

France Police State: Amid protests, Hollande Government uses Emergency Powers to Impose Draft Labor Law

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Amid continuing protests against the Socialist Party government's (PS) reactionary labor law, Prime Minister Manuel Valls again used Article 49-3 of the French constitution yesterday to impose a new draft of the law in the National Assembly without a vote. Just outside the Assembly, riot police kettled a protest by several hundred people on Concorde Bridge.

The PS also imposed unprecedented security restrictions at yesterday's protests in cities across France, which were timed to coincide with the presentation of the bill in the National Assembly. The starting point of the protest in Paris, Italy Square, was barricaded and surrounded by riot police. Protesters arriving at the march had to undergo three searches, including with a full-body pat-down, before reaching the square.

After using Article 49-3 to ram a first draft of the labor law through the Assembly in May, and issuing an extraordinary threat to ban a June 24 protest under the state of emergency, the PS' gesture is a signal that it will stop at nothing to ram through its anti-social agenda. It has trampled over overwhelming popular opposition to the law ever since it was first presented in March. Amid the unprecedented crisis caused by the British vote to exit the European Union (EU), and facing a likely economic crash, the PS intends to rapidly impose the law's anti-working class provisions.

The new draft of the bill presented to the Assembly yesterday arrived from the Senate, where the right-wing majority had eliminated all the token changes to the law the PS had made as concessions in the face of mass protests. They cut out programs for unemployed youth and reinstated limits on penalties judges can impose on employers who carry out sackings in violation of existing labor law.

None of these changes modified the essential content of the law: lengthening working hours, undermining younger workers' job security and, above all, allowing unions and management at individual workplaces to negotiate contracts violating the Labor Code.

Before presenting the bill to the Assembly yesterday, the PS again added another minor change to the bill, a provision allowing unions and employers in each industry to negotiate agreements specifying how firm-level contracts can violate currently existing, industry-wide contracts. Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri insisted, however, that this was a purely symbolic change: "What we are proposing does not in any way modify the importance we want to give to firm-level contracts, but it will reaffirm the role of industry-level agreements."

This measure will impose no meaningful control on the anti-worker measures that the unions and bosses will negotiate, and in any case, the Senate will once again be free to remove it.

The purpose of this maneuver is to allow the PS and the union bureaucracies to try to defuse social anger and to claim they are negotiating in the interests of the workers, whereas the law is just as harmful to the workers as the day it was first presented. “The clarifications on industrial-level agreements are useful to reassure workers,” stated the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) union, which supports the labor law.

“Without weakening the law, we want to avoid looking like we are frozen in place,” an adviser to President François Hollande explained, stressing that the PS still had to be careful due to explosive popular opposition: “We have repeatedly thought in the last four months that we had seen a way clear of this crisis.”

The central element that is emerging is the gulf separating the working class from the political parties and trade unions on the periphery of the PS. Many of these forces criticized the labor law and organized the protests against it. However, all of them had called for a vote for the PS in 2012, and all of them supported a perspective of negotiating with the PS in order to obtain whatever modifications Hollande was willing to make to the law.

No party was oriented to the task objectively posed by the eruption of a movement of the working class against the PS: mobilizing workers’ opposition to austerity independently of maneuvers between the PS and the unions, and linking it on a revolutionary and socialist platform to growing movements of the working class across Europe—in Belgium, Greece, and beyond. The sentiments driving masses of workers and youth found no genuine reflection among any of the existing political forces.

Three-fourths of the population opposes the law, and workers and youth are ever more drawing the conclusion that it is impossible to negotiate any agreement with the PS. Facing financial pressure due to repeated strike actions, and beginning to shed illusions that the current protests will stop the implementation of the bill, broader layers of workers and youth are increasingly turning away from the regularly-scheduled union protests.

The PS, the union federations and pseudo-left parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) hope to use this as an opportunity to wrap up the protests—allowing the PS to ram the law through and start the process of negotiating concessions contracts in workplaces across France.

“PS members or trade unionists, everyone is tired,” a government minister told *Libération*. “We have to get to the end of this, even if this means disappearing down a mouse hole.”

In the run-up to yesterday’s protest, Workers Force (FO)—which, together with the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and the NPA-linked Solidarity Union Democracy (SUD) union, organized protests against the law—indicated that it opposed the action.

Last week, FO leader Jean-Claude Mailly told *La Croix* that he “did not want” yesterday’s protest in Paris to take place, adding, “it is becoming complicated.” He peremptorily announced an end to the protests until September: “There are no demonstrations this summer, people are going on vacation.”

The continuing desire to fight among workers and youth protesting the labor law yesterday,

reflecting the broader anger against austerity building among workers in France and across Europe, is diametrically opposed to the positions of Mailly.

The WSWS spoke to Quentin, a university student, at the protest yesterday in Paris. "Today, I cannot see based on the PS' actions how it can claim to be a left-wing party," he said. "I voted for Hollande in 2012 because I did not want either the ultra-free market policies of [right wing President] Nicolas Sarkozy or the authoritarian policies of Marine Le Pen. And then we ended up getting both."

Quentin added that the Brexit crisis raised both the crisis of EU institutions and the rise of far-right nationalism. "Now the situation in Europe is getting very political, and the struggle against the labor law is a clear example of this," he said, adding: "We know very well that this is a law that the EU Commission wants to see passed."

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