No to calls for “national unity” after the burning of Notre Dame in Paris

Alex Lantier
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The calls in the French media and ruling elite for national unity after a horrific fire devastated Notre Dame cathedral on Monday in Paris deserve nothing but contempt. Their goals are obvious. They aim to strangle all critical reflection on the causes and lessons of this shocking event, which has exposed the utter irresponsibility of the state machine; and to stabilize President Emmanuel Macron’s government, which is rocked by the upsurge of the class struggle, with “yellow vest” protests and mass protests against the Algerian military regime.

The cause of the devastation of Notre Dame cathedral is the lack of serious fire security in renovation work, rooted in austerity and the relentless self-enrichment of the financial aristocracy. The French state refused to foot the €100 million bill for the renovation, leaving church officials to beg for money internationally. The plan that was ultimately adopted ignored basic fire security measures, including the need to hire sufficient fire security staff. After a fire alarm, under this plan, it would take staff up to 20 minutes to reach and inspect the area.

The gaping holes in this plan—adopted amid Macron’s austerity policy that funnels hundreds of billions of euros to the army, tax cuts for the rich, and bank bailouts—had disastrous consequences. Despite two fire alarms on Monday, Notre Dame staff could not locate the fire until much of the roof was ablaze and the spire was collapsing.

After this disaster the major media and parties are calling for a political truce and a halt to all criticism. Macron’s Republic on the March (LRM) and the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) suspended their European campaigns. On Twitter, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of Unsubmissive France (LFI) wrote, “24 hours off from politics would be welcome.” Nathalie Loiseau, the head of LRM’s European list, wrote that the LRM list “naturally is joining in this moment of national unity. We are suspending our campaign until further announcements are made.”

Europe1 radio enthused, “Deep emotion took over all the state officials who went to visit the flaming cathedral. The president, prime minister ... all went to see for themselves. In one hour, a holy union was formed. There were no discordant notes in the call for national unity, except maybe Jean-Luc Mélenchon because he asked Emmanuel Macron to be quiet for a few days.”

By raising the “holy union”—historically, the name for the bourgeoisie’s union with the social democrats to wage the First World War and oppose the rising international communist movement emerging from the October 1917 Russian revolution—Europe1 perhaps said more than it intended.

The current official campaign for French “national unity” is an almost chemically pure example of the reactionary role of nationalism, which by denying the significance of the international class struggle subordinates the workers to the military-austerity diktat of the ruling class. While the major parties led the call to silence criticism of official policy in the name of national unity, they left it to the Medef business federation to specify what “national unity” means.

On Wednesday, Medef President Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux went on BFM-TV to deliver a full-throated defense of the tax cuts for the rich and exorbitantly wealthy that led to this disaster. Hailing an “incredible enthusiasm” in the nation for rebuilding Notre Dame, he denounced “pathetic debates on tax cuts,” saying: “If you tax people too much in France, they will go elsewhere. We need rich taxpayers who pay their taxes in France.”

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Roux de Bézieux then hailed the billionaire Arnault and Pinault families, who refused to fund the renovation but are now giving a few hundred million euros to towards the multi-billion-euro project of rebuilding the cathedral. He said, “If the state paid 100 percent, who would pay? It’s you and me, everyone, the taxpayers. … So I think it’s great that there are people who agree to pay out of pocket to help. It’s a real moment of national unity.”

The fate of Notre Dame cathedral and the Medef’s ignorant lust for money are a warning to workers not only in France but around the world. The only way forward for workers is to expropriate the irresponsible and parasitic ruling class that dominates official public life. Class struggle, rejecting nationalist appeals for unity with the super-rich and fought through to its conclusion, is the only way to resolve the urgent problems created by the destructive operations of the financial aristocracy.

In this, it is critical to unmask and oppose petty-bourgeois forces, linked to the union bureaucracies and academia, who try to serve up nationalism in a “left” guise, while denying the significance of Marxism and of the class struggle. In France, this role is played currently by Mélenchon, who after coming under criticism for asking Macron to be quiet after the burning, posted a piece titled “Our shared cathedral” on his blog. In it, he argued for effecting the national unification of France by a reactionary reconciliation of religion with atheism via support for Notre Dame.

“Atheists or believers, Notre Dame is our common cathedral,” Mélenchon began, adding: “There are those for whom God’s work was at hand in constructing this building. … And others, those who know the emptiness of a meaningless Universe and the absurdity of the human condition, see in it above all the crowning glory of the spirit and labor of hundreds of thousands of women and men.”

Mélenchon’s claim that atheism leads to the view that life is meaningless and absurd is an attack on Marxism. “The history of all hitherto existing society,” the irreconcilable atheists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, “is the history of class struggle.”

Marx and Engels did not view life as absurd. That position finds favor only among petty-bourgeois populists steeped in existentialism and postmodernism who have, as Mélenchon did in his 2014 book *The Era of the People*, written off the class struggle and socialist revolution as dead relics of a past era. Marx and Engels on the other hand armed the working class with Marxism—that is, an imperishable, scientific guide to action for the revolutionary prosecution of the class struggle.

Mélenchon continued by attacking the role of the mathematical and physical sciences on the European mind, where he claims they create “a terrible dilemma. … Here it is: there is revealed truth, that comes from the exterior, affirmed by custom or religion and that imposes itself with the reassuring appearance of self-evidence. Then there is the truth one discovers with one’s own brain, based on one’s own investigations and calculations, to which science approaches a bit more each day.”

Mélenchon’s pretense that the great divide in French society is between atheists and believers is just as false as the view that the role of science is to come ever closer to supporting Mélenchon’s opinions. One recent poll found that only 4.5 percent of French people attend mass at least once a month. The great divide is class—the line separating the overwhelming majority of workers forced to sell their ability to labor to an employer, and the parasites of the financial aristocracy.

Having begun with the ambition to unify religion and atheism, Mélenchon closes his piece with a mystical invocation of the immortality of Notre Dame cathedral, of which “some piece will always remain that a human being will want to build up towards heaven.” While such rhetoric appeals immensely to the pundits and executives of France’s corporate media, it does nothing to improve the lives of the working population or to protect major monuments from the depredations of capitalism.

As the class struggle in Europe, North Africa and around the world mobilizes growing numbers of workers, the first task is to distrust all the initiatives of such petty-bourgeois proponents of national unity with the financial aristocracy.

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