

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5351>



France

After six months of Macron

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV516 - January 2018 -

Publication date: Sunday 28 January 2018

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The electoral sequence of spring 2017 revealed and accelerated the crisis of the French political system. Nothing happened as expected. The election of Emmanuel Macron to the presidency of the Republic, followed by a the winning of a crushing majority of deputies from La République en Marche (LReM) to the National Assembly marked an unexpected transformation of the political landscape. The logic of alternation would have given the classic right, represented by Les Républicains (LR) an overwhelming victory against the Parti Socialiste (PS) which had for five years held power at all levels, the presidency of the Republic, a majority in the National Assembly and the Senate, in nearly all the regions and in most of the big cities and metropolitan areas. The PS was certainly swept away, but so were LR.

A transformed political landscape

All the dominant parties in Europe have been riven by the transformations imposed by capitalist globalisation and neoliberal counter-reforms. France has, in its turn, experienced this crisis of hegemony, this growing inability of dominant parties and classes to obtain popular consent for their policies.

In this context, Macron played on the idea of being a non-party candidate, exonerating himself from the balance sheet of five years of PS government, although he was the only candidate to essentially embody the legacy of the governments of Ayrault and Valls (the two successive prime ministers under Hollande's presidency). He was deputy secretary general to the Presidency from 2012, where he was behind the CICE (Crédit d'impôt pour la compétitivité et l'emploi, a tax bonanza of 20 billion euros per year to enterprises without control or counterpart) and the pact of responsibility, then Minister of the Economy, introducing two widely unpopular laws, the one which bears his name and the so called El Khomeri employment law, named after the then minister of labour). Champion of the polls and the media, filling the halls for all his meetings, he rallied support from elements from both the PS and the right. His electoral campaign was waged effectively, with business style methods of media communication and marketing, and a party-enterprise selecting candidates for the assembly elections like a "headhunting" consultancy. Macron and LReM offered a way out of the crisis of representation of the dominant classes and constitute, at least at this stage, a political tool to take up the legacy of the PS and the right and continue the work begun by previous governments, whose brutality had precisely led to the erosion of the personnel and apparatuses in place. Emmanuel Macron, an unforeseen candidate without troops or party, won the day and his formation, only just created, has imposed itself. However, his legitimacy is weak, and he only won the support of 18% of registered voters in the first round of the presidential elections, rising to 43% in the second round against Marine Le Pen.

A forced march to societal change

Basically, his policies do not fundamentally differ from those of his predecessors of the right, Nicolas Sarkozy, or the PS, François Hollande. There is a remarkable continuity in the ambition to put an end to what remains of the social compromise imposed by the relationship of forces immediately following the Second World War. But in terms of form, he chooses to go quickly, very quickly even, so as to succeed where previous governments had not gone far enough, to remedy what capitalists consider to be France's "backwardness" and vanquish the "resistance to change". Macron expressed it very clearly in August 2017: "The French hate reform" and added "so it is necessary to explain to them where we are going, to propose a deep transformation to them", all punctuated with a contemptuous hand gesture.

To do this he is using one of the anti-democratic tools of the Fifth Republic. From early August he has obtained Parliament's agreement to decrees on employment law which he signed in September and which were ratified by the deputies on November 28.

Down with the Employment Code!

The first priority is the destruction of the Employment Code, with a new employment law called "XXL", which meets still more the demands of the employers' organisation, MEDEF. Increasing the precarity of employees is at the centre and the instrument for this is creating greater competition between them.

Increased precarity takes several forms. First, the right of employers to dismiss workers without fear. What the government and the employers call the end of "legal insecurity" concerns the damages granted by the "tribunal des prud'hommes" (tribunals which rule on respect of the employment contract) for employees who are the victims of abusive, and thus illegal, dismissals. The employment law fixes a scale for these damages allowing rogue bosses to budget the cost of an illegal dismissal, while there has been a drastic reduction in the deadlines within which employees can appeal to this tribunal. The previous employment law had already significantly reduced the number of complaints from employees. Also, the conditions of *contrats à durée déterminée* (CDD – fixed term contracts) can henceforth be degraded at enterprise level. Worse still, the *contrats à durée indéterminée* (CDI – open ended contracts) have been changed (this is already the case in the building industry) so that employees do not know when or why the contract is ended – this is now at the exclusive discretion of the employer.

In terms of easier dismissal, there is also the change to collective agreements which allows the employers to free themselves of the "constraints" of a redundancy plan by obtaining "voluntary" redundancies and through the restriction of the perimeter, which becomes national including in the case of international groups, to judge the economic "difficulties" of an enterprise justifying economic layoffs.

The inversion of the "hierarchy of standards" has the objective of destroying the Employment Code as it has been constructed since 1945. According to this hierarchy, any branch agreement or collective bargaining can only derogate from the Employment Code to improve the situation of employees. A collective agreement can specify more paid leave or minimum wage rates higher than those of the SMIC, the national minimum wage, for example. Also, an enterprise-level agreement can only improve on a branch agreement. This new employment law breaks this hierarchy (already undermined by various counter-reforms, for example on working time), while reversing the priority given to the enterprise level agreement over the branch agreement, and that of the branch agreement to the law. The "negotiation" at the enterprise level, where the relationship of forces is more unfavourable, allows employers to impose reductions in wages or benefits, increase working time, worsen working conditions – in the name of saving the enterprise, thus jobs, faced with competitors – competitors who in their turn will impose the same attacks – in order to be competitive. It is a formidable machine for destroying the rights and protections of employees. Low wages and poor working conditions become an essential parameter of inter-capitalist competition.

Finally, the law suppresses the existing institutions "représentatives des personnels" (IRP – staff representative institutions): *délégués du personnel* (DP – staff delegates), *comité d'entreprise* (CE – enterprise committee) and *comité hygiène sécurité et conditions de travail* (CHSCT – health, safety and working conditions committee) and replaces them with a single body, the *comité social et économique* (CSE – economic and social committee) in all enterprises (this single body already exists in small enterprises). Each of these bodies has its specificity, and those elected to them gain training and know how: managing social and cultural activities, understanding economic information, conveying everyday demands or monitoring the application of regulations in the area of health and safety, and so on. A single body means multi-function representatives, professionalised and more distanced from their colleagues. Above all the CSE means the death of the CHSCT, which had become a relatively effective tool in

the hands of trades unionists who have learned to defend the health and safety of employees intransigently.

These measures weaken and endanger all employees, but they target first and foremost those in small enterprises, in sectors with a weaker trade union presence, and where the workforce is predominantly female.

A radicalisation of neoliberal policies on all fronts

Macron presented himself as a candidate “of the right and of the left”, he is a president “of the right and of the right”. A President unapologetically “for the rich”, he practices a politics of shock. He has reduced the Aides personnalisées au logement (APL – personalised housing aid) accorded to the poorest or to students, suppressed tens of thousands of subsidised jobs, undoubtedly precarious and underpaid but indispensable, at the same time removing the impôt de solidarité sur la fortune (ISF – wealth tax) to the benefit of the richest. In the same week of November, on Monday, the deputies restored the “waiting day” for civil servants (the first day of sickness leave being unpaid) and on Wednesday he presented to the Council of Ministers a selection project which will have the effect of excluding school students from poorer backgrounds from access to higher education.

The increase in the CSG (contribution sociale généralisée -generalised social contribution) of 1.7% constitutes a dead loss for pensioners (above 1200 euros/month). Civil servants will see a simple compensation for this increased, without it being linked to any wage increase after years of a pay freeze. For employees in the private sector, it will be partially “compensated” for by the lowering of unemployment and sickness social security contributions. The CSG created by a left government is the Trojan horse for the state take over of social protection. Effectively social security contributions are the socialised part of the wage, pooled to finance social protection (sickness, pension and so on) The objective of the employers is the total suppression of social security contributions by the taking over by the state of social security which eventually will only ensure a minimal cover for the poorest, the remainder being entrusted to private insurance.

The unemployed are the next in the line of fire. Unemployment insurance based on contributions will give way to a scheme financed by the CSG. Macron presents this new unemployment scheme as a “universal right, for more equity and fluidity on the labour market. Under the apparent generosity of the enlargement to those resigning (once every 5 years after five years seniority in an enterprise) and to the self-employed (artisans, traders, liberal professions, farmers and so on), its model is the minimum flat rate for the greatest number and private insurance for those who can pay it. Concretely this will be ever lower amounts for a shorter time period and more policing to combat not unemployment but the unemployed themselves. A project which will increase poverty and stigmatise the poorest!

Macron washes greener

Like Hollande, who posed as a champion of the fight against climate change during COP21, Macron has made ecology a point of pride. The election of the climate change denier Trump offered him the occasion to “Make our planet great again “. The nomination of Nicolas Hulot, a star TV presenter and the incarnation of market ecology as minister of ecology was a trophy.

Announced as the “first climate law”, the so-called law on “the banning of the exploitation of hydrocarbons” only envisaged their “progressive end”, enacting neither the non-renewal of concessions, nor the immediate banning of unconventional hydrocarbons. The exploitation of hydrocarbons in France will remain possible beyond 2040 “with a

view to attaining economic equilibrium”.

Whereas the still timid reduction to 50% of the share of electricity of nuclear origin by 2025 was enacted in 2015 in the energy transition law, in early November, Hulot announced the postponement of the target date. Thus, EDF can continue the operation of ageing power stations. He has, moreover, the cheek to justify his retreat by defence of the climate and his desire not to open the door to a return to coal. Cynically, the government attempted to suppress in the next finance law an allocation of 22 million euros intended to finance projects fighting the effects of climate change in the Pacific islands (solar panels, anti-flooding shelters and so on). A parliamentary vote was needed to restore this “equivalent green funding”.

On December 12, 2017 (anniversary of the Paris agreement), Macron organised the One Planet Summit, a climate-finance summit with a lot of finance and little climate, with the likes of AXA and HSBC given places of honour in the sacrosanct private initiative. Grandiose statements and small decisions (glyphosate) cannot die the profoundly productivist and destructive policy of the Macron-Hulot duo: pursuit of motorway projects and other big destructive projects (at this time we still do not know the decision concerning the planned airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes), support for industrial agriculture.

Permanent state of emergency

France is the only European country to have installed a state of emergency in response to terrorist attacks. Although ineffective against the attacks, it has been renewed six times in 22 months. Some hundreds of bans on demonstrations have been issued. Discrimination and racial profiling has multiplied and with this police violence.

On the pretext of ending the state of emergency, the Macron government rushed through a text “strengthening internal security and the fight against terrorism” which brings into common law the main provisions derogating from basic rights and essential liberties which characterised the state of emergency. This is the twelfth security law in fifteen years. It authorises the administration and the police, outside of any legal control, to impose house arrests or “bans on appearing” in a specific place, searches and seizures, the extension of identity controls, searches of baggage and vehicles over vast “perimeters of protection”, the closure of a place of worship on the sole grounds of the “ideas and theories” that would be diffused there. The police have escaped the control of the judges and suspicion replaces proof.

Crackdown on migrants and state racism

When Macron vowed last July to have “no more people in the streets or in the woods” by the end of the year, it was obviously understood that his government would accentuate the crackdown on migrants, systematically dismantle all the places where they could try to land, pursue and criminalise their supporters. The ministry of the interior is preparing a draft law “for a guaranteed right of exile and a controlled immigration” for 2018, its goal was announced by Macron in early September in a speech to prefects which promised measures “to allow improvement of returns to the countries of origin”. A promise which will undoubtedly be kept!

But institutional racism extends well beyond the scandalous treatment of migrants. A recent episode illustrates it. Taking up a campaign initiated by the far right, the minister of national education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, has publicly attacked on twitter and before the National Assembly the national SUD Éducation 93 trade union for a union training course on anti-racism in schools. The motive was that two workshops (out of nine) were non-mixed so as to

deconstruct the mechanisms of racist oppression. The minister moreover threatened to sue the union for libel for use of the words “state racism”, as if his intervention was not an illustration of it! Racism in general, and Islamophobia in particular, occupy a determinant place in the strategy seeking to legitimate the state of emergency.

A global reactionary offensive

Hollande’s discourse on the loss of nationality, a true marker of the far right, the anti-Roma statements of Valls, his support to the Islamophobic campaign against the burkini waged by far-right mayors and police violence, shocked many who thought that, at least on the democratic terrain, there remained a difference between the PS and the right. Valls, who has now rallied to Macron, has made a speciality of taking the most retrograde positions, based on a combative secularism which is generally only the mask of a scarcely veiled Islamophobia. More globally, there are the campaigns like that against the independent website Médiapart and its director Edwy Plenel who have fought against the prevailing climate.

On the right, François Fillon won the primary election for LR by mobilising the most reactionary sector of the right-wing electorate, that of “the Manif for Tous” (against gay marriage), of Sens Commun (which had organised these reactionary demonstrations), of the Catholic right, traditionalist, homophobic and racist. The power of this faction and the absence of any alternative solution allowed him to remain candidate even after he became embroiled in the “fake jobs” scandal. His 20% vote in the presidential elections, despite the scandal, shows the weight of this ultra-reactionary pole. After the electoral defeat, with Laurent Vauquier this faction has a grip on what remains of the party.

The far right

Certainly the 21.3% vote received by Marine Le Pen in the first round of the presidential elections was lower than predicted, but with 7.6 million votes, the far right obtained the best result of its history in a first round. Even in the second round, it won more than 10.6 million votes. The scores for the parliamentary elections can be seen as a relative setback, but eight FN deputies were elected, four of them from the former mining areas in the north of France, where they have built a real implantation and an electoral fiefdom.

With this electoral sequence, the FN has again put down more roots and, above all, succeeded in its operation of banalisation. Its presence in the second round did not lead to sizeable demonstrations. This normalisation is attributable to a global shift in political discourse, a contagion by words and measures previously associated with the far right but now representative of almost all political discourse.

The FN remains fascist in terms of its history, its references and the composition of its leadership. Its electorate is a conglomerate, stretching from a fraction of the popular classes hit by the ravages of neoliberal globalisation, to fractions of the bourgeoisie with contradictory class interests. The result of the elections revives the internal debate between advocates of an alliance with the most reactionary right and supporter of a “neither left nor right” line of exit from the euro, targeting the popular classes. Its discourse can then take on real inflexions, as for example on Europe, as it has in the past (from a Reaganite advocacy of the free market to a rhetoric of pseudo anti-neoliberalism). Nothing would be more dangerous than to underestimate the danger it represents, since the underlying causes of its ascent are still present – the destructive effects of neoliberal policies and the decline of the workers’ movement, its collective tools of organisation, references and culture. The policies followed by Macron only radicalise and render systematic those followed by previous governments, and will only increase precarity, competition among employees and individualisation.

The first six months of Macron's government have been marked by the adoption of counter-reforms, heavy with consequences for the exploited and oppressed. The regressions are anti-social, anti-ecological and anti-democratic. If the mobilisation was equal to the regression, of its multiple and grave dangers, this neoliberal tsunami would lead to a popular insurrection. We are not there yet, far from what is necessary.

An inadequate response

Resistance exists, but the decrees on employment law XXL have been passed. Paradoxically, these measures are massively unpopular and Macron himself has fallen very rapidly in the opinion polls, but the riposte has been relatively weak.

The trade union response has been weaker than that of 2016, in relation to the previous employment law. The desertion of the confederation Force Ouvrière, one of whose leaders is directly a member of the employment minister's cabinet, has reduced the field to the CGT and Solidaires, with the FSU (the majority union in teaching) largely absent. Initially, before the summer, the trade union organisations were slow to react, leaving the field free to a caricature of consultation: unions received separately, texts hardly drafted, and so on. However, a one-day strike and demonstration on September 12 was announced before the summer holidays, allowing union teams time to prepare it. It was quite successful, in particular with a good mobilisation in the private sector, including in the smaller enterprises. But the absence of the big battalions of the public sector reduced the size of the demonstrations. A new date for mobilisation was fixed very rapidly fixed on September 21, but the broadening hoped for did not take place, on the contrary the numbers were down by a half to two thirds according to the town. With 60,000 participants the national demonstration called by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise was a success without being the tidal wave predicted. On October 10, the inter-union appeal only concerned public sector workers who mobilised on quite a massive scale. On the other hand, the few sectors (federations in the private sector or departmental unions) who called for a broadening did not succeed in making it into an inter-professional day. The last day, on November 16, was predictably a setback.

The evidence is that there is no plan of mobilisation, rather a succession of days of action without real coherence. Political and trade union unity has been lacking. We have not succeeded in convincing people of the use of mobilising and the possibility of winning, and the previous defeats on the employment code or on pensions weigh heavily.

The neoliberal counter-revolution is reflected in mass unemployment, the fragmentation of big units of production, the destruction of work collectives inside enterprises, temporary work and all forms of precarity, subcontracting – all elements which render the working class more heterogeneous and fragmented, without any fraction of it being able to agglomerate the others around it through its centrality. The question of unity is then first and foremost that of the unification of sectors divided by status, conditions of employment or non-employment, age, oppressions of gender or origin and so on, and this unification can only be political, against the government, its decrees and "their world" (an expression taken from the struggle "against the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes and its world" by the movement against the employment law in 2016). Even a partial victory depends on the ability to generate a political crisis which stops Macron from applying his programme. Such a political crisis can only be the fruit of the convergence of several factors, including strikes obviously, a powerful youth movement of the type virtually absent so far, the eruption of democratic aspirations and all forms of self-organisation, the re-appropriation of discourse and of politics.

In recent months, some often hard and long struggles indicated a real among the most precarious and feminised sectors, like cleaning, commerce or private health. Many activist groups (associations, parents of schoolchildren, teachers and so on) have ensure the hosting and legal defence of immigrants. The demonstration in Menton on December 15 is a first step towards giving a national visibility to this struggle. Beyond the symbolism of the struggle

against the airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes (the governmental decision will come in January) dozens of collectives are mobilising against destructive projects, dumping of nuclear waste, motorways and shopping centres.

On the left

On the traditional social democratic left, there is now virtually only the movement of Benoit Hamon, “Génération.s”. The PCF remains in crisis, with its continued electoral decline, even if it succeeded in saving its parliamentary group, and politically zigzags between absorption by the FI and a sectarian reassertion of identity.

The high score (more than 19%) achieved by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first round of the presidential election was the result of a class vote against austerity, against big productivist projects, against the state of emergency and the crackdown on immigrants. But electoral success is one thing, the construction of an emancipatory alternative another.

The first internal consultation of France Insoumise was held on November 25-26, 2017. It shows both the potential strength of the movement with 69,000 voting online to choose which national campaigns to prioritise, with the fight against poverty, a shutdown of nuclear power stations nearing the end of their life cycle and opposition to tax fraud and evasion coming out on top. But this is one of the major contradictions of FI – whereas the movement’s “Principles” affirm “a collective and transparent movement”, in fact an online consultation is taken on all debates to determine its main orientations and campaigns. So instead of the exchange of arguments, mutual conviction and collective elaboration, we have the approval (or not) of the leadership’s proposals. The organisation of “action groups” (which replace the support groups of the campaign) is far from the autonomy promised, with rules which deprive them of any real power. The number of participants cannot exceed fifteen members, while “no group or gathering of groups can constitute permanent intermediary structures”, and they have no financial autonomy. A vertical and hierarchical reality which is far from a “citizens’ revolution”. This mode of functioning renders fundamental debate on the key issues, from the Keynesian reflation seen as a magic remedy, to international questions or the European Union, impossible. The lack of solidarity with respect to Danièle Obono, an FI deputy subjected to a revolting racist campaign, is the illustration of these profound cleavages which cannot be discussed.

And yet the struggle against racism and Islamophobia, intransigence on equal rights, internationalism, the fight against French imperialism and the right to self-determination of colonies, are not supplements to the reconstruction of a left alternative, but unavoidable components of it.

Finally, the very concept of FI as a movement substituting for other forms doomed to disappear, inspired by the idea of a “people” realised following their Leader, justifies the absence of any unitary approach. This was the case for the demonstration of September 23 against Macron’s “social coup d’état”. FI’s deliberately isolated and identity-based approach spoiled a good idea. The social movement as a whole needed a successful demonstration of force. A national demonstration against Macron and his polices was a good idea, if it had been prepared on a unitary basis, at the rank and file level, with determination, as a point of departure for a reconstruction of the collective tools of struggle, organisation and solidarity.

A hegemony to be reconquered

Macron is implementing a global project of society, that of a “pure capitalism”. To break the infernal cycle of defeats, we need to build a common front of social and democratic resistance at local and national level, to rebuild the tools of

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unitary and federative mobilisation, to bring to life a radically alternative federative and unitary project based on a society of "living well", which links wages to lives, with the free satisfaction of basic social needs, reduction of the time of work and control over its content, organisation and goals, real democracy and equal rights.

This emancipatory project cannot be drawn up apart from mobilisations, experiences and partial alternatives which can confront and enrich each other. It is about recognising and respecting these different forms of action but also of understanding how they are indispensable to an overall critique of global capitalism which is not reducible to the exploitation of wage labour but reorganises and strengthens for its profit the exploitation and destruction of nature and all forms of oppression and discrimination. It is a hegemonic eco-socialist project to reconquer by the reanimation of the desire for equality starting from individual aspirations, by the capacity a common world based on well-being, by the articulation between the strategy of confrontation with power and the organisation of life itself.

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