New French prime minister Jean Castex calls for stepped-up police repression

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In a belligerent address to the National Assembly on July 15, Jean Castex presented the policies decided by French President Emmanuel Macron in talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Union (EU) institutions. Today, French union officials are to meet Castex in his Matignon Palace residence to publicly integrate themselves into the designing and implementation of these policies.

Castex declared that the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked an "economic crisis of unequaled severity since the end of World War II." He made clear he would respond by intensifying the policies of austerity and police-state militarism that have defined Macron's unpopular presidency.

This reflects the political bankruptcy and contempt for working people of not only the Macron government, but the entire ruling class. Approved by a 345-vote majority in the 577-seat Assembly, Castex's policy speech is setting into motion a collision between the working class and the banks, the state machine and the union bureaucracies, not only in France but across Europe and internationally.

Castex made clear that his government intends for workers to bear the full brunt of the crisis. While admitting that it was "the most vulnerable among us" who "were more affected by the pandemic," he predicted in a matter-of-fact tone that they "will also be the most strongly affected by the economic crisis." He then announced the accelerated implementation of Macron's pension cuts, suspended during the COVID-19 confinement after the December-January transport strikes, and numerous policies to strengthen the police.

The class arrogance of the Macron government and the EU policy agenda is staggering. As multiple massive bailouts are adopted—with €1.25 trillion of public funds handed to the banks by the European Central Bank, and hundreds of billions spent by the larger euro zone economies—Castex announced a further €100 billion in supplemental spending. After Macron said on Bastille Day that a million workers would lose their jobs this year, the state is reacting by pouring more public funds into the corporations and the pockets of the super-rich.

The plan includes €40 billion in business subsidies beyond the tens of billions in state bailouts for firms including Renault, Air France and Airbus; €20 billion for ecological renovations; and €38 billion to finance unemployment payments and provide orders to idled factories. Beyond this, Castex proposed to pay just €8 billion for raises to health workers' salaries, as well as for subsidies to encourage corporations to hire young workers for less than 160 percent of the minimum wage.

Castex stressed that his government would not repeal Macron's tax cuts for the rich nor increase other taxes on top income brackets. These decisions, which will massively increase social inequality and transfer wealth towards the top of society, are to be financed by a vast increase in public debt levels.

Raising EU bailouts negotiated by Merkel and Macron, Castex declared that his policy would be one of "massive investment based on exceptional support from the European Union, which was not present in the period after the 2008 economic crisis." He added, "To spend money on transformation is to invest in the future. The short-term part of the debt caused by the crisis, will be held separate from the rest of the debt."

This plundering of society will inevitably provoke a counteroffensive in the French and European working class. In the last two years, strikes and protests have unfolded not only in France, with the "yellow vests" and this year's transport strike, but around the world. US teachers and auto strikes last year went hand in hand with mass protests in Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Bolivia, Chile and beyond, and 2020 saw a wave of mass wildcat strikes in Italy, America and Brazil to demand social distancing

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and safety in the factories against COVID-19.

After nearly two years of violent repression of "yellow vests" by French police, the Castex government is preparing a major escalation of police violence against the population and the social opposition his policies will provoke. When Castex turned to describing his domestic policies, a distinctly fascistic picture emerged.

"It is of the greatest urgency to profoundly transform public policy," he declared. "The greatest error would be to think we should put the state in question. Because the state is France."

Castex reduced France to the state and, in fact, to the military-police forces on whom his policies of war and domestic repression rely. Demanding a "historic upsurge of our military power," Castex also hailed the police: "They are the first line of defense of Republican order. I demand that they be given all the material and human resources necessary to conduct their mission, so they can have boots on the ground, and so they can be relieved of administrative paperwork that takes up so much time."

Denouncing in the same breath Islamist terrorists and social protesters, he hailed "secularism as a cardinal value" to attack Islam and demand stepped-up domestic repression. "No religion, no current of ideas can take over public space or oppose itself to the laws of the Republic," he declared.

Castex announced his intention to pass a vaguely-worded "law against separatisms" and the creation of "neighborhood judges specially tasked with repressing day-to-day impoliteness." These judges would issue kangaroo-court rulings of those police charge with a vast number of offenses including "petty delinquency, graffiti, trafficking, and disturbing public order."

The various other measures Castex proposed to give a "progressive" veneer to his policy—a focus on ecology, cutting payroll taxes to businesses hiring young low-paid workers, one-euro meals in university cafeterias—are designed to avert an explosion of social anger that would swamp the police. However, they do not change anything about the evolution of the French state and of the EU into a distinctly fascistic police-state regime.

Domestic repression is going hand-in-glove with preparation of disastrous imperialist war amid the disintegration of US global hegemony after three decades of Middle East war and the impact of the pandemic in America. This week, as Castex was preparing his speech, the head of the French military general staff, General François Lecointre, gave an interview to *Le Monde* announcing that the French army is preparing for "major strategic conflict."

He recalled the confrontation between French and Turkish warships off the Libyan coast and said that a major war would be "different from the wars we are currently fighting—even if combat there is at times of high intensity at a tactical level, with important losses. But it would not necessarily be a high-intensity conflict, in the sense of an entire alliance completely reorganizing itself for a great war. Any scenario is possible."

Amid the pandemic and its accelerating resurgence in Europe, against the dangers of war, austerity and repression, it is critical to mobilize the working class independently of the unions. They are meeting Castex today, after he called in his speech for "social dialog"to "fuse France together"—that is, for the unions to strangle opposition to austerity policies Castex plans to impose based on empty and fraudulent demands for national unity.

By collaborating with Castex, union officials make clear their class hostility to the workers. These corrupt bureaucracies, financed by the state and corporate management since they lost their dues base decades ago, only work to subordinate workers to the state and the banks. With their allies in the middle class "left populist" parties, they are launching a corporatist collaboration with the financial aristocracy whose violence has no precedent since "legal" union officials were integrated, via the 1941 Labor Charter, into the state machine of the pro-Nazi Vichy regime.

Since the "yellow vest" movement began on social media, and as independent action committees are established from the US auto industry to Sri Lankan tea plantations, waging an international political struggle is both possible and essential for workers around the world. The only way to stop a health catastrophe and a massive impoverishment of the working class is to mobilize the working class outside the corrupt, national framework of the unions' "social dialog" in a political struggle against capitalism and war. This demands an international struggle to transfer state power to the independent organs of the working class, overthrowing capitalist relations, and imposing socialist economic planning to overcome the pandemic and social inequality.

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