

French government staggered by Interior Minister Collomb's resignation

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The resignation on October 2 of Gérard Collomb, the second-ranking minister in the government, under conditions without precedent in France's Fifth Republic, has laid bare the extreme weakness and deep crisis of President Emmanuel Macron's government.

After Macron initially refused Collomb's resignation on October 1, Collomb submitted it again and forced Macron to accept it a day after having refused it. Macron, apparently taken by surprise, was forced to give the job to Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, while he looked for a replacement. Philippe was then forced to cancel a scheduled official visit to South Africa.

Collomb had already announced last month that he intended to leave the government after the May 2019 European elections, supposedly to run in the municipal elections in Lyon in 2020. This announcement had effectively left France's powerful interior ministry leaderless.

The departure of one of the Macron presidential campaign's first supporters and the sudden collapse of the Macron-Collomb alliance, a pillar of the executive since Macron's election last year, has directly undermined the president. While it was expected, it has also staggered the entire French ruling elite. It underscores the instability of the government as it sets out to make many fundamental attacks on democratic rights and cuts to basic social programs, including pensions, health care and unemployment insurance created by workers' struggles over several generations.

The press was alarmed at the circumstances of Collomb's resignation. "In the second year of his term, the late Interior Minister defied the president of the Republic and made him back down. It is a first in the Fifth Republic whose 60th birthday we are celebrating on October 4," wrote *Le Monde*, adding: "With his departure, the former ally of Emmanuel Macron has

indeed unleashed a crisis of authority at the summit of the state."

The newspaper also warned about the visible impotence of the "head of government, Edouard Philippe, who will look like a fool in front of the deputies as he seems totally taken by surprise," although the constitution makes him responsible for nominating and firing ministers.

Echoing broader media accusations that Collomb deserted his post, the paper adds that after Macron and Philippe, "The third victim is Collomb himself, as one wonders if he understood very well the implications of his actions for what is known as the authority of the state."

After his departure, Collomb immediately distanced himself from the president. He announced his intention to run in the Lyon municipal elections as an unaffiliated candidate, thus abandoning Macron's Republic on the March (LRM) party. And over the last several days, Collomb and his associates have made multiple biting or alarmist comments in the press about the viability of Macron's presidency.

Collomb's associates told *La Dépêche du Midi* that shortly before his resignation, Collomb told them: "Those who are still able to speak frankly to Macron are those who were there from the beginning: Ferrand, Castaner, Griveaux and me ... He will end up hating me. But if everyone bows down before him, he will end up being isolated, because occupying the Elysée presidential palace by nature isolates people."

Collomb himself declared on LCI that his relationship with Macron exploded because "I tried to bring him news of what is happening on the ground." He added on BFM-TV that Macron will be a victim of "hubris ... the curse of the gods. When at a certain time, you become overly sure of yourself, you conclude that you

will clear out everything in your path. There is a phrase that says that those whom the gods would destroy, they first strike blind.”

Above all, Collomb’s departure takes place amid persistent and broad-based protests and complaints among the police and domestic security forces.

This already erupted into public police protests at the end of 2016 and in 2017, to which Collomb alluded in his resignation speech at the interior ministry on October 3, mentioning the ongoing “revolt” of the police. Thousands of policemen had marched multiple times in cities across France, demanding more funding and recognition for the repression of mass protests against the labor law that they were carrying out under the state of emergency and the so-called “war on terror.”

This opposition also emerged in the Benalla affair this summer, which thoroughly destabilized the government. When it emerged that Alexandre Benalla, a close Macron aide, had beaten up peaceful protesters on May Day while posing as a policeman, much of France’s parliamentary opposition applauded the police against Macron.

At the head of this operation stood Unsubmissive France (LFI) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who declared an open alliance with the right-wing The Republicans (LR) party on the issue and also worked in concert with the neo-fascist National Rally (formerly National Front) of Marine Le Pen. All of them took the opportunity to support the police repression on May Day.

This episode has confirmed that Macron has indeed lost the support of significant sections of what has long been a key social base of the French government: the police forces.

While the ongoing police protests are fertile grounds for various far-right provocations, Mélenchon is trying to pass them off as progressive, and to pass off the police as democratic supporters of the Republic.

In fact, faced with the unpopularity of the executive, the police are preparing stepped-up repression of workers’ struggles and working class neighborhoods. In his resignation speech last week, Collomb insisted on the need for greater police intervention in working class suburbs, saying the police had to “ensure security” and carry out a “Republican reconquest” of these districts.

With Collomb’s departure, it is not simply one of Macron’s longest-standing supporters that is leaving the sinking ship. It is the second top-ranked minister to resign in a month, after Ecology Minister Nicolas Hulot. After the rail strike and the privatization of the National Railways (SNCF), Macron’s popularity ratings have evaporated. An Elabe poll found that only 6 percent of French people believe that his policies will improve their well-being.

Collomb’s departure confirms the enormous weakness of the Macron government, which is fundamentally due to the enormous and growing social inequality in France, and the deep opposition in the working class to Macron’s program.

The rallying of LFI officials close to the union bureaucracy to the side of the police underscores the urgent need for the working class to make a new development in their struggle against Macron and the European Union. As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, to stop the drive to austerity and military-police rule, workers cannot fight within the straitjacket imposed by the unions, which they have already largely abandoned. The task is to build their own committees of action and prepare a movement that will raise the necessity of the transfer of power to the working class.



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