Law to “moralize” French politics: A fig leaf for austerity

Francis Dubois
15 August 2017

The law to “moralize” political life, approved August 3 and 9 by the two houses of the French parliament, is a desperate and farcical attempt to spread illusions in a political establishment that is nothing more than a tool of the banks and the financial oligarchy.

The campaign to “re-establish confidence” that produced this law began after the “Penelope affair,” launched against conservative candidate François Fillon over his pro-Russian positions, but which revealed endemic corruption in the French ruling elite. The drafting of the bill was given over to François Bayrou, the leader of the Democratic Movement (MoDem), who has since resigned as charges surfaced that his party illegally organized no-show jobs at the European Parliament.

The law was approved last Wednesday by a vote 412 to 74 with 62 abstentions. Most conservative The Republicans (LR) deputies voted against; Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (UF), the Stalinist French Communist Party, and the New Left group (Socialist Party and allies) abstained. After the vote, the deputies gave the government a standing ovation.

The law is a purely cosmetic measure aimed at covering up the most embarrassing faults of the system, while giving the financial aristocracy all the powers it needs to buy the parliament. Sections of the law do, however, give a revealing look at the practices of the French regime.

The suppression of the “parliamentary reserve,” a €150 million slush fund placed at the disposal of the deputies and senators to fund various retinues in their districts, could not be avoided; otherwise the entire exercise would have been discredited. It was in part motivated by the fact that its distribution was creating growing tensions within the political establishment. It was opposed by LR, which apparently had the most to lose.

The measure on the official and pervasive lobbying activities of major corporations—who each year pay out considerable sums of money that are rarely declared and produce amendments that are then submitted by parliamentarians—is a “corrective” that will correct nothing. The ban on lobbyists paying the salaries of advisors of the president, of parliamentarians, and of members of ministerial staffs will not prevent the financial aristocracy from making the laws. A deputy will no longer be authorized to participate himself in lobbying activity.

Parliamentarians’ lucrative “consulting” activity will not be banned, but will be subject to certain restrictions. A member of parliament will not be able to engage in consulting during his or her term in office, or to advise firms bidding for state contracts. Otherwise, everything remains the same as before.

As for *pantouflage*, the revolving door between top jobs in the state bureaucracy and in finance and industry—of which president Macron, a former Rothschild banker, is a classic example—the law changes nothing.

The new law prevents parliamentarians from financing a “close relative” via an advisor position, though they can hire nephews, nieces, cousins or members of the families of other deputies. In this case, they are simply obliged to report it to the High Authority for the Transparency of Public Life. A priori, nothing prevents a pair of parliamentarians from financing each other’s families: they will only be required to state that they are doing it.

Expenses up to €5,840 per month will no longer be paid to National Assembly deputies. They have €5,782 monthly salary, a credit line of €9,500, the right to up to €2,800 monthly for local salaries, the right to travel

© World Socialist Web Site

first class in trains and to take taxis and flights (up to 80 per year) for free. Previously they had to give their word that this was being used for their official functions. Now expenses will only be reimbursed if the deputies provide receipts.

At the same time, the law reintroduces the famous "Bercy lock," which gives the Finance Ministry at Bercy, instead of the justice system, the right to investigate budgetary infractions. This makes the ministry a key tool for factional political warfare.

For the financing of political parties, the government is creating by decree a "Bank for Democracy," to regulate party financing and prevent scandals like the Liliane Bettencourt affair, in which LR presidential campaigns received illicit funding directly from France's wealthiest woman. Public subsidies, as before, will be based on how many parliamentarians belong to the respective parties, thus favoring the established parties. It is safe to say that this bank's loans will not in any way hamper the financial aristocracy's financing of parties that are favorable to it.

The moralization law is an attempt to give limited political credibility to a political establishment and parliament directed controlled by the ruling elite and led by cabals that are nostalgic for the monarchy and the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy régime and aspire to build a police state. This system of representation is largely rejected by the population, and above all by the working class, as was shown by the massive abstention in both rounds of the June legislative elections.

As social inequality reaches ever more monstrous proportions, it is less and less compatible even with the trappings of democracy. The pretense of "moralizing" the French capitalist class is absurd. It is an operation intended to give a veneer of legitimacy to the attacks on basic social and democratic rights that Macron aims to impose, with his unilateral decrees to rewrite French labor law and his creation of a permanent state of emergency.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) participated in this operation, trying to provide another layer of whitewashing to the ruling elite, proposing various amendments to the bill. LFI did everything it could to insist that "citizen control" over the parliament is possible. Mélenchon—a close collaborator of the late president François Mitterrand, the founder of the PS and master of political corruption—proposed to pay parliamentarians the minimum wage and give the citizens the right to recall them at any time.

Mélenchon personally tried to participate in talks with Bayrou on modifying the bill after the May presidential election. LFI ultimately abstained, however, after having suggested at the end of July that it would oppose the moralization law by presenting two censure motions.

LFI's main concern was that the veneer of morality was too thin and already beginning to crack. Clémentine Autain of LFI told France Info: "We voted for a certain number of things, but what bothers us is that this law will not allow us to address the basic issue, which is the massive popular distrust of the political system and institutions. So we abstained, because that is our way of saying that we are not happy."

Mélenchon hopes to profit from this cynical word-juggling. His perspective for a parliamentary "opposition" to Macron, alongside toothless street protests policed by the union bureaucracies and various NGOs, is based on this conception of parliament as an institution that can be pressured to fight for marginal modifications and improvements in social conditions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site