

French Government Forces Through Austerity Measures without Vote in Parliament

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French Prime Minister Manuel Valls' government yesterday forced through an unpopular bill imposing large-scale liberalization of the French economy without a parliamentary vote. Instead, Valls used the anti-democratic provision 49-3 of the French Constitution, which allows the executive to force the National Assembly to either adopt the bill or bring down the government.

A motion of censure to bring down Valls' government, a coalition of the Socialist Party (PS) and the small Radical Left Party (PRG), will go to a vote on Thursday. Its sponsors—the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI), together with the Left Front—reportedly do not expect it to pass. The PS-PRG coalition controls 306 of the Assembly's 577 seats, with 288 seats from the PS and 18 from the PRG.

Valls resorted to this move after discussion with President François Hollande, as it became clear that even the PS delegation was hesitating to vote for the law, named after PS Economy Minister and former investment banker Emmanuel Macron. Sources at the Elysée presidential palace told Reuters that they wanted to avoid failure of the bill, a risk that “the executive did not want to take given the bill's importance for our economy.”

The Macron Law is a major attack on the working class. Its more than 200 provisions include making it harder for workers to sue for wrongful dismissal; letting employers demand increased working hours on Sunday without overtime pay; a comprehensive overhaul of fees for various legal and medical services; and numerous privatizations of public firms.

The proposed law led to numerous protests last year by service workers opposing Sunday work without overtime pay, as well as by medical and legal professionals opposed to the liberalization of their professions.

Valls said the decision was taken to avoid fatally undermining Hollande, whose wars and austerity measures have made him France's most unpopular president since the end of World War II. “Right now as we speak, the bill would not pass,” Valls told deputies at the National Assembly. “We are at a time when we cannot, in good conscience, weaken the head of the state and the government.”

The government's resort to provision 49-3 underscores the fact that the austerity program of the PS and the European Union (EU) lacks any political legitimacy. A poll last year found that Hollande's economic policy has only a 3 percent approval rating, reflecting rising outrage in the working class over unemployment and economic stagnation. The PS therefore pushed through its reactionary policies, with total contempt for the population, without even

the fig leaf of parliamentary support.

The PS hypocritically denounced the government the last time 49-3 was used. This was in 2006 by then-UMP Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, as he sought to impose his unpopular First Job Contract (CPE) in the face of mass youth protests. “49-3 is an act of brutality, 49-3 is a denial of democracy, 49-3 is a way of blocking or preventing parliamentary debate,” Hollande declared at the time.

As for the parties in the Assembly who are now criticizing the PS government—led by the UMP and also the Left Front, a coalition of long-time allies of the PS—their opposition is no less hypocritical. They have all designed and helped impose social cuts against the working class for decades. Their decision not to vote for the Macron Law, like that of the sections of the PS itself, is only a cowardly attempt to hide their support for unpopular austerity measures.

Marine Le Pen, the leader of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), responded to the use of the 49-3 provision by calling for the dissolution of the parliament and new elections, in which the PS would stand to lose heavily and fall from power, and the FN to make substantial gains. Valls “should present the resignation of his government ... The government itself is admitting that it no longer has a parliamentary majority,” Le Pen said.

The PS government is clearly calculating that the 49-3 maneuver will shore up its parliamentary majority, and give political cover to factions of the PS closer to pseudo-left organizations, including the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

“Rebel” (*frondeur*) PS factions associated with former Industry Minister Arnaud Montebourg, who criticized PS economic policies last year and might feel politically exposed if they openly voted for the Macron Law, will now be able to instead vote confidence for the Valls government. Such a vote would not only preserve the government and their own seats, but also allow the “rebels” to cynically justify their vote as necessary to stop the rise of the FN.

The only way forward for workers is a broader mobilization of the working class in political struggle against the EU and the Hollande government. Such a struggle has been consistently blocked by the Left Front, the NPA and the trade unions, who supported the election of Hollande in 2012 and continue to support the PS government. They isolated protests by sections of workers and of the middle classes against the Macron Law, seeking to prevent these protests from developing into a broader struggle against the government and the entire capitalist system.

As the bourgeoisie works out its strategy for imposing continued austerity despite mass popular anger, a reactionary political division of labor has emerged. While pseudo-left and PS “rebel” forces block a united struggle of the working class and encourage illusions in parliamentary opposition to the PS, PS factions closer to Hollande and Valls work directly with the EU to prepare and justify further attacks on the working class.

EU Economics Affairs Commissioner Pierre Moscovici, who previously served as Hollande’s finance minister, demanded that the French government develop a more ambitious liberalization and austerity agenda, going beyond the Macron Law. “France can and must have this,” he declared last week.

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