Macron to ram through French pension cuts without vote in parliament

Alex Lantier
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On Saturday, French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced that he would use Article 49-3 of the Constitution to impose pension reform. This allows the law to pass without a vote unless a vote of censure is passed against the government in the following 24 hours, bringing it down and leading to new elections. As the majority in the Assembly is from the party of Emmanuel Macron, who does not dare to face the voters because he would lose a general election, this would allow Macron to impose the reform without any parliamentary vote on its content.

The use of this undemocratic measure, announced at a moment where the soaring number of coronavirus cases across Europe dominates the news, shows the contempt for workers of Macron and his supporters in the international financial markets. Two-thirds of the French people are hostile to the law, which merges all pension schemes into one, eliminating many job-based advantages, increases “equilibrium age” (the minimum retirement age with a full pension) to 64 and imposes pensions on a “point” system rather than contributions. The monetary value of pensions will depend on these “points,” the value of which successive governments can reduce over the years.

This unmasks the trade union leadership and their political allies, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI), who have claimed that the reform could be stopped through trade union negotiations with Macron, or by tabling amendments to the reform in the Assembly. But there is nothing to negotiate with Macron. As the *World Socialist Web Site*and the Socialist Equality Party (PES) have insisted, it is a matter of mobilizing the entire working class to bring down Macron.

As the coronavirus spreads and Paris prepares new austerity measures and more troops for its war in Mali, Europe is in the hands of a politically criminal ruling class, which will do anything to enrich its great fortunes at the expense of the masses. The state is launching a reform that will ultimately profoundly impoverish pensioners, even as the elderly are threatened by a potentially fatal disease.

Last week, while rumors were circulating about a strategic debate within the government, unnamed members of the Macron’s party told the press that the 49-3 “branded” those who use it. A few days later, the government reversed course and “branded” itself with its own branding iron: Philippe announced to the Assembly that he would use the 49-3 clause to cut short the debate on the law, which otherwise would have lasted until March 6.

The pretext invoked by Philippe in the Assembly and on LFI was an absurd political lie. According to him, “many MPs were confronted from the very beginning of the debate with a strategy of deliberate obstruction by a minority, a strategy whose sole aim was to prevent the debates from taking place. ... It has to be said that the discussion on the essential questions never really came together. I deeply regret this. This debate should have made it possible to confront our points of view in front of the population.”

To put it plainly, it is Macron’s party, the Republic on the Move! (LRM), which is preventing the debate from taking place by closing it.

To understand the decision to shorten the debate, one can consult the agenda of the Assembly and the government. Philippe announced the use of 49-3 just after a Defense Council, a military body including the president and the prime minister, was held on the coronavirus. The invocation of 49-3 then closed the debate just before the Assembly’s discussion of Articles 9 and 10 of the reform, which increase the

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“equilibrium age” for retirement and impose point-based retirement.

If the debate had continued, even the opposition parties in the Assembly might have felt obliged, faced with the measure’s unpopularity, to quote the now well-known comment by the right-wing and former Prime Minister François Fillon. According to him, the points-based pension “allows for something that no politician admits. It allows the amount, the value of the points, to be lowered each year and thus the level of pensions to be reduced.”

Macron did not want a debate on a reform that is so openly hostile to the public, while the coronavirus is exposing the deep flaws of a medical system weakened by decades of austerity, two weeks before municipal elections. The ruling class prefers to work out its attacks on the income and health of the masses and impose them behind closed doors.

This decision has provoked widespread social anger against the backdrop of an international resurgence of the class struggle. The last few months have seen mass mobilizations in not only France, but throughout the world with historic mass strikes in India and the United States, and mass mobilizations from Algeria and Lebanon to Latin America. The defense of fundamental social rights requires a political reorientation of these struggles, that is: the organization of struggles by action committees independent of the unions and a new revolutionary internationalist perspective.

Across Europe, the financial aristocracy is one after the other destroying the social rights established in the 20th century during the struggles of the European working class against fascism: public pensions, the status of civil servants or railway workers, access to medical care. None of these rights can be guaranteed under a capitalist regime, but the pandemic is a reminder to us that these rights are essential to safeguard the lives of workers in all countries.

The example of France underlines the politically criminal nature of this offensive. The pretext of the state of emergency imposed in 2015, which established a police state to repress demonstrations against social breakdown, was the attacks by Islamist networks used as a cover for the war in Syria by NATO. Then hordes of paramilitary CRS beat up demonstrators against the Socialist Party’s (PS) “Labor law” and now the Macron reform, both of which were rejected by an overwhelming majority of the French and imposed by the 49-3 constitutional clause.

These are “villainous laws” with no democratic legitimacy whatsoever, imposed by a police state in the service of a financial aristocracy that poses an imminent and manifest danger to society.

There is a clear need for an alternative to the bankrupt union apparatuses. Subsidized by the state and employers, fearing that they would be overwhelmed by spontaneous strikes by railway workers in the fall, the unions felt compelled to organize a strike while negotiating closely with Macron. But when, in December-January, SNCF and RATP workers went on the longest strike in France since May 1968, the unions isolated them, without launching further unlimited strikes, and provided derisory aid. RATP strikers received $22 (£17) for six weeks on strike.

Parties like LFI or Olivier Besancenot's New Anti-Capitalist Party, which encouraged workers to rely on a common front between the unions, the PS and themselves against Macron’s attacks, are unmasked as petty-bourgeois charlatans. As with the PS labor law, their strategy of tabling hundreds of amendments to the reform was consciously impotent in the face of a government majority wanting to pass it by force.

The course of the struggle proved the analysis by the PES absolutely right. In December, as the strike against Macron’s reform began, the PES warned, based on the Trotskyist movement’s long analysis of the working-class experience with the CGT (Stalinist trade union) apparatus, that the unions would seek to strangle the movement. The PES stressed that only the independent leadership by the workers of their own struggles, together with those of their international class brothers and sisters in a struggle to bring down Macron, offered a way forward.

As anger continues to mount against the financial aristocracy and Macron, this experience will lead more and more workers to draw the same conclusions.

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