

After mass October 17 protest, French government prepares dictatorship

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High school students in France, protesting for weeks against funding cuts and police repression, joined “yellow vests” opposed to rising fuel and living costs in a national day of action on Saturday. More than 550,000 people marched, according to the Interior Ministry, and riot police were deployed in city after city. A crisis of bourgeois rule came into view in France.

The youth are protesting overcrowded classes, missing teachers and the Parcoursup university selection system. Workers can no longer afford fuel and food. Behind these grievances is growing anger at social inequality, repression, imperialist war, neofascism and the capitalist oligarchy.

The explosive events in France are reverberating across Europe and beyond. Mass housing protests have shaken Spain, youth protests are growing in Albania, public sector strikes have hit Ireland, Belgium and Portugal, and anti-war protests have erupted into clashes with police across Italy.

The ruling establishment in France is pursuing a two-track strategy. While the union bureaucracy and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France insoumise (LFI) work to subordinate the protests to the capitalist state, the government itself is moving to set up a dictatorship.

By Sunday night, nearly 2,400 people had been arrested over the October 17 protests. In a televised address, President Emmanuel Macron blamed the violence on “seditionists from ultra-left grouplets.” He demanded that parties and unions “unambiguously condemn” it, and invited student organizations into talks with employers, union officials, local authorities and parliamentarians to negotiate an end to the protests.

On Monday, Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu spoke after an emergency cabinet meeting, pledging a “massive penal response.” He announced “partial and very localized curfews,” even as the Marseille police prefecture banned gatherings across the entire city. Asked whether he would declare a state of emergency, which suspends democratic rights and lets police arrest citizens at will, Lecornu replied: “If necessary, clearly we could. For now, curfews seem more suited to the situation.”

Lecornu has invited the far-right National Rally (RN) to attend meetings on the government’s crisis response, and he said he had to protect the 2027 presidential election, in which the RN currently leads the polls, from left-wing opposition. “It

is a proven fact that an ultra-left movement wants to organize deep disorder in the country until the presidential election,” he alleged, adding: “There is a nebulous network that can activate itself to call into question the date and even the holding of the presidential election.”

Lecornu gave no evidence for his “proven fact.” In reality, the threat to democracy comes from his own police state operations. Lecornu, who took part in talks before the 2024 elections on the possibility of installing an RN government under Macron, is concerned that the protests threaten the ruling elite’s plans to engineer a victory in 2027 for the RN or a similar repressive right-wing party.

As Lecornu presents a €54 billion austerity budget in parliament today, international investors are studying the RN’s call for deep austerity to stabilize France’s massive debt. RN leader Marine Le Pen’s October 6 proposal of €140 billion in cuts by 2032 led bond markets to pull back from speculation against French debt. Powerful sections of the capitalist oligarchy are coming to see an RN presidency next year as a viable, even desirable, way to ensure that their loans to the French state are repaid with interest.

The eruption of mass opposition in France threatens these plans. It also cuts across the reckless escalation of NATO’s war against Russia. At their summit in Brussels last week, the European powers pledged to keep financing Ukraine’s war after Washington’s diesel deal with Moscow. They are preparing up to €800 billion in additional military spending under the “ReArm Europe” plan.

A war on this scale is to be paid for by gutting social spending, and that requires the suppression of opposition at home. Lecornu’s curfews defend these financial and military interests of French and world imperialism.

The statements from the fascist RN confirm that the ruling class is grooming it to suppress left-wing opposition. Jordan Bardella declared that only “professionals of chaos,” not “working France,” were in the streets on Saturday. Marine Le Pen wrote that rioters “pillaging, ransacking, destroying, attacking the security forces” had “spoiled” the October 17 protests, which had been “taken hostage by the far left.” She said that if elected, she would protect the French people “from the violence of the far left.”

Repression is one track of the ruling class's strategy. The other is the effort of the union bureaucracy and LFI to bring the movement back under the control of the state. Here Mélenchon's response to the October 17 protests was highly revealing. On LCI television on Sunday, he sowed illusions that Macron would offer concessions to the youth and, above all, called for the movement to end.

"Our youth need a good ending to this sequence of events. Its demands must be heard," Mélenchon said. Pressed on what Macron might offer to end the movement, he replied: "Respond to high living costs, freeze prices. Secondly, respond to the youth, give them €10 billion and eliminate Parcoursup. And respond to the distress of unfortunate people whose shops have been pillaged."

Mélenchon then referred to the May 1968 general strike, which erupted after a violent police crackdown on university protests. He did not do so to advocate preparing a general strike against repression or dictatorship. Rather, he held up the Grenelle Accords, negotiated by Prime Minister Georges Pompidou with the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) bureaucracy to wind down the strike, as an example of what could be won.

Lecornu, Mélenchon said, "can take his inspiration from history ... What did Pompidou do? He got everyone together, to do what? Well, it was to give up as much as possible. In one night, we got a 30 percent increase in the minimum wage, protection of trade union work in companies, and more."

Mélenchon's history lesson leaves out how 1968 ended. When CGT leader Georges Séguéy presented the Grenelle terms to the workers at Renault-Billancourt on May 27, they booed him down and the strike continued. On May 30, de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly and called elections. The French Communist Party (PCF) backed the decision that evening, and the CGT threw all its energy into ending the strikes and occupations before the vote. It was the Stalinists who, by channeling the general strike into elections, saved de Gaulle.

Mélenchon is playing an analogous role. But there will be no Grenelle Accords in 2026. Like countries across Europe, the French state is bankrupt, pursued by its creditors in the capitalist oligarchy, and diverting tens of billions of euros to war. Lecornu is discussing curfews and states of emergency because the state has no budgetary room for substantial concessions. Should Mélenchon succeed in engineering a sellout of the movement, tying workers to the capitalist state and disappointing their hopes, it is the far right that will benefit politically.

The CGT bureaucracy plays the same role. Its statement demands a "commission of inquiry" into police violence on October 17, while calling for the government to find "political solutions" for "social demands that have been expressed for months." But the government intends neither to punish its own police nor to make any substantive social concessions. It relies

on the CGT, which has put off nationwide action until November 5, to delay and block a broader mobilization of the working class.

This underscores the bankruptcy of middle-class groups such as the Morenoite *Révolution permanente* (RP), which insist that the struggle must ultimately be led by the union bureaucracy. RP's October 17 statement, titled, "The workers' movement must go into battle like in 1968," declares that "imposing a battle plan on the union leaderships is the key to building a force capable of paralyzing the economy" and defeating the government's austerity.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES) insists that the struggle against Macron, the financial markets and neofascism cannot be waged on the perspective of forcing capitalist governments to retreat. An irreconcilable class conflict has emerged. The alternative confronting workers and youth is not between Macron, Mélenchon and Le Pen, but between capitalism and socialism.

The protests have revealed the deep, explosive social opposition that exists. As yet, however, they remain based primarily among the youth. The PES fights for the widest possible extension of the movement into the working class. The working class cannot wait on the timetable set by the union bureaucracies and their allies in LFI.

The PES calls for the building of committees of action in schools, universities, workplaces and neighborhoods, elected and controlled by those engaged in struggle and independent of the union bureaucracies and capitalist parties. These committees must take control of the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracies. They must unite workers and youth in France with those now entering struggle across Europe and worldwide, to prepare a general strike against austerity, repression and war.

This requires a revolutionary political perspective: the fight for workers' power and the United Socialist States of Europe, against fascism, war and capitalism. The PES calls on all workers and youth who agree with this perspective to join it and build it as the revolutionary leadership of the working class in France.



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