

Workers and youth protest French president's visit to Amiens

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President Emmanuel Macron paid a two-day visit to his hometown of Amiens in Picardy on Thursday and Friday as the town's mayor Brigitte Fouré, a conservative, stands for re-election after recently joining Macron's The Republic on the March (LREM) party. The town was in lockdown, with riot police on duty at all intersections, and only vetted guests were allowed to attend official engagements. A group of "yellow vests," although small, was strictly kept at bay by riot police.

Dozens of laid-off workers from the closed Whirlpool factory in Amiens marched, demanding to meet the president, who did not keep his 2017 election promise to keep the plant open. Like the youth and "yellow vests," they were prevented from making contact and told he would visit the inactive plant on Friday.

On Friday, workers demanded an accounting for his failure to save the 286 jobs at the clothes dryer manufacturer, now relocated to Poland, and why he could not find a buyer for the factory as promised. Indeed, the government gave €4 million to a local businessman to manufacture letter boxes—a plan that never saw the light of day.

Macron, the "president of the rich," was arrogant as usual in response. While issuing empty promises of another meeting next year, he criticized what he called the "paranoia" and "obsession" of workers angry at losing their jobs.

The National Assembly deputy for Amiens, François Ruffin of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, carried out a staged confrontation with Macron. Ruffin voted for Macron in the second round of the presidential elections, and in Amiens last week he still promoted illusions that Macron's goodwill would help workers in Amiens.

Referring to Macron's failed attempt to get local

businesspeople to take over the Whirlpool plant, Ruffin offered Macron friendly advice: "I think that you will bring credit to the state if you admit to having made a mess of this, well not you personally but ... there were signs relayed up to you that all was not well, with no reply." He added, "I have the impression this famous takeover was a fake deal between the government, Whirlpool and a dubious businessman."

Ruffin then lamented that his own project to preserve the factory, a plan for the production of an "indestructible washing machine," had not won Macron's approval.

Macron's first official engagement was to inaugurate the new Picardy University human and social science faculty, in the restored "Citadelle" military fortress built in 1610. Students and faculty were kept at arms length. The president of the university told Macron the student intake had recently grown from 24,000 to 31,000, but that funding was not keeping pace. Only 54 percent of the students have scholarships, which are inadequate to live on, forcing 50 percent of students to work in the gig economy.

A hundred students were allowed to discuss with Macron on the vast difficulties they face to subsist. One poster held high by a post graduate teacher read: "The university suffers from a precariousness which kills," before security staff pulled it down.

This was a reference to 22-year-old student Anas K. in Lyon who immolated himself last week protesting against the desperate plight of students. The youth is in intensive care with 90 percent of his body covered with third-degree burns. Macron's reaction Thursday was to claim that "our deepest thoughts are with him and all youth in difficulty."

With his Amiens visit, Macron is attempting to keep a lid on social anger that is growing in France and

internationally. A strike movement set for December 5, which first developed as wildcat actions among rail and Paris transit workers three weeks ago and is now snowballing throughout the country, will lead to contagion among students. The *Parisien* quoted one minister saying that “if the youth join the movement, that will be the start of real trouble.”

Macron’s approval ratings are at only 36 percent, while an overwhelming majority of the population supports plans for strike action against the president.

In his brief visit to Amiens, however, Macron had nothing to offer students except platitudes on the need “to invest in our youth.” He contented himself with France’s treatment of students compared to that of other countries, trumpeting the abolition of the €217 paid by students for medical insurance.

Summing up his feelings of frustration at workers and youth for not being sufficiently grateful to him for his social cuts, he complained that “at the moment our country is too negative about itself” after a visit to a laboratory research project for sodium-ion batteries to power public transport.

To round off his visit, Macron attended the launch at the local Jules Vernes circus building of Amiens of the European Capital of Youth for 2020, as designated by the European Union. Again, the event was heavily policed and participants vetted.

Macron also visited the local working-class district of Amiens Nord devastated by unemployment of over 20 percent. In spite of his walkabout, local residents interviewed on TV were unimpressed by his pet project to centralise local administrations, making access to public services easier. For many, the purpose of the visit was to boost his local candidate Fouré in the mayoral elections, and they felt it would change nothing in their daily lives.



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