

French Presidential Address: A Call for Austerity and Militarism

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Global Research, January 15, 2014
[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [US NATO War](#)
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French President François Hollande gave a three-hour press conference yesterday at the Elysée presidential palace, trying to halt the slide in support for his Socialist Party (PS) government.

The Hollande administration has been undermined by growing popular anger and disillusionment with its reactionary policies. It has become France's most unpopular government since World War II, falling to 15 percent approval over unpopular wars overseas and rising unemployment. In upcoming municipal and European elections this year, it faces a rout and a possible first-place finish by the neo-fascist National Front (FN).

Before his press conference, the financial press called on Hollande to accelerate his austerity measures. The *Economist* magazine pressed Hollande to impose the type of cuts that have devastated Europe's so-called "peripheral" countries—Greece, Ireland, and Spain. It complained, "Far from copying the deep structural reforms undertaken in peripheral countries, he has barely begun liberalizing labor and product markets or trimming France's social-welfare spending, the highest in the OECD rich-country club."

Hollande responded at his press conference yesterday by trying to rally support in the ruling class, pledging draconian social cuts justified with militarist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. It was a thoroughly scripted affair, from the gilded woodwork of the Elysée palace to the equally wooden questions of the invited journalists—to which Hollande replied with professions of belief in various free-market nostrums and the military power of French imperialism.

Stressing his "desire to cut public spending," Hollande touted "supply-side" policies, like slashing corporate contributions to social spending, to cheapen labor and fatten profits for firms operating in France. He said, "The time has come to deal with France's principal problem: production. We must produce more and better. We must therefore act on the supply side. ...This does not contradict demand, in fact supply even creates demand."

He added, "I am setting a new goal: by 2017, for companies and the self-employed, we must end family social payments, eliminating €30 billion in taxes." These payments fund a subsidy of approximately €150 per child paid to each family in France with at least two children under 20, the centerpiece of a policy of maintaining a higher birth rate in France.

Hollande also called for more cuts to the RSA unemployment and social benefit, as part of a drive to slash corporate taxes by a total of €50 billion. He said that preparations would be made during the spring, and a law passed to this effect in the autumn.

Hollande said his austerity measures would be worked out in collaboration with the so-called “social partners,” i.e., the trade unions and employers federations. Praising the “Responsibility Pact” on social policy he is devising with them, he called it “one of the greatest pacts proposed to our country in decades, it involves all the social partners. My method is negotiation—it has proved its worth in discussions on youth contracts, pension cuts, and job training.”

Hollande justified his austerity policies with chauvinist and warmongering appeals, claiming that these would permit French imperialism to assert itself militarily on the world stage.

Boasting that he is “reformist, realistic, but above all patriotic,” Hollande said: “What are we? We are not simply a country which has had colonial possessions. We are a power that still has resources. ... If this great country, this military capacity, these admirable soldiers do not have behind them an economy capable of creating the necessary dynamic, it is the impact of France that will be reduced.”

He boasted, “I will tell you a sort of secret: if it turned out that we had had to carry out strikes in Syria, we would have been able to do it.”

In a further appeal to right-wing sentiment, Hollande also indicated his support for Interior Minister Manuel Valls’ reactionary expulsion of Roma schoolgirl Leonarda Dibrani and her family last autumn—on which he declined to take a position at the time. He said, “On the Leonarda affair, the only question I asked myself was whether I should intervene. It appears the matter is solved, and no one has returned.”

It testifies to the bankruptcy of capitalism, despite the disastrous consequences of the wars and austerity policies launched by European imperialism, Hollande has nothing to offer but more of the same. The US-led intervention in Syria nearly led to a military confrontation with Iran and Russia that could have led to global war, and austerity policies in Greece and Spain have driven an economic collapse that threw most young workers out of work. Yet similar policies are still pursued by bourgeois “left” parties like the PS as models of success.

In this, Hollande and the PS enjoy the support of Stalinist or pseudo-left tendencies like the French Communist Party (PCF) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). Having called for a Hollande vote, the attempts of such petty-bourgeois parties to distance themselves from the PS’ policies reek of cynicism and bad faith.

Thus, PCF National Secretary Pierre Laurent commented: “What François Hollande has presented is really an ‘irresponsibility pact.’ He is announcing a profound attack, a full-blown demolition of France’s social and Republican model. ... The Communists and the Left Front [of which the PCF is a part] will mobilize to defeat the presidential plan.”

The petty-bourgeois allies of the PS will do no such thing. The PCF is busy working out electoral alliances with the PS in the upcoming elections and—through its forces in the union bureaucracy—plotting the austerity measures Hollande, the employers groups, and the unions will seek to impose on the working class. Should it organize any protests, the PCF will aim to keep workers’ anger trapped in harmless channels and a perspective of making impotent appeals to Hollande to somewhat modify his policies.

A class chasm separates the proletariat from the cynical petty-bourgeois operators in the political periphery of the PS. What is being prepared is a confrontation between the working

class and the reactionary policies of the bourgeois “left” and its petty-bourgeois “left” defenders, amid an escalating crisis provoked by the right-wing

Though he did not spell it out, Hollande himself and the European ruling class are well aware that their chauvinist and militarist appeals are escalating nationalist tensions inside Europe and boosting neo-fascist groups such as the FN.

Calling for closer political and military ties with Germany, Hollande briefly acknowledged the rising conflicts between the major European powers: “There is rancor inside Europe, but I will not let the very idea of Europe tear itself apart.”

He also referred cryptically to the rise of the FN, calling for pro-business growth policies to stave off the rise of “populist” forces in French elections: “We must act fast, otherwise it will be the populists—a name which in fact does not have meaning, let us say the extremists, the racists, who will benefit.”

In fact, the principal factors driving the rise of the FN and the tensions inside Europe are the capitalist collapse and the type of reactionary initiatives Hollande made in his address.

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