

Naming new French prime minister, Macron coordinates austerity with unions

Alex Lantier
4 July 2020

Yesterday, in a perfunctory ceremony reshuffling the government, French President Emmanuel Macron named Jean Castex to replace Édouard Philippe as prime minister. Castex, a member of the right-wing The Republicans (LR) party close to former President Nicolas Sarkozy, is to name a ministerial cabinet and give a political address next week.

While the government reshuffle does not modify one iota the military-police diktat and antiworker program of the Macron government, it is significant as a warning to the working class. Castex, whom *Libération* described as a “technocrat in the Matignon” prime ministerial palace, made his career by cutting spending and boosting profit levels in public hospitals in close coordination with the unions, before supervising Macron’s ending of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Castex is being brought in to coordinate closely with the trade unions the austerity policies that Macron and the banks will impose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As workers around the world launch strikes and protests against mass sackings and bank bailouts imposed by the ruling class, Castex’s nomination as prime minister is a further warning: the only way forward for these struggles is to organize them independently of the trade union bureaucracy. The French unions, which have long postured as a “radical” and “class struggle” variants of their corrupt cousins in America or Germany, are also totally integrated into the state machine.

The historic failure of the capitalist governments of America and Europe to promptly stop the COVID-19 pandemic is setting the stage for an international offensive of the bourgeoisie against the working class. While trillions of euros in public funds are being handed over in bailouts to the banks and major corporations, workers are being told to pay for the crisis. In France alone, over 11 million workers are on short-time work, and over 400,000

have lost their jobs even before the latest wave of mass layoffs at firms like Airbus, Air France, and Renault.

These ruthless, socially-destructive policies of the financial aristocracy are expected to trigger the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s Great Depression, even worse than the 2008 crash. Last month Macron announced in a speech that his government would accept mass layoffs and corporate bankruptcies, apparently of smaller businesses that the banks—flush with a €1.25 trillion bailout of public funds from the European Central Bank—want to let go to the wall.

Before asking Édouard Philippe to resign on Thursday night, Macron granted an interview to a consortium of regional papers, including *Ouest France*, *Midi Libre*, and the *Courrier Picard*. He said, “I have been engaged in very broad discussions over several weeks, in order to bring together all the living forces of the nation and face the next steps in the crisis. The back-to-school period will be extremely difficult, and we must prepare for it.”

After publicly boasting last month that he had worked out with Berlin €500 billion in pledges of state bailouts to major corporations, he stressed there would be massive job losses. He said, “I will be very clear with you: mass layoffs are occurring, and there will be more. The health crisis has wiped off five percent of the national wealth and halted entire industries. This will necessarily have an effect on businesses.”

Macron lamely tried to present himself as listening to popular demands, including the rise in vote for Green candidates in last weekend’s local elections and global protests against the police murder of George Floyd in the US city of Minneapolis. Calling for an “economic, social and environmental reconstruction of our country,” he warned, “A key issue is ensuring equality of opportunity. We have not done enough. You see it when some of our youth say, ‘If you have this skin color or first name, you do not have the same place in the Republic.’”

Macron also said he could spend €6 billion to raise French healthcare workers' salaries, which are among the lowest in Europe.

He went on to make clear, however, that he would in fact wage a ruthless class war against the workers. He said workers would have to accept lengthening the workweek and the length of time they need to pay into the state pension scheme in order to retire on a full pension. At the same time, he insisted it would be a "profound error" to increase taxes on the wealthy, which he slashed at the beginning of his presidency, and that he would not do it.

After negotiating a bailout package with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Macron insisted that the none of the European funds being handed out would go to increase workers' living standards and save jobs. With a straight face, he insisted that it would be "unfair" if these funds did not all go to the banks and corporations, saying, "We are agreeing to issue debt together. What would be unfair would be if we financed spending on social benefits and wage increases with debt."

Macron said the task of the incoming government would be to design, coordinate and implement this war on the working class in intimate collaboration with the "social partners," that is, with the trade unions and business groups. He said, "I will ask the government to rapidly engage deep-going negotiations this summer, in a responsible dialogue with the trade unions on the question of balanced budgets."

In short, the incoming government is tasked with the most parasitic defense of the privileges of the French ruling class since the feudal nobility refused to pay taxes at the 1789 Estates General; this led the budget crisis precipitated by France's participation in America's war for independence to erupt into the French Revolution. After two years of mounting strikes, youth and "yellow vest" protests, the working class is on a collision course with the Castex government.

Significantly, however, both Castex and the union bureaucracy have indicated that they support the broad outlines of the policy laid out by Macron. In the run-up to a prime-time interview on national television, Castex pledged on Twitter to work closely with the unions. "Before giving solutions, I want them to be discussed with the Nation, with the social partners, in every region. We will associate them as closely as possible to the search for solutions and a new social pact."

Right-wing politician Xavier Bertrand, formerly Sarkozy's labor minister, replied, "I know and appreciate Jean Castex's qualities as a servant of the state. They will

be indispensable in the difficult times we are about to live through."

In his colorless television interview, Castex again called for "negotiations" with the "social partners" on his policies and also for a more "rigorous" social policy. At the same time, he signaled a nationalist crackdown on immigrants, especially Muslims, insisting he would not tolerate "certain types of behavior, deviances, self-isolations, or communitarian outlooks."

At the same time, the trade unions—who are mobilizing no strikes against the mass layoffs now being imposed—signaled their support for the new prime minister. Castex "worked very closely to ensure the trains continued running, while train drivers' pensions were cut, and since has remained a close friend of former General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union leader Bernard Thibault," the financial daily *Les Échos* reported.

François Aubart of the Hospital Medical Coordination union hailed Castex's intervention to cut costs and raise profit levels in public hospitals, speaking to *Libération*, "When we spoke to him in 2005-2006 on the hospital crisis, he listened to us. He is a man who does not change based on what his position is. He wants to drive change."

These remarks point not only to the illegitimacy of the policies of European governments, but to the fraud of the unions' claims to represent working people.

The first half of 2020 has been dominated by the stunning medical incompetence and economic parasitism of the bourgeoisie's response to the pandemic. The second half of 2020 will see growing resistance by the working class. As US autoworkers form independent committees to impose safe working conditions and oppose speedup and job cuts, the way forward is to take the struggles out of the hands of the unions. Workers must be organized independently in a struggle to defend jobs and living standards by taking back the vast social wealth now being looted by the bourgeoisie.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact