In New Year’s address, French President Macron pledges to impose austerity despite mass strike

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In a brief, perfunctory speech on New Year’s Eve, French President Emmanuel Macron pledged to impose his pension cuts despite mass strikes and overwhelming popular opposition, which he derided as “pessimism” and “motionlessness.”

On January 2, the rail and transport strike against Macron’s pension “reform,” at 29 days, became the longest-running continuous national strike in France since the May 1968 general strike. Over two-thirds of the population opposes the pension cuts, and strikes continue to break out affecting wider layers of the working population, from teachers and students to electricity and gas workers and opera and ballet company staff. This comes amid a global wave of protests and strikes over the last year, including US auto workers’ and teachers’ strikes and mass movements against neo-colonial dictatorships in Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and across Latin America.

Macron’s speech vindicates the analysis made by the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) since the strike broke out on December 5. There is nothing to negotiate with Macron. The way forward is to organize a struggle of the working class independently of the unions, which are negotiating with him, and mobilize ever-broader layers of workers to bring down his government.

The address gave the lie to media propaganda that he would make “appeasement” with social opposition the priority of his address. The French president had made no public statement on the strike for weeks, during which the press speculated that he might prove open to compromise on the cuts. But in the speech, Macron made clear he intends to impose the cuts in a direct confrontation with the working class.

He declared: “I well know how much the decisions that have been taken can shock people and create fear and opposition. But should we give up on changing our country and our daily lives? No, this would be abandoning those the system has already abandoned, it would be betraying our children, and their children after them, who would pay the price of our betrayals. This is why the pension reform will be carried out to the end.”

Denouncing unidentified “lies and manipulation” spread by unnamed critics of his policies to incite popular opposition, Macron said, “I will give in neither to pessimism nor to motionlessness.”

That is, Macron will not back down from a two-year increase in the retirement age, cuts in public sector pension plans, and the calculation of pension benefits according to a system of “points,” the monetary value of which the state is free to set arbitrarily—that is, to slash—every year, as a new generation of workers retires. The aim is to impose a class-based pension system, where working class retirees live in poverty while the affluent enjoy private retirement accounts.

Macron made this clear by awarding Jean-François Cirelli, the head of asset management firm BlackRock’s French operations, the Legion of Honor on January 1. By some calculations, BlackRock stands to reap over €70 billion in profits from private retirement accounts in France.

Macron’s attempts at empathy in his speech came across as what they were: insincere banalities from a wealthy investment banker hiding in terror from the workers in a succession of heavily guarded former royal palaces, from the Elysée to Versailles to Fort Brégançon. He began with a hollow reference to those who are sick and alone over the holidays, later

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proclaiming his concern for “the careers of teachers, professors and health care staff.” The mark of this “concern” is that he is preparing to slash their pensions by 20 to 40 percent.

Besides the usual praises sung to the riot police, who have brutally attacked “yellow vest” protests and largely peaceful marches by strikers, Macron reserved his only meaningful comments for the trade union bureaucracy. He insisted that on pension cuts, “I expect Prime Minister Edouard Philippe’s government to quickly find a compromise with the trade union and employers’ organizations that are looking for one.”

The critical question facing workers is to take the pensions struggle out of the hands of the unions. The struggle cannot be resolved by national negotiations with Macron, which will obtain nothing for workers. The mass protests and strikes are part of an international upsurge of the class struggle with revolutionary implications. The way forward is to build committees of action independent of the unions, fighting to bring down Macron as part of a revolutionary international movement to transfer power to the working class.

The unions have discussed and negotiated Macron’s pension cuts since his elections two years ago. Many openly support most of the cuts, including the pro-government French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), which refused to join the initial strike calls on December 5.

The role of Philippe Martinez, the leader of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), is not fundamentally different. Like the entire CGT bureaucracy and allied petty-bourgeois parties such as the New Anticapitalist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France, Martinez peddles the false line that workers can convince Macron to withdraw his cuts and negotiate a better pension system. As such, he responded to Macron’s speech by arguing falsely that Macron does not understand France.

“We have a president of the Republic who’s stuck in a bubble and thinks everything is going well in this country. He’s complacent,” Martinez told BFM-TV on January 1, adding that he would call further protests. “Our cry of alarm must be louder,” he declared.

Martinez complained that he had “not received an invitation” to the next formal trade union talks with the government, on January 7, but said he would go anyway. “We have attended them all,” he said.

Martinez’s bankrupt strategy, designed to prevent workers from waging a struggle to bring down Macron by holding out false hopes of a favorable negotiated settlement, is built on a false premise. The French president may be ignorant of conditions facing workers, but he is not complacent. Dozens of accounts over the last year of “yellow vest” protests have made clear that Macron, his wife Brigitte and most of his staff live in terror of a revolutionary uprising.

In an article last month titled “Brigitte is panicking: the Macrons fear an insurrection,” *Gala* magazine cited an anonymous minister who complained of the dread seizing Macron’s “entourage and the ministerial staffs, who are terrified.” The minister added, “We are ruled by fear.”

The article also reported that Brigitte Macron dislikes comparisons between herself and Queen Marie-Antoinette, who died in 1793, guillotined during the French Revolution.

Macron is imposing his cuts because, desperate to defend French imperialism’s economic competitiveness and its military interests on the world stage, he is determined to transfer hundreds of billions of euros into the pockets of the armed forces and the super-rich. Though terrified of the confrontation that he has set off with the workers, he is very consciously pressing ahead. The only way to stop Macron’s austerity agenda, as his New Year’s speech has made clear, is an independent political struggle of the working class to bring down his government.

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