

French ex-President Jacques Chirac dead at 86

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Given the angry mood among workers in France and across Europe, and the widespread hatred of President Emmanuel Macron, it was perhaps inevitable that the passing of right-wing President Jacques Chirac Thursday would trigger an outpouring of official tributes.

The last two years have undermined the self-confidence of the political establishment. The eruption of strikes in America, France and across Europe, and mass political protests by the “yellow vests” in France and by workers and youth in Sudan, Algeria and Hong Kong have marked a resurgence of international class struggle. Chirac’s death reminds PR executives, intelligence officials and editorial writers alike that everything seemed safer and more predictable under his presidency (1995-2007).

A pro-Chirac propaganda offensive of mind-numbing superficiality is underway, from the talk shows to state ministries and the pages of the major dailies. Hailed as France’s “last true head of state” (*20 Minutes*) and an “all too human” expression of the French spirit (ex-Maoist daily *Libération*), he was portrayed in Macron’s TV address Thursday night as a great opponent of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. The neofascist magazine *Current Values* placed his picture on its cover with a sympathetic article. The dailies all obligingly reminded their readers of recent polls that found 70 percent of the population considered him France’s best living president.

In the face of this avalanche of official stupidity, one must first state the obvious. It is no great credit to Chirac that voters preferred him to his unpopular surviving predecessor, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, and to his successors: conservative Nicolas Sarkozy, social democrat François Hollande and Macron—who rank as France’s three most hated presidents in history. The second point that must be made is that the media is marketing an account of Chirac’s life that has nothing to do with his actual record.

A convicted embezzler, two-time prime minister, mayor of Paris and friend of neocolonial dictators across France’s former African colonial empire, Chirac was neither a great “humanist” nor an opponent of imperialism. He was a cog, if a prominent one, in the state machine of the French capitalist class.

By his advocacy of free-market and law-and-order policies, combined with appeals to anti-immigrant racism, he prefigured the bloody repression of the “yellow vests” and the universal rehabilitation of European fascism epitomized by Macron’s hailing of Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as a “great soldier.”

Chirac’s current media image as the benevolent father of the French nation is a fabrication of the affluent middle-class elements that, over decades, the bourgeoisie has passed off as the “left.” When the elimination of unpopular Socialist Party (PS) candidate Lionel Jospin in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections led to a run-off between Chirac and neofascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, the PS, the trade unions and the Pabloite Revolutionary Communist League (LCR)—today the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA)—rallied to Chirac. As mass protests erupted against a choice between two reactionary candidates, they all insisted that

the defense of democracy required the French nation to rally like one man behind Chirac.

They rejected the call by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) for a campaign in the working class for an active boycott of the election and launching of a political movement against the reactionary agenda of the soon-to-be-installed Chirac administration.

The nostalgia for Chirac that brought several thousand people out onto the streets of Paris to pay their respects to his casket in the Invalides, guarded by hordes of riot policemen armed with assault rifles, reflects the impact of this petty-bourgeois propaganda on a layer of the public. Millions of workers in France detested Chirac, who in four presidential campaigns never obtained more than 20 percent of the vote in the first round. However, he was a master at exploiting the political and class prejudices of the affluent petty bourgeoisie, whether right-wing or nominally “left.”

The last French president to live through World War II and the Vichy regime’s collaboration with the Nazi occupation, Chirac undoubtedly cultivated a different style than his successors. Having lived through both the working-class insurrections amid the fall of European fascism after World War II and the 1968 French general strike, he was intensely aware of the revolutionary threat from below. Much to the chagrin of younger and much less experienced generations of bourgeois politicians, he pared down austerity measures when they provoked strikes or mass protests.

While Chirac was always associated with the right, this policy won him the appreciation of union executives and their political defenders in parties like the LCR/NPA. These flunkys of the banks and of major parties of government are paid to support whatever austerity measures the French president hands them. However, they cynically used Chirac’s various temporary, calculated retreats—in the face of the 1995 railroad strike against pension cuts and the 2006 student protests against youth temp job contracts—to posture as radicals who had forced Chirac to back down.

Chirac’s cautious avoidance of unnecessary political provocations extended into his personal life. Unlike Macron, who also graduated from the elite National Administration School (ENA), he did not go into banking to first become a multimillionaire before entering politics. And it is no secret that he disliked the instinctive tastelessness of Sarkozy, who as president sailed on his billionaire friends’ yachts and divorced his wife Cécilia to marry the younger Italian model and singer Carla Bruni. More old school, Chirac preferred to take more discreet vacations and be serially unfaithful to his wife, the ruthless bourgeois Bernadette Chodron de Courcel.

Seventeen years after the 2002 elections, one can draw a balance sheet of the social democratic, Stalinist and Pabloite forces’ coronation of Chirac as the sacred defender of France against the scourges of war and neofascism represented by the Iraq invasion and the Le Pen dynasty. As a nationally based strategy against war and fascistic authoritarianism, it has been an utter failure.

Since Chirac was elected in 1995, France has deployed troops across a

vast arc of imperialist wars from Afghanistan, where Chirac participated in the 2001 NATO invasion, to Syria, Libya and Mali. And Chirac's conservative Gaullist party, having fallen far behind the neofascists in the 2014 and 2019 European and the 2017 presidential elections, is threatened with disintegration.

Amid the resurgence of the international class struggle, there are critical strategic lessons to be drawn—as paradoxical as it might seem—from Chirac's right-wing record. He built his reactionary career on the bankruptcy of the nationalist forces that predominated in the workers movement and in the “left,” and their rejection of the political independence of the working class. It is a classic illustration of the bankruptcy and reactionary implications of attempts to base left politics on nationalism and adaptation to the propertied classes.

Chirac began his career with a brief dalliance with the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) as an adolescent at the beginning of the Cold War. He attended at least one PCF branch meeting in Paris, hawked the Stalinist daily *L'Humanité*, and signed the 1950 Stockholm Appeal against nuclear proliferation. He briefly worked as a sailor over the objections of his father, a bank employee who rose through the ranks to become a banker, and traveled to America.

In France at this time as in prerevolutionary Russia, many bourgeois youth briefly had “red” sympathies, which Trotsky compared to the red splotches of childhood measles. Though he was Parisian, Chirac's family came from the Corrèze region, where resistance militias had been very active during the world war. The role of the Soviet Union and the working class in leading armed resistance to the fascists was universally acknowledged at the time.

Moreover, like Stalinist parties across Europe, the PCF had strangled the insurrectionary movement of the working class at the end of the world war; the PCF trapped it behind the nationalist perspective of backing the capitalist regime of General Charles de Gaulle, thus restoring French imperialism's ability to maneuver on the world stage after its catastrophic defeat in 1940 by Nazi Germany. This won it the gratitude of many youth headed for careers in bourgeois politics. And so even Jacques Chirac, studying politics and state administration in Paris, briefly came down with a mild case of the “red” measles.

Its symptoms were very soon overcome. Always keenly aware of where the most promising career path lay, Chirac volunteered for the Algerian war to support continued French colonial rule in Algeria in 1956. That same year he married into the financial aristocracy. Bernadette's family, an extremely wealthy bourgeois family tracing its roots to the 17th century, and who fought during the French Revolution alongside the feudal aristocratic armies against the revolutionary French bourgeois Republic, disapproved of Chirac's lowly origins. Chirac persisted, however. Thanks to his ENA degree and his wife's connections, he soon was working at the heights of the Gaullist regime while also pursuing electoral politics in Corrèze.

Chirac's next major experience was the French general strike of May-June 1968. The explosive opposition of the working class to the de Gaulle regime erupted in what is to date the largest strike in European history. Over 10 million workers went on strike, the economy ground to a halt, and red flags flew over factories across France.

The authority of de Gaulle's government collapsed, and it again depended on the PCF to prevent revolution. Working with his political patron, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, Jacques Chirac as junior minister for social affairs helped negotiate the wage increases of the Grenelle Accords with the PCF-linked General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union. The PCF then took these accords and, working over weeks to overcome workers' opposition, used them to justify forcing workers back to work, averting a seizure of power by the working class.

The aftershocks of 1968, which had shaken the French capitalist state to its foundations, shaped the career of Chirac, who tried to exploit his

relative youth to present himself as modern and popular, but also close to the salt-of-the-earth life of rural Corrèze. This image, which helped lead him to a first stint as prime minister from 1974 to 1976 under Giscard d'Estaing, was a concoction.

As prime minister, he demanded subsidies for business designed to transfer wealth away from the workers. Behind the scenes, he engaged in ruthless factional and financial intrigues against his rivals on the right. One of them, apparently Sarkozy, later said of him, “People believe Chirac is a nice guy who is not very smart. In fact, it's the exact opposite.”

The later stages of Chirac's career depended critically on the reorganization of French left politics after the 1968 general strike, which had decisively exposed the counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinist PCF. What emerged as the dominant force, however, was not a Trotskyist party offering a Marxist critique of Stalinism from the standpoint of the international working class, but a bourgeois party newly founded in 1971: the PS, led by the former Vichy collaborator François Mitterrand.

This was due to the reactionary role of petty-bourgeois parties that had broken with Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The Pabloite LCR and the *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI) of Pierre Lambert, who broke with the ICFI in 1971, endorsed a PS-PCF “Union of the Left” as the national way forward for the workers. After Mitterrand became president in 1981, all these organizations adapted themselves to his policies of social austerity and militarism.

Chirac was able to exploit popular anger with the PS and the absence of any visible left-wing critique of Mitterrand to return to office as prime minister in 1986—pursuing privatizations and attacks on the working class. Mitterrand frustrated Chirac's ambitions to become president, however, in the 1988 elections. Pushing through a raft of changes in electoral law, Mitterrand helped the neofascist National Front (FN) win legislative office and used the FN's prominence to split the right-wing vote. The PS thus barely held onto power in 1988.

In this period, marked by the reactionary policies of the social democrats and the moves by the Stalinist parties across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union towards capitalist restoration in 1989-1991, the framework within which Chirac had worked collapsed and bourgeois politics shifted far to the right.

The PCF and the trade unions rapidly lost whatever remained of their base among workers. Masses of people were shocked to learn that Mitterrand had maintained a friendship with René Bousquet, the Vichy police chief who ordered the French police's July 16-17, 1942 Vél d'Hiv mass deportations of 13,000 Jews from France to Nazi death camps in Germany and Poland. Shot by a madman in 1993, Bousquet never went to trial. Several ex-OCI and ex-Pabloite members of the PS made statements dismissing the significance of these revelations to justify their collaboration with Mitterrand.

Though he later cultivated an image as a democratic opponent of the FN, Chirac became notorious for his fascist appeals to anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism. In his infamous 1991 speech in Orléans, Chirac insisted that French workers were racists who hated the bad smell of foreigners, saying that a worker making 15,000 francs “sees a family crowded in with the father, three or four wives, and twenty or so kids, who gets 50,000 in welfare, without working of course... Add to that the noise and the bad smell, and seeing it the worker goes crazy.”

Profiting from the unpopularity of the PS, Chirac was able to win election on May 7, 1995. Barely two months later, on the 53rd anniversary of the Vél d'Hiv raid, he for the first time officially admitted France's long-established responsibility for the raid. This ended over a half century in which state officials of all colors—Gaullist, social democratic and Stalinist—had either kept silent on this historic crime or lied, denying French responsibility. However, the political establishment sought to give

this objectively damning admission as reactionary an interpretation as possible. Even as it continued to shift to the right, it promoted the admission of guilt as supposed proof that the French and European bourgeoisie had dealt with the history of its fascist crimes.

In fact, the ensuing quarter of a century has conclusively demonstrated that, far from being an exceptional feature of the 20th century, the bourgeoisie's drive towards war, austerity and fascist regimes is a deeply rooted, inherent tendency in capitalism.

Chirac soon had to rely again on the services of the PS and its petty-bourgeois periphery after pension cuts advanced by right-wing Prime Minister Alain Juppé provoked a mass railway strike in 1995. Relying on the trade unions and the Pabloite parties to call off the strike without a struggle to bring down his government, Chirac nonetheless took the apparently politically suicidal decision to call new elections in 1997. These returned a PS-led government led by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, a former OCI member—the Plural Left alliance between the PS, the PCF and the Greens. It was mounting disaffection in the working class with the Jospin government that led to his elimination in the first round of the 2002 elections and the crisis over the Chirac-Le Pen runoff.

Chirac's record in his second term vindicated the ICFI's opposition to the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties' claims that a Chirac vote was the best way to block the rise of neofascism and war. Confronted by a unilateral US war in Iraq aiming to secure a military grip over the Middle East and its oil supplies, which are critical to the French and European economy, Chirac was predictably unenthusiastic.

This was compounded by nervousness over the explosive state of class relations—with mass protests against the Chirac-Le Pen run-off in France and mass international antiwar protests against the Iraq invasion. Indeed, Chirac's call for more pension cuts in 2003 provoked a teachers strike, and the death of two suburban youth in a police chase in Paris in 2005 led to mass rioting in France's major cities that nearly overwhelmed the police.

Chirac's response to the rise of the class struggle in his second term was an accelerating turn towards fascist and militarist policies. Faced with the teachers strike, he tried to demoralize it with appeals to anti-Muslim racism to divide the workers—discussing and passing in 2004 a law banning the Muslim veil in public schools.

His response to the 2005 riots was to impose a three-month state of emergency that suspended basic democratic rights. A long-time friend of African dictators like Gabon's Omar Bongo and the Republic of the Congo's Denis Sassou Nguesso, who provided cheap oil and natural resources to French imperialism while paying off its leading politicians, Chirac intensified French military intervention in ex-French colonial Africa. His 2004 bombing of Ivory Coast helped set into motion the conflicts that led to the French invasion of Ivory Coast in 2011 to install Alassane Ouattara as president. His extensive resort to illicit cash to finance political campaigns in France, notably from African sources, led him to be the first president in French history to be convicted of embezzlement in 2011.

And as if to make perfectly clear his commitment to militarism, in 2006, the year before he stepped down as president, Chirac laid out a doctrine allowing first use of France's nuclear arsenal against countries Paris accused of terror attacks against it.

Today, it is clear that Chirac was not an opponent but a precursor of the turn to naked military aggression and neofascism by European imperialism in the ensuing 12 years. His repression in 2005 prefigured the unprecedented two-year state of emergency imposed after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks by the PS and maintained by Macron, and the subsequent brutal police crackdown on the “yellow vests.” And his normalization of anti-Muslim racism, which paved the way for the ruling elite to integrate the FN into mainstream bourgeois politics, was part of a universal drive by the European bourgeoisie to legitimize fascist politics.

Macron's hailing of Pétain as a “great soldier,” the hailing of Hitler's policies as “not cruel” by German right-wing extremist professors, and the Spanish Supreme Court's ruling that Francisco Franco's 1936 fascist coup was legitimate—all are the outcome of the legitimization of military-police violence and fascist policy that is a central part of Chirac's legacy. His record is yet further proof that the only way forward in the struggle against imperialist war and fascism is the revolutionary mobilization of the working class on the Trotskyist program advanced by the ICFI.



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