Clashes erupt across France as Macron imposes pension cuts without parliamentary vote

Alex Lantier
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Mass protests erupted last night in cities across France, after Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne announced that her government plans to impose President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts without a vote in the National Assembly. Anger is mounting in the working class, which is entering into a direct confrontation with the Macron government, with revolutionary implications.

Macron's police state machine is trampling democracy and the will of the people underfoot. He has ignored the opposition to his cuts of three-quarters of the French people, and nationwide protest strikes against the cuts by millions of workers have continued for two months now. With 60 percent of the population supporting a general strike to blockade the economy and force Macron to withdraw the cuts, strikes and protests are mounting in France.

Police assaulted protests by thousands in Marseille, Lyon, Lille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes, Rennes, Brest, Dijon, Angers and Besançon. Tens of thousands gathered at Place de la Concorde in Paris, where police armed with tear gas, water cannon, rubber-bullet guns and assault rifles guarded strategic buildings, including the Elysée presidential palace, the National Assembly and the US embassy. Clashes broke out after police charged the protest. Fires burned in streets across central Paris as protesters battled riot police. At least 120 protesters were arrested.

An objectively revolutionary situation is emerging in France and across Europe, as the class struggle erupts amid the bloody NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. Millions are striking against inflation and wage cuts in Germany and Britain, strikes are continuing in the Netherlands and Portugal, and a general strike hit Greece yesterday. Even as social anger assumes titanic dimensions across Europe, Macron has nothing to offer besides repression.

Macron told his council of ministers yesterday morning that he would activate line 3 of Article 49 of France's constitution. The 49-3 provision allows the government to force the National Assembly to adopt legislation without a vote, unless the Assembly votes to bring down the government. Borne's announcement came amid reports that Macron, whose party has only a minority in the Assembly, could not get enough votes for the pension cuts from the right-wing The Republicans (LR) party.

Macron told the council of ministers that if the pension cuts went to the Assembly and were voted down, the result—amid a mounting financial crisis, fears of failures of European banks, and growing speculation on the French national debt—would be catastrophic. It would also, clearly, cut across Macron's attempt to fund his €413 billion military budget and his participation in the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine via pension cuts.

Macron said: "My political interest and my political will were to go to a vote (in the Assembly on the cuts). Among all of you, I am not the one who is risking his position and a parliamentary seat. But I consider that in the current situation, the financial and economic risks were too great."

Macron dispensed with the lie that his pension cuts are dictated by the need to ensure the financial viability of the French pension system. It is truly a vast handout to the banks and the war machine.

France's CAC-40 stock index, which had fallen heavily in early trading, surged after Borne said she would use 49-3 in the parliament. With financiers expecting further massive profits, the CAC-40 rose over 120 points to close back over 7,000.

The Macron government is pledging to ram through the cuts, no matter the cost. Borne gave a prime time TV interview on TF1 in which she defended her record,

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dismissed reporters' questions about mass popular opposition to the cuts, and pledged that the cuts would go through.

The trade union alliance that has called the nationwide strike protests over the last two months, including the social-democratic French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) and the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), also held a brief press conference yesterday evening. The alliance called a further one-day strike protest to be held on March 23.

This is a dead end for workers in France and across Europe. Macron has made unmistakably clear that there is nothing to negotiate with him, and that he is determined to run roughshod over public opinion. To break Macron's attempts to impoverish the working class and dragoon it into war, workers must first take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracies and build rank-and-file committees to wage a political struggle to bring down the Macron government.

In an atmosphere of panic across the French ruling establishment, bourgeois journalists and pseudo-left politicians are peddling the line that workers should limit themselves to begging Macron to change his mind, or begging parliamentarians to censure his government and call new elections. It is a desperate attempt to buy time, give the union bureaucracy room to get control over the situation, and prevent a revolutionary struggle against Macron.

"This is the beginning of something that is skidding out of control... Representative democracy no longer allows for the expression of the voice of the people," commented *Marianne* editor Natacha Polony on BFM-TV, whose editorialist Bernard Duhamel desperately asked: "The risk is that the trade union will not hold. Will the union leaderships be able to hold?"

Members of 2022 presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon's New Popular Union coalition peddled illusions that Macron and the ruling elite would suddenly abandon the cuts. "We are in a major political crisis," said Green politician Sandrine Rousseau, asking the right-wing LR party to provide the decisive votes for the motion of censure and force new elections. She added: "Things must be calmed down, the government has a responsibility to calm things down."

"Social harmony must be re-established. Mr Macron must return to reason," declared François Ruffin of Mélenchon's own Unsubmissive France (LFI) party. Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) leader Fabien Roussel pledged to organize a petition campaign to gather four million signatures to ask Macron to reconsider. "What president of the Republic would act with contempt towards such a petition?", Roussel cynically asked.

This is a fraud. If Macron is willing to trample underfoot the opposition of 50 million people in France and 3 million strikers, he can easily dismiss a petition with 4 million signatures.

The union bureaucracy is also strenuously signaling, in its behind-the-scenes talks with employers but also now in the media, that it will do everything it can to crush the workers. Jean-Christophe Deprat, the Workers Force (FO) union bureaucrat in charge of Paris mass transit, complained of the "risks of things getting out of control. It risks turning into a big mess where everyone does whatever they want."

"A certain insurrection is possible," warned CGT-Energy bureaucrat Frédéric Ben. "We fight against the radicalization of movements… but on a strike picket, there are not only CGT members. Workers, they do what they want."

These statements amount to a pledge not to mobilize opposition to Macron's coming crackdowns. Already yesterday, riot police broke up pickets by striking garbage collectors in Paris and arrested several striking CGT energy workers for distributing free energy to workers' homes.

Only the independent, rank-and-file organization of the working class, armed with a revolutionary socialist perspective, can defeat the bureaucracy's attempts to strangle workers' struggles and hand Macron a victory. What is emerging in France is not a national crisis that can be resolved with talks with the Macron-Borne government, or its replacement. It is the expression in France of an insoluble economic and military crisis of world capitalism.

This crisis cannot be resolved via reforms or parliamentary maneuvers, but only by the transfer of state power to organizations of the working class in France and across Europe and internationally, fighting to build socialism.

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