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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

23 November 2018

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25.11.2018

France sends military against protesters on Réunion Island

Announcing the deployment of military forces to Réunion to attack Yellow Vest protesters blockading the island, a French overseas department in the Indian Ocean, President Emmanuel Macron is launching a major escalation of the French police state's repression of workers and youth.

To justify sending squads of *gendarmerie* military police and national police, he tried to discredit the Yellow Vest protesters, who are protesting his fuel tax increases, citing acts of vandalism allegedly carried out in and around the movement. Wednesday, he warned the state would “brook no negotiations,” adding: “What is happening at La Réunion is very serious. We have engaged the necessary means and we will continue to do so: our military will be deployed starting tomorrow to re-establish order.”

Macron did not say which military units would go to repress the Réunion population. But a squad of *gendarmerie* from Troyes and another from Maisons-Alfort are to join the four squads already on the ground. Police unions also announced the upcoming arrival of 28 officers of the Anti-Criminal Brigade (BAC) and of a departmental intervention force. Réunion's police prefect announced the requisitioning of 18 gas stations for emergency and security vehicles.

The political situation in Réunion is extremely tense. From the beginning of the Yellow Vest movement a week ago, there have been 123 arrests—including 16 on Wednesday night, which the authorities called “calm”—and around 30 policemen wounded. The

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president of the region wrote Macron a letter calling it a “situation of urban guerrilla warfare.” A curfew has been imposed from 9p.m. to 6a.m. for 14 of the island’s 24 municipalities.

Thursday, Réunion’s Departmental Road Directorate (DDR) counted 27 blockades by Yellow Vest protesters, most of which were allowing vehicles to slowly pass through them.

Nevertheless the island is paralyzed, educational establishments are closed, and most athletic and cultural activities are canceled. The airport closes at 4p.m., forcing flights to be delayed and to pass by neighboring Meurice island for refueling, as Réunion’s airport’s fuel stocks have not been replenished. The shelves in grocery stores and shopping centers are starting to become bare, and resupply for herders and hospital pharmacies are failing.

The radicalization of the protests on Réunion reflect the extreme poverty and intense class conflicts that characterize all of France’s overseas possessions.

According to a 2015 National Institute of Statistics study, 40 percent of the island’s inhabitants live in poverty: “Poverty is far more widespread than in metropolitan France (14 percent). Their revenues are lower and heavily dependent on social aid: for one quarter of households, welfare payments constitute the principal monetary resource, which is four times more than in metropolitan France. Poverty is particularly acute in small rural communities where jobs are scarce.”

The government is terrified by the continuing protests on the island, whose current police forces are overwhelmed and cannot stop the protest. But Macron is maintaining his unpopular policies of austerity and tax increases affecting working people. Fearing that blockades on the island could spread to other overseas departments and territories that have already seen significant strike action—and ultimately provoke a social explosion in metropolitan France—he is replying with repression.

The sending of more squads of *gendarmes* and police to Réunion is a warning to all workers mobilized in opposition to Macron’s policies. He plans to use the entire military and police machine in order to repress growing opposition to militarism and austerity.

Macron’s approval of sending the military against the Yellow Vests in Réunion is a signal to the general staff and to the police forces. As against youth and workers protesting the Socialist Party’s (PS) labor law under the state of emergency in 2016, the police and military have been a green light for a brutal crackdown.

The “Yellow Vest” protest, a heterogeneous movement organized outside the control of the union bureaucracies and the various petty-bourgeois parties linked to the PS, has stunned the ruling class. Separated by a class gulf from masses of workers, led by a state whose president is widely hated, it fears the eruption of a broad political movement in the working class.

His reference to mobilizing “our military” against it is sinister. Réunion is a French department whose population enjoys, on paper at least, all of the legal and democratic protections of French citizens in metropolitan France. The head of state’s decision to proudly announce the deployment of “our military” against them underscores the collapse of democratic forms of rule and the advanced state of the drive to authoritarianism in Europe.

Macron’s announcement clearly has as the goal of habituating the population to the idea that military repression is a legitimate tool of domestic policy in France.

These actions make clear the aim of the government’s announcement of a return to universal military service starting in June of next year. The move not only aims to help Europe rival the United States, Russia and China as world powers, and to impose military discipline to the youth in order to strangle social protests. The goal is also to train the youth in the use of arms in order to attack their class brothers and sisters, so as to allow Macron to continue imposing his unpopular wars and austerity policies despite mounting popular opposition.

At the same time, the Macron government is rehabilitating or promoting fascist figures of the 1930s in order to legitimate nationalism and violent repression of social and political opposition. Two weeks ago, Macron saluted Philippe Pétain, the Nazi-collaborationist dictator France during World War II. As well, government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux recently quoted favorably Charles Maurras, the fascist and anti-Semitic ideologue of the far-right *Action française* movement.

This fascistic policy is the product of a turn to the far right by the entire ruling establishment, notably under PS President François Hollande, who had Macron as his economy minister. The PS imposed a state of emergency, for which it also had the votes of the parliament of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) group in the National Assembly, as well as legalizing mass electronic spying.

The threat now bearing down on the inhabitants of Réunion is the consequences of this reactionary repressive spiral carried out by the PS and its petty bourgeois allies like LFI.

The way forward for the struggle launched by the Yellow Vest protests is a mobilization of the working class in an international struggle against militarism and austerity and for socialism. The defense of protestors on Réunion island requires the development of a politically conscious movement in the working class, fighting for a socialist and revolutionary perspective against nationalism, militarism and state repression.