

French President Macron hails fascist dictator Philippe Pétain

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On Wednesday, as he toured World War I battlefields in the run-up to tomorrow's celebration in Paris of the centenary of the end of World War I, French President Emmanuel Macron hailed France's fascist dictator, Marshal Philippe Pétain.

Macron declared that it was "legitimate" to honor Pétain: "He was a great soldier, this is a reality. Political life like human nature is sometimes more complex than one would like to believe."

After these statements provoked an outpouring of popular revulsion, Macron returned Thursday to defend the leader of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime and praise his record as a general in World War I. He declared, "I will hide no pages of history. Marshal Pétain was also, during World War I, a great soldier. That is a reality of our country."

Macron's statements are a deliberate effort to rehabilitate Pétain, the figurehead of French fascism and the Vichy regime, the bloodiest and most reactionary regime France has ever known.

As the head of the Vichy regime collaborating with the Nazi occupation of France, Pétain was implicated in all the crimes of European fascism. He ordered the launch of mass deportations that led over 75,000 Jews from France to the death camps. He presided over a regime that recruited Frenchmen to the Axis armies fighting the Nazi war of annihilation in the Soviet Union, and to the French Militia, which crushed armed resistance to the Nazi occupation.

The Vichy regime also violently repressed the left, banned communist parties, dissolved the trade unions and declared the class struggle illegal.

Immediately after World War II, the Provisional Government of the French Republic organized a trial of Pétain on charges of treason and collusion with the enemy. On August 15, 1945, Pétain was found guilty,

given a death sentence later commuted to life imprisonment, and stricken from the army with loss of rank and honors.

Since then, praise of Pétain has been the exclusive domain of neo-fascists, and Macron's honoring of Pétain's World War I record echoes their attempts to overturn the August 15, 1945 trial.

Macron's hailing of Pétain is an unabashed overture to the far right.

Within the working class, Macron is hated as the "president of the rich." He is booed whenever he encounters a working class audience. When he stopped at a Renault factory in Maubeuge as part of his World War I tour on Thursday, he was greeted with catcalls and a union official who informed him he "is not welcome here."

In response, Macron is seeking to cultivate the neo-fascists to create a popular base for his reactionary policies of militarism and social austerity. In this, Macron is reprising the policy of his German ally, the grand coalition government between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social-Democratic Party (SPD).

In the face of the overwhelming unpopularity of Berlin's decision in 2014 to become a military "great power" for the first time since Hitler's defeat, the grand coalition has deliberately cultivated the far-right. An initial propaganda campaign to downplay Hitler's crimes led by a cabal around right-wing extremist Professor Jörg Baberowski has escalated into a campaign by the German political establishment to promote the far-right.

Despite mass protests by hundreds of thousands against neo-fascism, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party enjoys growing support in the army and domestic intelligence, whose former chief, Hans-Georg

Maassen, worked in close collaboration with the AfD to publish a report branding opposition to capitalism as “left-wing extremism.” Workers are flooded with fascist state propaganda, such as Interior Minister Horst Seehofer’s statement that he would have liked to have joined neo-Nazi riots in Chemnitz.

Such statements from Macron’s German allies make quite clear the character of Macron’s efforts to rehabilitate Pétain. It is not a neutral act of historical memory, appraising Pétain’s skill on the killing fields of World War I, but a political provocation aiming aimed at strengthening the far-right in order to ram through discredited policies of austerity and war despite mounting popular opposition.

Heads of state are gathering for tomorrow’s World War I centenary in Paris amid the deepest crisis of capitalism and of US-European relations since the 1930s Depression and World War II. While Trump scraps the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty to prepare nuclear war against Russia and China, Macron calls for building a European army to confront not only Russia and China, but also the United States.

The European imperialist powers’ attempts to band together to make a bid for world hegemony require them to drastically restructure class relations, repudiating all the social and democratic concessions made to the working class after the fall of fascism. Macron government officials declared at this year’s Munich Security Conference that France would spend 300 billion euros on the Army by 2023. As Macron hands out tens of billions of euros in tax cuts to the super-rich, such spending is possible only on the basis of ruthless austerity against the workers.

To promote militarism and slash social rights established in struggle against fascism, the French bourgeoisie is driven to legitimize the Vichy dictatorship. In 1943, the National Resistance Council’s (CNR) Stalinist, social-democratic and bourgeois forces pledged “the eviction of great economic and financial feudalities from rule over the economy.”

As the Trotskyist movement explained, these forces strangled a revolution, with devastating long-term consequences for the working class—blocking a seizure of power by the workers, preserving capitalism and protecting the fascist ruling classes. After armed insurrections across Europe in 1943-4 and mass strike

waves in 1946-7, however, the French ruling elite was forced to make vast concessions to the workers. Rail and energy firms were nationalized and state pensions, free health care and free public education were instituted in France and across much of Western Europe.

Decades later, Macron aims to destroy what is left of these gains to feed the war machine. This spring, he privatized the National Railways by decree, despite strike action and opposition from 95 percent of rail workers. Now, even as his ratings plunge and his ministerial cabinet disintegrates, he is forging ahead with cuts to pensions, health care and unemployment insurance, while strengthening the state’s police powers.

Macron’s hailing of Pétain underscores the fascist character of his policy. All the middle-class organizations and parties that in the 2017 elections promoted Macron as a “lesser evil” than neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen—and who are now negotiating Macron’s social cuts with him through the union bureaucracy—are exposed as bankrupt and reactionary.

Macron’s efforts to rehabilitate the fascist dictator Pétain are an unanswerable confirmation of the warning made by the International Committee of the Fourth International that the world’s ruling elites, bent on war and austerity, are actively promoting a revival of fascism. It makes clear that only a socialist political program seeking to overturn the capitalist system, the root of war and dictatorship, offers humanity a means to avoid the return of the barbarism of the 1930s.



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