From Cavaignac to Villiers: The class struggle in France and the lessons of history

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Millions of people have participated in demonstrations and public sector strikes this month against French President Macron's efforts to slash workers' retirement benefits, shutting down rail and transportation infrastructure in much of the country.

On Monday, the newly retired head of the French general staff, General Pierre de Villiers, demanded harsher repression against the ongoing nationwide strike movement.

These statements must be taken as a warning to workers not only in France, but internationally. With capitalist society torn apart by levels of social inequality incompatible with democratic forms of rule, factions of the ruling elite are pressing for a bloody military dictatorship.

Already, over the last year, Macron has ordered nonstop repression of "yellow vest" protests against social inequality, student protests, and now of strikers. Protesters have faced armored cars, water cannon, and thousands of riot police armed with rifles and rubber-bullet guns. Over 10,000 protesters have been arrested and jailed for questioning, over 4,400 wounded, two dozen have lost an eye to rubber bullets, five have lost hands to police grenades, and one bystander was killed, in the largest wave of state repression in France since the 1940-1944 Nazi Occupation in World War II.

In March, Paris military district commander General Bruno Le Ray reported that he had authorized soldiers to open fire on protesters, the first time such an order had been issued in France since 1948.

Nevertheless, de Villiers insisted that repression of social protest still must be greatly increased. As Macron and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe were preparing confidential meetings with the general staff and with union officials to discuss Tuesday's million-strong protest march, de Villiers told RTL: "We must reestablish the proper balance between firmness and humanity. … There is not enough firmness in our country."

De Villiers, who is now being considered as a possible neofascist presidential candidate in 2022, stressed his fear over the conflict emerging between the workers and the state. "A gulf has emerged between those who lead and those who obey. This gulf is profound. The 'yellow vests' were already a first sign of this," de Villiers said. "We must restore order; things cannot continue this way."

Neither de Villiers nor Macron have said exactly how many more people they would like to kill, maim and jail to crush protests against deep social cuts opposed by two-thirds of the French people. But the ruling class is clearly acutely conscious that it is waging a violent struggle against the working class. To understand what de Villiers is advocating, one must recall what happened when de Villiers' predecessors acted with more "firmness" against the workers.

In 1848, workers across Europe rose up in revolution against the monarchies that had emerged from France's defeat in the Napoleonic wars. In June, as the capitalist Republic suddenly tried to shut down the National Workshops set up to provide jobs to the unemployed, workers in Paris took to the streets to stop a policy that would mean poverty and starvation. In response, General Eugène Cavaignac led the army and the security forces in the mass slaughter of the June Days, killing over 3,000 workers, arresting 25,000 and condemning 11,000 to prison or deportation to Algeria.

In March 1871, when the French Third Republic tried to disarm Paris by stealing cannons the city had bought for self-defense amid France's war against Prussia, revolution again erupted. The working class Commune took power in Paris. After buying time, however, and

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with the complicity of the Prussian general staff, the French army under General Patrice de MacMahon invaded Paris in May and slaughtered the insurgent workers.

Led by liberal historian Adolphe Thiers, the French Third Republic killed an estimated 20,000 workers and arrested 60,000. On May 24, as the infamous Bloody Week of mass slaughter unfolded in Paris, Thiers boasted to the National Assembly: “I have shed torrents of blood.”

From such bitter experiences of the international class struggle, worked over by the greatest revolutionaries of the era, the Marxist theory of the state and revolution emerged that would guide the taking of power by the working class in Russia during the October 1917 revolution.

The state, Karl Marx’s great co-thinker Friedrich Engels wrote in 1884, establishes “a public power which no longer directly coincides with the population organizing itself as an armed force." He continued: "This special, public power is necessary because a self-acting armed organization of the population has become impossible since the split into classes... This public power exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed men, but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds… It grows stronger, however, in proportion as class antagonisms within the state become more acute.”

From this flowed the need for the workers to take state power to suppress the counterrevolutionary violence of the ruling class and, through socialist policies to create social equality, overcome the division of society into classes, out of which the state emerges. Nearly 150 years have elapsed since the Paris Commune, and yet Engels’ analysis still illuminates the decisive questions facing working people in France and around the world today.

The last two years have seen an eruption of struggles, from US autoworkers and teachers' strikes to mass protests against inequality and dictatorship in Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Chile, Bolivia and beyond. This global resurgence of class struggle is the product of social contradictions that matured over decades of capitalist globalization. The era since the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, and especially since the 2008 financial crash, has seen a relentless transfer of wealth produced by workers to the financial aristocracy and to the funding of imperialist wars from Afghanistan to Syria, Libya and Mali.

The intensity of these class antagonisms underlies the extraordinary buildup of military and police forces across the globe. Macron’s cuts, which would transfer tens of billions of euros from retirees to the banks, exemplify how nominally democratic states are but thinly veiled dictatorships of the capitalist class. To see the reality of the Marxist assertion that the state consists of bodies of armed men, even in countries like France with long bourgeois-democratic traditions, one need only take a walk through the streets of Paris on any day protests are called.

This underlies the bankruptcy of the middle class, pseudo-left forces like Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, who defend the existing state and social order. Not only do they promote the union bureaucracy’s attempts to negotiate a reactionary deal with Macron, but they cover up plans within the state machine for militarized repression. Instead of warning about de Villiers, Mélenchon has spent his time promoting illusions that neofascist Marine Le Pen’s empty statement of support for the strike amounts to “progress” in a “humanist” direction.

The decisive task now is to warn the working class and mobilize it politically against the threat of state repression. No political confidence can be placed in the unions or their political allies like LFI. The way forward is the building of committees of action independent of the trade unions, to coordinate the mobilization of ever-broader layers of the working class into struggle against the financial aristocracy, the Macron government, and the threat of police-state repression and dictatorship.

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