispatch, with free-market dogmatism that is as old-fashioned as it lunatic."

Mélenchon's criticisms are completely impotent, however, insofar as his improbable strategy to head up opposition to Macron—based on winning a majority in the National Assembly—completely failed. Since he refused to call for a boycott of the second round of the presidential election to oppose both Macron and neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen, Mélenchon's support has rapidly collapsed. With a handful of deputies in the assembly, Mélenchon is in a position only to issue rhetorical denunciations of Macron while supporting the union bureaucracy's maneuvers with him.

Opposition to Macron's reactionary program will find expression only to the extent that workers struggle outside the context of this sclerotic and bankrupt political order.



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