

# French President Macron unveils decrees to destroy Labour Code

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France's Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and Labour Minister Muriel Pénicaud yesterday unveiled President Emmanuel Macron's decrees aimed at tearing up the country's Labour Code. A year after the Socialist Party (PS) government imposed its labour law, trampling the opposition of the vast majority of the French people, Macron is unilaterally reinstating into law all the most unpopular measures the PS decided to withdraw in the face of mass protests.

The decrees—negotiated by Macron's government, business federations, and the trade unions—are provoking broad opposition among workers. Over two-thirds of French people (68 percent) think their boss will exploit the decrees, using the greater freedom to negotiate contracts at the level of individual firms to reduce their wages and benefits, according to an Opinion Way poll. Four in five say they expect social protests against Macron's decrees.

The ruling elite in France and internationally fear popular opposition to the decrees, but they consider it a critical step in the destruction of social rights won by workers over generations of struggle in the twentieth century. They hope to impose what the ruling class forced through in Germany with the Social Democrats' Hartz laws, or the European Union (EU) austerity measures in Greece since the 2008 global crisis. As French capital's competitiveness collapses and the EU plans a broad militarisation of its foreign policy, the ruling class is heading for a confrontation with the working class.

Germany's *Die Welt* cited Jérôme Fourquet of the Ifop polling institute: "There is a definite sense that we are on the eve of a major struggle." The German daily added, "No one knows who will win. Only one thing is certain: the coming weeks of September will be a moment of truth. Macron, who began as a candidate

who stood no chance at all, then realised the exploit of winning a presidential campaign that was completely unpredictable from start to finish, now has a historic chance. He will not have a second one."

The *New York Daily News* wrote that for Macron, the decrees are "the first big test of his plans to reform the euro zone's second-biggest economy. For decades governments of the left and right have tried to reform France's strict labour rules, but have always diluted them in the face of street protests."

Edouard Philippe echoed this position, declaring that the key question involved in the decrees was "making up for lost years, years of rendez-vous that we missed, maybe that were badly negotiated or badly explained, or poorly understood, but always pushed back or diluted."

The methods Macron is using to impose his decrees testify to the deep-going crisis of democracy in France under the diktat of the financial aristocracy. The National Assembly, dominated by Macron supporters who emerged from legislative elections in which only a minority of the French population participated, voted an enabling act allowing Macron to impose his decrees without even the formality of a parliamentary vote.

The decrees facilitate mass sackings by limiting the constraints on businesses. They impose upper limits on fines labour courts can impose for unfair dismissal, and the maximum delay for launching a case in the labour courts is being cut from 24 to 12 months. To estimate the financial difficulties of a company that intends to announce mass sackings, now its financial health within France alone will be taken into account. Thus, complex financial transactions to organise bankruptcies or blacken the balance sheets of French subsidiaries will facilitate sackings.

The decrees also allow businesses to spread

precarious working conditions and defy the terms of the Labour Code and industry-level contracts. Individual bosses will be able to negotiate firm-level contracts that violate industry contracts and the Labour Code, which are thus emptied of their substance. Industry-level contracts can, however, regulate the adoption of temp contracts, and in particular promote the use of the so-called project contract, a precarious contract Macron created.

As he presents these reforms, Macron is counting on the transformation, which is already largely completed, of the union bureaucracies into corporatist machines totally loyal to big business, as well as the collaboration of the PS and petty bourgeois “left” forces like Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the New Anti-capitalist Party.

The decrees reinforce the integration of the unions into management, by merging different forms of workforce representation. The four bodies will be transformed into two—on the one side, trade union delegates, and on the other workers’ delegates, the works committee, and the committee for hygiene, security and working conditions.

A worker who is unionised or wants to become so will be able to receive more training on this subject, and the state will create an organisation to monitor collective bargaining, on the German model, in an effort to buy total loyalty from local union officials. These organisations are indeed slated to play a key role in the imposition of firm-level contracts and accords to limit the bonus for overtime work from 25 to 10 percent of wages.

The massive sums to be obtained by thus increasing the exploitation of the workers would serve to fatten the profits of the billionaires who dominate Europe and to finance defence spending to militarise the European continent. Macron published his decrees only two days after speaking to a conference of French ambassadors. There, he presented plans for an aggressive and militaristic world strategy to assert French interests amid rising conflicts between the major powers, including in Europe.

At the conference, Macron declared, “We had forgotten that the last 70 years of peace on the European continent were an aberration in our collective history. ... The threat is at our gates, and war is on our continent.” He called for making the French army “one of the best in the world.”

Macron is manifestly counting on the draconian police powers under the French state of emergency and on the complicity of the trade union bureaucracies to impose his decrees despite mass opposition. The national union confederations, which negotiated these measures at length with Macron, have no intention of carrying out a serious struggle against him.

Laurent Berger of the French Democratic Labour Confederation said he is “disappointed”, but his union, like Workers Force, will not even organise symbolic protests. The General Confederation of Labour, which also joined the talks with Macron, hypocritically declared that “All the fears we had have been confirmed, and the supplementary fear is evident and in writing: this is the end of the labour contract.” The Stalinist union is calling for protests on September 12.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (Socialist Equality Party) stresses that workers cannot rely on symbolic protests organised by the trade unions on a narrow, nationalist perspective. The natural allies of French workers in struggle against anti-social decrees, militarism and police repression under the state of emergency are the European and international working class. That is the objective social force upon which a revolutionary and truly socialist struggle against the militaristic and austerity policies of the EU can be based.



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