Macron demands “100 days of calm and unity” amid protests against French pension cuts

Alex Lantier
18 April 2023

President Emmanuel Macron gave a prime-time televised address yesterday evening insisting that raising the retirement age and imposing cuts opposed by an overwhelming majority of the French people must go ahead. He ludicrously declared that he would fight for “100 days of unity and calm,” opening a new era in his presidency.

Ninety percent of the French people did not believe that Macron’s address would solve anything, according to a BFM-TV poll, and his remarks convinced no one. Thousands protested in cities including Paris, Marseille, Nantes and Rennes, banging pots and pans, as he spoke. His remarks showed that he plans to launch a military-police armament drive and wait for the union bureaucracy to gradually wear down protests, now that his cuts are adopted as law.

Protests and strikes against Macron, his cuts and falling wages due to inflation will continue, as even top union officials admitted in TV interviews after Macron spoke. But one political lesson emerged very clearly from his address: Macron is utterly impervious to popular pressure, and the only way to stop his assault on the working class is to bring him down.

Macron began with an arrogant and insincere expression of regret that the French people had not been convinced of the superior wisdom of his cuts. “Adopted in line with our constitution, these changes were necessary to guarantee everyone’s pensions and produce greater wealth for the nation,” he said, adding, “Nevertheless, is this reform accepted? Clearly it is not. Despite the months of negotiations, we were not able to find a consensus, and that is too bad.”

Macron is a banker, and he knows that the claim that his cuts are the only way to finance the pension system is a lie. Massive European Union (EU) bank bailouts, financed with public money, have inflated the wealth of France’s financial oligarchy by hundreds of billions of euros. Just one oligarch, Bernard Arnault—the world’s wealthiest man—has increased his wealth by €40 billion each year since the pandemic. This is by itself enough to finance Macron’s €13 billion cut to yearly pension spending three times over.

Coming shortly after a trip to Beijing during which he called for the building of a “European war economy,” Macron tried to hide the French financial oligarchy’s plundering of the workers behind reactionary invocations of French nationalism and military rearmament.

He pledged that the rest of his second term would “serve clear goals: our independence and justice. Our independence first of all, for France and for Europe. We are a people that intends to control and choose its fate. We do not want to depend on anyone, neither on the forces of speculation nor on foreign powers, nor on any will but our own. And we are correct in this. Independence cannot be decreed, it is built by ambition, by effort… in knowledge, research, competitiveness, technology, industry, and defense.”

Macron’s remarks underscore the extent to which his attacks on the working class are driven to an extraordinary extent by the international crisis, and above all the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine and Washington’s plans for war with China. The €13 billion per year Macron intends to cut from pensions is not to cover a financial shortfall in the pension system, but to finance the roughly €90 billion in supplementary military spending he plans for the rest of the decade.

Turning reality on its head, Macron argued however

© World Socialist Web Site

that his pursuit of national "independence" and military autonomy would allow for flourishing social justice at home.

"This French and European independence is precisely what will allow us to obtain more justice, that each get more from all his efforts," Macron said, acknowledging the "anger felt by many French people whose work no longer allows them to live well, given the rise in prices… Some feel they are doing their part, but without getting assistance or effective public services."

Even as he slashes social spending to divert massive sums to the military, Macron claimed he would work with the union bureaucracy on "three great projects" to improve French life. Like everything else in his address, this was an absurd lie. He intends to accelerate social attacks on the working class, while further building up police forces that have attacked protests and strikes against his cuts over the last three months.

Macron announced the opening of talks on a "pact on working life" to be "formulated in social dialog" with the union bureaucracies. In addition to an unspecified proposal for "reforms" to vocational technical high schools, Macron indicated that this would include his proposed changes to the RSA (Active Solidarity Revenue) welfare program, whose recipients Macron plans to force to work to receive benefits. He added that "the door is always open" to the trade unions.

Macron announced an insincere "struggle for progress to live better" to improve services in public schools and hospitals devastated by decades of spending cuts and his own murderous indifference to the COVID-19 pandemic. But he is under no illusion that empty rhetoric about social progress, contradicted at every step by his actual record, will convince anyone.

For this reason, the only concrete announcement that he made in his three-part plan to improve France was his plan for "justice and republican and democratic order." He called to recruit 10,000 cops and judicial staff, primarily to reinforce the riot police by creating 200 new military police squads. On this basis, he called for "100 days of calm, unity, ambition and action in the service of France."

Workers and youth should reject Macron's call for calm and national unity with the contempt it deserves. His address is the latest confirmation that there is nothing to negotiate with Macron, who unabashedly plans to rule against the people. His illegitimate laws derive not from the consent of the governed, but by the executive fiat of an all-powerful presidency imposing the diktats of the banks via police violence.

Workers cannot leave the task of opposing Macron's dictatorial agenda to the union bureaucracy, which is terrified of the explosive opposition in the working class.

After Macron spoke, French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) head Laurent Berger went on the air for an extended interview on BFM-TV. He called for protests on May Day, though he has already said that "in six months," there will not be any more protests against Macron's cuts. Berger added that there only had to be a "decent delay" before the union bosses restart public negotiations with Macron.

"The CFDT, one day or other, will go back into discussions. You know that, you know us," Berger told BFM-TV interviewers. "We'll discuss working conditions, we'll discuss wages. But we want a minimum of decency in this relationship. We do not just answer when we're called."

Berger warned Macron and the entire ruling class that they should try and avoid a social explosion, as two-thirds of the French people want a general strike to block the economy. "We must be careful not to have contempt for workers, who mobilized in large numbers over the last three months and will continue to do so on May Day, I hope. This is not what they needed tonight." He pledged that the CFDT would go back into talks with Macron "when the time is ripe. But there must be a decent delay, I stand by this. Today, there is still a lot of anger."

The mass anger in the working class requires a political perspective and leadership, opposed to the cynical plans of Macron and Berger to gradually wind down the movement. The perspective, as the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* has explained, is to build a mass movement of the rank-and-file, independent of the union bureaucracy, preparing a general strike to bring down Macron.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site