

French government collapses with strikes against austerity set to begin

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French Prime Minister François Bayrou's government fell in a confidence vote yesterday, by a 364-194 margin, with 15 abstentions. It was the first time since France's Fifth Republic began in 1958 that the National Assembly brought down a government.

President Emmanuel Macron issued a communiqué pledging to "receive tomorrow the prime minister, François Bayrou, to accept his resignation" and "name a new prime minister in the coming days." He is apparently trying to form a new government without new elections, based on France's current hung parliament. Figures cited as possible prime ministerial picks range from Macron's fascistic former interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, to former Socialist Party (PS) prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve.

A confrontation is fast emerging between the working class and the capitalist oligarchy. Macron's poll ratings have plunged to 15 percent, the lowest ever for a French president; his possible new prime ministers are all unpopular figures who share Bayrou's agenda of military spending increases and austerity. Moreover, the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) is declaring itself ready to take power, pledging to more than double Bayrou's social cuts, from €44 to €100 billion.

With strikes and protests set to begin across France tomorrow, the working class is entering into a struggle that can only be waged with revolutionary methods. The only way to resolve the debt crisis in France and across Europe without impoverishing the workers is to expropriate the capitalist oligarchy, breaking its grip over state power. This, in turn, requires freeing the class struggle from the grip of bureaucracies trying to strangle it—primarily the parties and trade union leaderships in the New Popular Front (NFP), led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Bayrou's speech at the National Assembly yesterday baldly defended war and the capitalist oligarchy. "France has not had a balanced budget in 51 years," he said,

pointing to France's debt of over €3 trillion. Without massive military spending and payoffs to the banks to reduce France's debt, Bayrou claimed, France will be "dominated by force of arms or dominated by our creditors as our debts drown us. In either case, we lose our liberty."

He lamented that billionaires like Europe's richest man, French luxury magnate Bernard Arnault (worth \$172 billion), are "emblematic targets of a mystical form of thought. They are like voodoo dolls people stick pins in—to hit them in the wallet, I suppose. ... Thus we are told that if we just take what they have, a lot of what they have, or each year 2 percent of what they have ... then France's problems will be solved."

Instead, Bayrou demanded the French people hail the ultra-rich. "The top 1 percent is responsible for a large part of private investment in production in France," he said, and if "they are targeted, they have a very simple and very immediate response: They leave. They can find a plethora of other countries where they can find tax havens."

The capitalist oligarchy has not enriched society, but rather plundered it. The oligarchy condemns France and much of Europe to industrial stagnation, monopolizing the wealth created by the workers. In his 2010 work *For a Fiscal Revolution*, economist Thomas Piketty found that in France, the top 10 percent of the population held 62 percent of total wealth; the top 1 percent alone held 24 percent. Since then, however, wealth has become far more concentrated at the top: the wealth of just the 500 wealthiest Frenchmen rose from €194 to €1,228 billion.

Strengthening the military and stabilizing state finances without expropriating these massive fortunes means destroying social spending. The French state currently has €330 billion in yearly tax revenues. On this basis, raising military spending by €100 billion per year, finding €100 billion per year for interest on the debt, and finding tens

of billions of euros more to pay down France's debt would require virtually eliminating pension, health and education spending.

RN leader Marine Le Pen spoke in the Assembly, calling it "a moment of truth where the officials are forced to reveal the disastrous results of five decades of overspending." Leaders "of the right and of the left" were "guilty," Le Pen said, calling upon Macron not to resign, but instead to organize snap legislative elections. She said she hoped the RN would obtain "an absolute majority to enact a policy to redress the nation."

Workers voting for the RN must be warned: Le Pen is playing them for fools. Her demagogy on "redressing the nation" is cynical window-dressing for RN plans to set up a fascistic dictatorship to wage war abroad and class war at home. Indeed, last week, RN party president Jordan Bardella's open letter to France's entrepreneurs called for a €100 billion cut to social spending.

Workers cannot fight fascistic dictatorship by supporting an NFP-led government, under Macron or otherwise. The NFP's program pledges to participate in NATO wars and defend capitalist property. In power, the NFP would soon resort to brutal repression to crush working class opposition to its measures to stabilize French capitalism.

Yesterday, most of the NFP called to form a government under Macron. "The PS takes upon itself the responsibility to assert that it is ready, together with the left and the Greens, to govern," said PS leader Boris Vallaud, who claimed the PS would provide "tax, social and territorial justice."

"To escape this dead end, the president has no other choice but to accept a prime minister from a rival party, naming a prime minister from the New Popular Front," said Green parliamentary leader Cyrielle Chatelain. Similarly, Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) leader Fabien Roussel called on Macron to "draw the lessons and name a left-wing prime minister who will put austerity in question."

Mélenchon projects a more "radical" image, saying upcoming strikes should bring down Macron. But Mélenchon has been in or allied to PS austerity governments for over 40 years, since serving as a top advisor to PS President François Mitterrand, as Mitterrand abandoned the reform program he had been elected on in 1981 and mounted his 1982 "austerity turn." Under threat from the financial markets as in 1981, a Mélenchon government would also rapidly capitulate.

Last night, on France2 TV, Mélenchon claimed

Bayrou's fall was a "popular victory," but hailed Bayrou's "courage" in calling a confidence vote: "We must salute him, incidentally, because it's the first time in five years. He had that courage." Baldly denying the debt crisis, Mélenchon claimed his proposals for ecological investment will give confidence to French business.

"There is no debt crisis. Three trillion euros is cosmetic," he said. "What we must give above all to the country—not to the financial markets but to the good people, the entrepreneurs of this country—is visibility on what will happen."

Mélenchon's main demand is for Macron to resign and call snap presidential elections to give more credibility to the French institutional set-up. He said, "We are in a 'kick them all out' moment, I think you will agree. And what we need after a 'kick them all out' movement is a refounding movement. Given the institutions in this country, only the presidential election will allow us to have a refounding moment."

Mélenchon's denials of the crisis are lies to chloroform the workers. All Europe's major countries face insoluble debt crises. There are only two ways out: a fascistic dictatorship to impoverish the workers, or a struggle for a socialist revolution to expropriate the oligarchy.

The actions being launched by workers and youth across France must initiate this struggle. A general strike must be prepared to bring down Macron, by workers organized in rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles independently of union bureaucracies allied with Macron. Above all, this struggle requires finding allies outside France's borders, among workers entering into struggle against austerity across Europe and internationally, in an openly declared struggle for socialism.



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