

Macron offers “great national debate” as trap for French yellow vest protesters

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Last week, on the eve of the 10th Saturday yellow vest protest, French President Emmanuel Macron launched his “great national debate” on the yellow vest movement. After initiating the so-called debate with an insulting letter to the French people insisting he would not modify his policies, Macron attended a discussion with 600 mayors in the town of Bourgtheroulde, which was transformed into a fortified camp by the security services. The event confirmed that masses of yellow vests and tens of millions of workers are right to dismiss Macron’s “debate” as a political fraud.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* insisted since before the beginning of the yellow vest movement, there is nothing to negotiate with Macron. The question posed to the movement, and the broader class struggle across Europe, is the transfer of power to the working class. This requires the formation of workers’ organs of struggle independent of the unions and the mobilization of the working class internationally for the expropriation of the financial aristocracy.

As he launched the “great debate” at Bourgtheroulde, Macron turned the town of 3,700 people in Normandy into a fortress to protect him from the French population with which he claims he is debating. He mobilized 10 squadrons of the mobile *gendarmerie*, seven companies of CRS riot police and 300 *gendarmes* of the territorial force. While he spoke for seven hours to a hand-picked group of mayors, who loudly applauded him, he met neither the yellow vests nor the town’s inhabitants.

His intervention in Bourgtheroulde only confirmed that the “great debate” will take as a given the policies of austerity and militarism he laid out in his letter to the French people. He will give the protesters nothing and seek to crush all opposition with police repression.

In his letter, Macron rejected any modification of his tax cut for the rich. His supposed debate on budget policy and efficiency in the public services devolved into an initiative to protect the riches of the financial aristocracy by stepping up anti-worker austerity. “We will not go back on the measures we have taken to encourage investment and make work more rewarding,” he wrote. “They were just voted on and are only beginning to yield their effects. We cannot in any case continue tax cuts without reducing the overall level of our public spending.”

Macron then offered the population a choice of which essential services to slash to the bone: “Public services have a cost, but they are vital: schools, police, the army, hospitals, the courts are indispensable to our social cohesion. Are there too many administrative echelons or levels of local government? Should we reinforce decentralization and give more power of decision and action to those closer to the citizens, at what level and for what services?”

This parasitic ex-banker cannot help but display his contempt for workers, whom he dismisses as lazy. Shortly before the ninth Saturday protest, as he was receiving bakers’ apprentices at the Elysée presidential palace, he lectured the population for lacking a “sense of effort.” He added, “The disturbances our society is experiencing are sometimes also due or connected to the fact that far too many of our fellow citizens think you can get things without making that effort.”

Yellow vests who have a hard time making it to the end of the month—be they small businessmen, farmers or workers—are, in fact, making an enormous effort in the face of exploitation by the financial aristocracy represented by Macron.

Economist Thomas Piketty has calculated that French workers create three times as much wealth as they did

in 1970 despite the fact that the official work week has been reduced, overcoming the advantage the United States had in productivity at that time due to large-scale investment during the post-World War II period. Over the first nine months of 2018, workers in firms with more than 15 employees worked an average 31.5 hours overtime. The average work week for full-time workers is 39.1 hours, and 23.7 hours for part-time workers, among the highest in Europe.

As Macron lectures the population, workers are worn down by the strain of their labor. According to Social Security statistics, 16 percent of work stoppages are due to muscular-skeletal disorders, and 10 percent are due to excess fatigue or psychological stress. The worst-hit industries are construction, manufacturing and health care.

The National Statistics Institute just published a report on work accidents. In 2013, 26 percent of those polled said they had suffered a workplace accident in their career. This rises to 40 percent for workers and 32 percent for farmers, young as well as old.

It is the financial aristocrats represented by Macron who lack “a sense of effort.” The *Challenges* paper sheds some light on the “French social model,” wrongly presented as egalitarian. The size of the 500 greatest fortunes as measured by *Challenges* has been multiplied by 7 and that of the top ten by 12 since 1996. Yet over the same period France’s GDP barely doubled and the real median salary did not increase for 20 years.

Since the 2008 crash, the 500 wealthiest Frenchmen have tripled the portion of the economy they personally hold. From 2009 to 2018, their collective wealth grew from 10 to 30 percent of the gross domestic product, reaching an unprecedented level of €650 billion. The pillaging of the working class by the financial aristocracy has only accelerated during the last two presidencies—those of Macron and his predecessor, the Socialist Party’s François Hollande.

The anger of the working class against social inequality is entirely legitimate. It is not the responsibility of the workers to finance tax cuts for the super-rich, who should be expropriated in France and around the world.

In his letter, Macron sought to divert social anger into the repugnant channel of anti-immigrant xenophobia, turning in a more neo-fascist direction. He wrote that in France, “tradition today is disturbed by tensions and

doubts connected to immigration and failures of our system of integration.” Under cover of “secularism,” which he claimed was “the subject of important debates”—such as reactionary bans on certain types of clothing worn by some Muslim women—he demanded that “all respect the reciprocal comprehension and intangible values of the Republic.”

An essential precondition for the mobilization and unification of workers in struggle is the rejection of the xenophobic agitation of this representative of the banks.



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