Amid French refinery strike, Macron to impose 2023 budget without parliamentary vote

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With refinery workers striking in France against inflation and the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine escalating, President Emmanuel Macron moved yesterday to ram his 2023 budget through the National Assembly without a vote. After the May 2022 elections, Macron's Renaissance party has only a minority in the Assembly, and its budget was doomed to go down to defeat in a vote.

Ultimately, the Macron government decided yesterday to force approval of the revenues portion of its budget bill, using the French constitution's anti-democratic Article 49-3. This article allows the government to force the Assembly to adopt the budget without a vote, unless it adopts a motion of censure to bring down the government. The government is set to invoke this article again before the end of the week on the financing of Social Security—and, potentially, up to seven times before the budget is adopted.

Imposing its budget without a vote and trying to crush the refinery strike by requisitioning workers to force them to work, the Macron government operates without any popular support and with open contempt for basic democratic principles. It is a warning to workers of all industries not only in France but across Europe. They face governments that are unalloyed dictatorships of the banks, implacably opposed to working class demands and protests.

Events yesterday also revealed the mechanisms that keep Macron in power, despite his lack of a popular base: the complicity of the union bureaucracies and allied forces in the political establishment.

Even as Macron revealed his weakness, acknowledging his lack of support in the Assembly, factions of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union capitulated to him, working to gradually wind down the refinery strike. Indeed, yesterday CGT officials announced the end of the strike at the Donges refinery, while police tried to shut down the strike at the Feyzin refinery near Lyon—requisitioning 20 key workers at the facility in order to to restart production.

"Today the main thing for us was to get out of this strike cleanly, with cohesion and as a unified bloc," CGT officials at Donges told BFM-TV. They justified their action by citing low turnout at the CGT's October 18 national day of action, asserting, "The broadening of the movement we had hoped for did not take place."

In reality, the CGT national confederations are isolating and disarming the strikers. France's union confederations have multibillion-euro budgets, dwarfing the €10,000 fine workers face if they disobey a requisition order, but none of the unions are helping the workers defy the requisition. Above all, despite its symbolic one-day protest on October 18, the CGT bureaucracy is not mobilizing broader support for refinery workers in any continuing solidarity strikes.

Profiting from the union bureaucracies' demobilization of the working class, however, Macron is doubling down on his budgetary agenda of inflation, austerity and militarism.

The €480 billion budget, based on tax revenues of €320 billion, foresees a massive budget deficit of €160 billion. It raises defense spending by over €3 billion to €44 billion and cuts energy price subsidies, so that energy prices are expected to rise fully 15 percent. This will further drive up prices and decimate living standards for workers already reeling under the impact of 7 percent inflation in France in 2022. Nearly €6 billion in state revenue comes from EU bailouts, which go to pay off wealthy investors by buying up their state debt and stock holdings.

Neither the recklessness of its military build-up amid the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine nor the inflationary

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impact of its energy subsidy cuts and its EU bailouts of the super-rich were discussed in the parliamentary debates, however. Rather, deputies attacked the Macron government on various measures, especially smaller tax concessions to the wealthy.

Macron had authorized the government to use Article 49-3 at a cabinet meeting a week earlier, but Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne reportedly replied that “debate should take place.” In the Assembly, however, the debates on the 2023 budget spun out of the government’s control: It lost votes on numerous items in the budget bill, including sometimes even amendments proposed by members of Macron’s own Renaissance party.

Particularly embarrassing for the Macron government was its defeat by an amendment proposed by Jean-Paul Mattei, a member of the small right-wing Democratic Movement party that is part of Macron’s ruling coalition. Mattei demanded a temporary raise in taxes for “super dividends” paid out by highly profitable corporations—a tax hike the Macron government and Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire had opposed. Mattei’s amendment was supported by Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s New Popular Union, the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) and factions of Macron’s Renaissance party.

Borne met with Renaissance party deputies on Tuesday morning to prepare the use of Article 49-3 after discussions with Macron. Yesterday, under jeers from the opposition parties, Borne announced the use of the 49-3: “We could have given up looking for a compromise. We chose dialog. While we do not agree on everything, we can come together when the national interest is at stake. We must give our country a budget. I stake the responsibility of my government upon this.”

For now, this decision appears to have little chance of bringing down the Macron government. Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) and the far-right RN have both submitted motions of censure against the Macron government, in line with Article 49.3. Currently, however, it is expected that these motions have little chance of passing, since LFI and the RN both refuse to vote for the other party’s censure motions. The right-wing Republicans party has already let it be known that it will not vote for either motion of censure.

Above all, however, none of the decisive issues posed to workers by this budget are discussed in official political life. In this, the deputies in the National Assembly are no different than the bureaucrats of the CGT. The enormous danger of the NATO-Russian war in Ukraine erupting into a full-scale nuclear war that would devastate Europe and the role of bank bailouts and energy policy in driving a wave of inflation that is devastating workers internationally are all passed over in silence.

This sinister silence lulls the public to sleep and facilitates the union bureaucracies’ demobilization of the working class, by hiding the enormous dangers of war and economic collapse facing workers.

Particularly heavy responsibility falls on Mélenchon, who won nearly 8 million votes among urban workers and youth in the April 2022 presidential election. Despite nearly having advanced to the second round, Mélenchon did not seek to project opposition to Macron or neo-fascist Marine Le Pen, the two candidates in the run-off. Instead, he promised that he could work under either of them, as their prime minister. He then formed a New Popular Union (NUPES) alliance with the widely despised, anti-worker Socialist Party (PS) of former President François Hollande.

Mélenchon has done nothing to appeal to his masses of voters to mobilize in defense of the refinery workers, against inflation and austerity, or against imperialist militarism and war.

In reality, there is nothing to negotiate with Macron, and the CGT bureaucrats who seek to negotiate with him have nothing to offer to the workers. The way forward is a political insurrection of the working class against the national union bureaucracies and the building of rank-and-file committees to organize all the struggles against repression, austerity and war. The best allies of workers in France in these struggles are their class brothers and sisters around the world, fighting to build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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