

French Socialist Party Uses Special Powers to Impose Unpopular Labour Law Reform

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Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister Manuel Valls' decision to try to impose Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri's labour law reform in the National Assembly without a vote marks a profound crisis of French democracy.

For two months, millions of workers and youth have protested the law, which three-quarters of the population opposes. And for a second time, the PS is trying to impose its social diktat without a vote in the Assembly. The same mechanism, Article 49-3 of the constitution, was used last year to impose the Macron Law on economic liberalisation.

This article allows a government to impose a law on the Assembly if the Assembly does not bring down the government in the ensuing 48 hours. This is an admission by Valls that the relentless drive to austerity and deeper exploitation carried out by the PS and the ruling classes of all the EU countries is no longer compatible with the traditional mechanisms of parliamentary democracy.

Amid loud booing from the deputies, Valls criticised “rebel” PS deputies who refuse to vote for the El Khomri law and who, since the installation of the second Valls government in the fall of 2014, have criticised it. Valls was angry that

“some, in the government’s parliamentary majority, refuse to look for a compromise. The coming together of all these oppositions could block the law. ... As the country must advance, the council of ministers has authorized me to engage the responsibility of the government.”

Right-wing deputies presented a censure motion, as well as Left Front deputies, but this would need the support of around 60 deputies from the PS and its allies in order to pass—that is, a sizable number of “rebel” deputies would have to vote for it. Christian Paul, the leader of the “frondeurs,” eluded the question of whether he would support a censure motion against his own party. He said, “We refuse to abandon any constitutional possibilities. It is a collective decision that we will probably make tomorrow.”

In fact, the “rebel” opposition to the law is only a third-rate factor in the PS’ crisis. Despite their reservations, the “rebel” chiefs have always indicated that they wanted to reform France with austerity. Their general spinelessness has allowed them both to vote confidence in the second Valls government in 2014, and to refuse to vote for a censure motion against it after it imposed Article 49-3 to force through the Macron law. Indeed, had they brought down Valls, triggering new elections, the “rebels” would have risked losing their own seats.

What is driving the crisis inside the PS is a profound, ongoing international political reorientation of the masses, which is provoking a growing mobilisation of workers and youth across Europe and the world. After eight years of unprecedented capitalist crisis since 2008, working people are turning against the parties that for decades have passed for “left” or even the “extreme left,” but that are the instruments of a financial aristocracy that is ready for any policy against the working class to defend its exorbitant privileges.

In the United States, millions of young voters showed their deep disillusionment with Obama and the Democratic Party by voting for a candidate, Bernie Sanders, that claimed to be socialist. At the beginning of this week, Greek workers massively followed a strike call against the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government, which is trampling its electoral promises in order to impose the policy demanded by the EU.

In France, President François Hollande’s policy of austerity, war, and the state of emergency has provoked deep and growing disillusionment with the PS and the petty-bourgeois groups in the PS’ orbit, like the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party. Tens of millions of angry workers know that these organisations offer no alternative to the existing social order. For four years, moreover, these organisations and the trade union bureaucracies mobilised no opposition to Hollande, whom they endorsed in the 2012 presidential elections.

For two months, something of 1968 was in the air; France was on the verge of a revolutionary explosion. However, the spark was absent: no formally-constituted party fought to mobilise the working class in a revolutionary struggle against the PS. The unions and petty-bourgeois groups that organised the #UpAllNight occupations of city squares in various cities in order to intervene among the youth blocked the mobilisation of the working class. As social anger grew, they did everything they could to dissipate the movement and allow security forces to attack young protesters.

A leading figure in #UpAllNight, economist Frédéric Lordon, even declared about the El Khomri Law that “we in no way demand that it be modified or rewritten, we do not demand rights, we do not demand anything at all, in fact.”

Having long put off the presentation of the El Khomri law to the Assembly, the PS has finally concluded that the youth mobilisations had been sufficiently isolated and repressed that the PS could try to impose them at the Assembly.

The only way to stop attacks on basic social rights is to renew the mobilisations and to launch a struggle against the PS government and its trade union and political allies. This would be possible only through building organs of class struggle independent of the trade unions, on the perspective of mounting a revolutionary struggle to bring down the PS government and appeal to broader popular opposition to austerity across France, to extend the movement beyond the borders of France.

It would be a fatal political error for the youth and workers to put their faith in the Assembly, which is dominated by the PS and explicitly right-wing, pro-austerity parties, to block the El Khomri law, as the trade unions have proposed. Like last year, when they allowed Hollande to pass the Macron law, the “rebels” do not intend to seek an end to austerity, but to preserve as long as possible the illusion that there is opposition to austerity inside the PS itself. They are hostile to youth and workers who are mobilising against PS austerity measures.

If they are now putting forward their reservations as to the law, it is to prevent the total discrediting of the PS in the long term and its collapse in the 2017 presidential elections, and a social explosion that could force the retraction of the El Khomri law and bring down the Valls government.

If the fate of the law is left in their hands, the unpopular policies of austerity and war will continue, either by the “rebels” capitulating to Valls’ 49-3 as last year, or by more complex negotiations between the French parliamentary parties and the various EU institutions.

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