

France Strikes and Demonstrations Shakes Macron Government

Widespread protests and marches across France rocked the Macron government during second half of November this year. On November 17, more than 2 lakh people participated in protest marches and blockaded 2034 points and go-slow operations across France. The protesters included workers, transport drivers and small businessmen. They are protesting against the so-called austerity programme – hike in fuel tax, cuts in pensions, tax increases on working people and slashing of tax on wealth of millionaires.

One protester told BFM TV, “the fuel tax was the feather that broke the camel’s back, but it goes far beyond that. We are tired of being led by private interests. We would like to return to democracy. Wage increases, cuts in taxes paid by the working people, the right to cast blank votes and to decide on all important laws via referendum. The people must take back political power”.

Similar protests are going on across the Europe. In Belgium, protesters are blockading oil refineries, while protests against fuel tax hikes have come up in Bulgaria and Serbia. The working people are in fiery strikes against in Greece. There was strike in the metro rail in Bucharest and Amazon Ryanair strikes in Germany.

The protests in France continued despite police crackdown; 183 persons were in preventive detention. France’s Interior minister said that “police authorities are ordered to liberate fuel depots and other sensitive sites, and the protesters would be thrown out systematically and methodically”.

While the fuel tax protesters continued to demonstrate through the week, thousands of high school students blocked school buildings in opposition to the government’s university reforms and in support of protests to fuel tax hike. They blocked around 50 buildings. Louis Broyard, the president of the National High School Students Union said, “It’s not a very Parisian demonstration; it is a revolt in the provinces and rural areas of the high schools abandoned by the politics of Macron. The schools which were blocked today are not those which typically mobilized for this type of demonstration”.

At the same time, in France numerous strikes took place or were going on in public transport in Lyon and Mans, by municipal employees in Marseille, refinery workers in La Mede. At the nuclear plant in Flamanville, smelters in Poitou and many hospitals.

Amid these protests and strikes, the French government announced the imposition of universal military service which was suspended in 1997. A paper on this compulsory draft into military was published by *Le Parisien* stated, “every year around 800,000 boys and girls of the sane age will be called up for a three month military service and then possible recruitment into the armed services”. The reason put forward – the draft would allow for “mixing social classes on the basis of values of our Republic”. Many academics contested this claim and said, “social mixing gradually ceased and in 1997 you only had young men from poorest social classes in the land army’s combat units”.

But the real intentions of Macron government are concealed. Macron during the presidential election campaign in 2017 pleaded to bring back the draft and said, “We have entered an epoch in international relations where war is again a possible outcome of politics”.

While mass protests are going on Macron went to Berlin and held talks with German chancellor on the security of Europe. He called for “stronger and more sovereign Europe” that would not “become the plaything of other powers”. Referring to Franco-German collaboration on a European army, he declared “The new Franco-German responsibility consists of giving Europe the tool it needs to reach sovereignty”.

In 2017, Sweden re-established the compulsory draft into military with “Russian annexation of Crimea, the conflict in Ukraine, the increased military activities in our neighborhood” as a pretext. The German authorities announced that they were also considering re-instatement of the draft.

The return back to universal military service indicates the growing crisis and sharpening contradictions among the imperialist powers. It also indicates the building of infrastructure as a part of preparations to war. It is also aimed at disciplining and diverting the younger generation, which is seething with discontent and anger against prevailing capitalist system as is evident in the recent protests, by invoking national chauvinism and by creating regressive political atmosphere.
