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France

Between Macron's Crisis and Le Pen's Threat: France's Left Seeks a Way Forward

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France finds itself in the grip of overlapping crises as Emmanuel Macron's government collapses and mass protests sweep the country. Following the ousting of Prime Minister François Bayrou in September, France operates without stable government whilst facing its most severe social unrest since the yellow vest movement. The immediate trigger is a brutal austerity budget proposing €44 billion in public spending cuts whilst protecting tax breaks for the wealthy—a final straw for millions already struggling with rising poverty and declining public services. Meanwhile, Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National lurks as the potential beneficiary of political chaos. Léon Crémieux explains how seven years of Macronist neoliberalism have created the conditions for either genuine left-wing transformation or authoritarian breakthrough, as trade unions and social movements mobilise against austerity whilst the political left struggles to maintain unity.

Since early September, France has faced a social crisis, a political crisis and the beginning of a new popular mobilisation, marked by the days of action on 10 and 18 September and preparations for a new day of action on 2 October, whilst the country finds itself without a government following the ousting of François Bayrou by the National Assembly on 8 September.

The chaotic political crisis has resurfaced on several occasions since Macron's re-election in 2022. At that time, he only secured 250 seats for his parliamentary bloc in the National Assembly (an absolute majority being 289), as he neither wanted nor managed to reach an agreement with Les Républicaines [\[1\]](#) (62 seats).

Following the yellow vest mobilisations in 2018/2019 and the powerful trade union mobilisation in defence of pensions in 2023, social discontent has only grown in France, clashing with Macron's various governments but without managing to satisfy their demands. The current political crisis is therefore essentially the result of a social crisis that has been intensifying since the 2008 financial crisis. The electoral weight of the two main parties that have led governments for more than 40 years, LR and PS [\[2\]](#) (socialists), collapsed between the 2012 and 2022 presidential elections. The combined votes of the PS and LR fell, between these two elections, from 56.81% to 6.53% of votes in the first round. Macron thought to take advantage of this window of opportunity to occupy the space this opened by creating a new political force and accentuating liberal reforms. Today, he is the most discredited president in the history of the Fifth Republic, and everyone is aware that Macronism will not survive the end of Macron's five-year term in 2027... or even earlier, if he is forced to resign.

The hope built in 2022 with the formation on the left of an anti-liberal electoral front (NUPES) [\[3\]](#) articulated around La France insoumise [\[4\]](#) did not continue during the following two years. The paralysis of NUPES in 2023/2024 caused its fragmentation into four lists during the European elections (9 June 2024), which led Macron to cherish the hope of winning the right wing of the PS for his parliamentary bloc and thus escape his paralysis. Despite Rassemblement National [\[5\]](#) obtaining a wide lead in those elections with 31% of the vote, Macron attempted a risky gambit by dissolving the National Assembly and calling new elections. Faced with the RN threat, he hoped to rally a broad majority to his right and left in the legislative elections that followed... or perhaps appear as a democratic bulwark in the presidency against an RN prime minister and RN majority in the Assembly.

However, far from achieving a broad majority around Macron's candidates, the fifteen days of campaigning before the elections saw the emergence of social and political mobilisation on the left, with the reconstruction of a coalition around an anti-liberal programme, the Nouveau Front Populaire [\[6\]](#) (New Popular Front), which imposed itself politically and in number of seats against the RN and Macron, preventing the far right from obtaining a majority in the Assembly... and further reducing the space of the Macronist bloc, which lost 53 additional seats.

Denying the election results by refusing to appoint a prime minister from the NFP, Macron entrenched himself from the beginning around his parliamentary minority by appointing prime ministers from his centrist bloc, which at best only has a minority of 240 seats with LR support. For a year, three prime ministers loyal to Macron have succeeded each other, benefiting from the benevolence granted by the RN or PS to remain for a few months and avoid falling quickly through a motion of censure. The constant of these governments has been the persistence of a reactionary and anti-social policy, whilst making the far-right (RN) agenda their own on security and xenophobic issues.

On 13 December 2024, social discontent forced the PS to vote alongside the rest of the left for the censure of Michel Barnier [7], appointed three months earlier, when he wanted to impose a budget that included €60 billion in cuts to public spending and tax increases, which obviously affected the working classes. François Bayrou [8], loyal to Macron, could only replace Barnier in December 2024 thanks to the complacency of the PS and RN, who, despite their censure vote against the previous government, wanted to show a responsible attitude, "not blocking the approval of a budget for France". The following six months witnessed the maintenance of fragmentation of trade union forces and the political left. The PS and CFDT [9] accepted the simulacrum of social dialogue in a conclave that was supposedly going to rethink the pension reform, whilst Bayrou had imposed a framework that clearly indicated it was not about changing that policy and returning to the retirement age of 62.

This division of social and political forces and the RN's manifest refusal to precipitate a new censure could give Bayrou the impression that he had room for manoeuvre to continue with the objectives of austerity and social budget cuts. But in early July 2025, the presentation of the 2026 budget, by showing the will to reduce the budget deficit from 5.4% to 4.6%, to reach 3% by 2029, had an incendiary effect on the country. Under the pretext of a catastrophic level of public debt, the objective was to impose a budget that would reduce public spending by €44 billion with numerous social attacks: the loss of two public holidays to impose two days of unpaid work, the freezing of social benefits and pensions, cuts to sick leave, the will to reduce unemployment benefits and new job cuts in the public service.

The essential characteristic of this budget project was, above all, that it included no measures of fiscal justice aimed at high incomes, in the name of "preserving the means of production", which would constitute the patrimony of the richest, and maintaining supply-side policy.

For six months, the government and major media tried to impose issues of public order, security and the fight against immigration as the population's main concerns, with a ministerial duo in Justice and Interior (the Macronist Gérald Darmanin and LR's Bruno Retailleau) committed to cultivating far-right themes to prepare possible presidential candidacies in 2027. François Bayrou, for his part, resumed the obsession with the invasion of the country by migrants. But in recent months, social issues have re-emerged in public debate as the essential concerns of the population. During the summer, a fiscal question and a budgetary one became political demands: the redistribution of taxation affecting the richest, particularly with the Zucman tax [10] (intended to create a minimum tax of 2% on wealth above €100 million, affecting 1,800 tax households) and the questioning of the state's largest budget item in practice, the €270 billion in various aid granted to companies, mainly the largest ones, which have considerably increased their profits and dividend payments over the last fifteen years. These two demands faithfully reflect the social anger, the purchasing power crisis and access to public services that the working classes suffer.

In France, between 2003 and 2022, the richest 0.1% saw their average income increase by 119%, more than double that of the rest of the population. At the same time, the poverty rate rose between 2004 and 2023 from 12.4% to 15.4% (INSEE [11], with a threshold of 60% of median living standards). Although France is below the EU average (16.2% in 2024), its rate trend is contrary to European evolution.

The social crisis goes back a long way. Liberal attacks, as in many countries, have called into question social budgets, public services, social protection and the health system. In France, supply-side policy has been officially applied since 2014, under François Hollande's socialist five-year term. Its main objective has been the reduction of

taxes on companies (production taxes) and large fortunes, the reduction of social contributions and a whole system of aid and exemptions. The different reports prepared since the early 2020s allow quantifying the amount of this aid to companies at €270 billion in 2025, the first budget item in practice of the state, never accounted for as such (but established by CLERSE of Lille [12] in 2019, commissioned by the CGT [13] and the France Stratégie [14] report). In this respect, France goes far beyond the systems in place in other European countries. In the 1990s, this budget only amounted to €30 billion. Today it includes €91 billion in exemptions from social contributions on wages, more than €100 billion in tax niches (tax credits for research, reduced VAT rates, derogatory tax rules), €50 billion in direct aid (see the synthesis by Aron and Michel-Aguirre in *Le Grand détournement* [15]).

All these policies have aggravated social injustice, the deterioration of public services and inequalities to the benefit of the richest, which have progressively intensified, creating profound popular discontent. This discontent has manifested itself forcefully in recent years, during the yellow vest movement in 2018, and with much more force in 2023, during the immense six-month mobilisation against pension reform that delayed the retirement age by two years, from 62 to 64. Rassemblement National has tried to polarise this discontent in its favour, pointing to spending in favour of immigrants or the weight of European regulations as responsible for the difficulties of the working classes, but the perception of tax privileges and the hoarding of wealth by the richest has largely prevailed in recent months.

The obsession of large capitalist groups and, evidently, right-wing and far-right politicians is to curb this popular discontent and prevent the left from polarising it further. This leads, on the other hand, to more and more big business leaders thinking that the only stable way out of the current crisis can come from an alliance between the right and the far right, in the image of Meloni's government [16].

The Complex Situation of the Social Movement and the Political Left

The announcement of the 2026 budget quickly provoked a reaction from activist circles, in a context where, a few weeks earlier, there had been a breakdown of the trade union front and the main left-wing parties had proven incapable of continuing to present a common front.

From 15 July, through social networks, Facebook, TikTok, X, the hashtag #bloquonstout [17] for a total and unlimited strike of the country on 10 September was imposed, and a Telegram group quickly brought together 10,000 people. A spontaneous popularity that reflected both social exasperation and, on the left, the frustration of many activist circles seeing the inability to organise against the government's reactionary wave and the growing threat of the RN. This movement could recall the Yellow Vests, but it was soon characterised by the structuring presence of trade union militants and the radical left, countering the attempted takeover by far-right networks like Les Essentiels [18]. Unlike 2018, the movement was welcomed with sympathy by the left, the CGT and Solidaires [19]. The spectacular aspect was the proliferation of local preparatory assemblies, more than a hundred, which brought together thousands of militants in the middle of summer, and a multitude of decentralised initiatives planned for 10 September with blocking actions. The initiative soon had the convergence of social movement organisations, such as ATTAC [20] and Les Soulèvements de la Terre [21]. Despite the date [first week after holidays], youth mobilised strongly in preparatory general assemblies in around twenty university cities. In total, the day brought together more than 200,000 people, with great youth participation, at least 430 blockades (ring roads, strategic locations) and important demonstrations in numerous cities. Mobilising 80,000 police officers, the Interior Minister gave the order to immediately attack the blockades and the blockades of secondary schools and universities.

Although the movement did not continue during the following days, it served as a catalyst for the preparation of 18 September. Without calling for the 10th, the inter-union of all trade unions met at the end of August to call for a day of strike and mobilisation against Bayrou's budget, in favour of fiscal justice and the suspension of pension reform. It was the first time such unity had been achieved since 2023.

Whilst the importance of the 18th mobilisation (1 million people according to the unions) did not reach the figures of the 2023 demonstrations, the strike was massive in the RATP [22] and SNCF [23], in National Education and in Energy. After 10 September, there were 276 blocking actions on public roads and 135 attempts to block installations, which were quickly repressed, as well as numerous actions in secondary schools and universities.

One of the most notable aspects of the demonstrations was the strong presence of young people, the marked place occupied by solidarity with Palestine, Pink Bloc collectives [24] and climate demands. This is indicative of a militant convergence that characterises the current situation.

On the afternoon of 18 September, the Inter-union gave the new prime minister, Sébastien Lecornu [25], a Macronist from LR, a five-day ultimatum to respond to their demands. The meeting took place on Tuesday 23 September and, as expected, no agreement was reached. Consequently, the Inter-union called for a new strike day for 2 October, which had the support of all NFP parties. This inter-union unity is the expression of pressure being exerted on trade union leaderships, as is the immediate call from parties, including the PS, which nonetheless seeks any hint of openness from the new prime minister.

Social mobilisation and political crisis will continue to be combined in the coming weeks. But it is clear that political unity of the left is far from being maintained, as each of the parties is mobilised both in preparing for municipal elections and in the possibility of a new dissolution. La France insoumise is openly betting on Macron's resignation, thinking that the terrain of presidential elections is more favourable for LFI, and the Socialist Party is trying to restructure itself as an independent force from the NFP, driven by its liberal wing. But the reactionary course shown by Macron's governments, including the announcements made this Saturday, leaves little room for a dialogue orientation with the Macronists.

Therefore, in recent weeks a balance of forces favourable to the trade union, social and political left has been reconstructed, but this is precarious, as it is determined by government provocations, in the absence of a unitary policy and common initiatives by NFP parties. The Inter-union acts in a unitary manner under pressure and the NFP parties are not a driving force to organise and stimulate an alternative orientation to Macron's austerity policy. However, there is fertile ground for such a perspective and the NFP programme advanced tracks in this direction.

It is evident that only the force of the social movement can create the necessary balance of forces and crystallise current discontent based on the fight against austerity, silencing the racist and security orientations of the RN. No one knows how the coming weeks will develop in the institutional sphere, whether there will be censure, dissolution... But the movement must set its own timelines to create the balance of forces that allows blocking austerity policies.

Several political questions will be at the centre of the coming weeks. Maximising self-organisation capacities, unitary initiatives from below, building on the networks constituted around 10 September. Highlighting the demands for wealth redistribution, popularised by the Zucman tax, but beyond that, the question of the commons and the need for public ownership of essential sectors of production; the question of debt and dependence on financial markets as justification for austerity policies; evidently, debt contracted to distribute tax gifts and subsidies to capitalist groups is illegitimate debt, which serves to speculate in markets; as well as the question of a government that breaks with austerity and satisfies the demands expressed by the working classes.

But this also raises the obvious democratic question: the institutions of the Fifth Republic, presidential power and the electoral system are tools designed to curb democratic expression. This once again raises, as in the case of the yellow vests, the demand to overthrow the institutions of the Fifth Republic and elect a Constituent Assembly by full proportional representation.

The threat of Rassemblement National coming to government is more present than ever given the current cacophony of the political left. But it can also, as in June 2024, more forcefully impose the construction of a political and social front that expresses popular demands and proposes a policy of rupture with capitalist austerity.

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Translated by Adam Novak for [ESSF](#). First published by [Viento Sur](#).

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[1] Les Républicaines (LR): France's traditional centre-right party, successor to the Gaullist tradition

[2] PS: Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party), France's main centre-left party

[3] NUPES: Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale (New Popular Ecological and Social Union), a left-wing electoral alliance formed for the 2022 legislative elections

[4] La France insoumise (LFI): "France Unbowed", a left-wing populist party led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon

[5] Rassemblement National (RN): "National Rally", Marine Le Pen's far-right party, formerly the National Front

[6] Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP): "New Popular Front", an electoral alliance of left-wing parties formed for the 2024 legislative elections, named after the 1930s Popular Front

[7] Michel Barnier: former EU Brexit negotiator and centre-right politician, appointed as Prime Minister by Macron in September 2024

[8] François Bayrou: centrist politician and leader of the Democratic Movement (MoDem), long-time ally of Emmanuel Macron

[9] CFDT: Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail, one of France's major trade union confederations, generally considered more moderate

[10] The Zucman tax: a proposal by economist Gabriel Zucman for a minimum tax of 2% on wealth above €100 million, affecting approximately 1,800 households in France

[11] INSEE: Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, France's national statistics institute

[12] CLERSE: Centre Lillois d'Études et de Recherches Sociologiques et Économiques, a research centre at the University of Lille

[13] CGT: Confédération Générale du Travail, France's largest and most militant trade union confederation

[14] France Stratégie: a government think tank attached to the Prime Minister's office that conducts economic and social policy analysis

[15] *Le Grand détournement*: "The Great Diversion", a book analysing how public money is redirected to private interests through various

subsidies and tax breaks

[16] Giorgia Meloni's government: refers to the right-wing coalition government in Italy led by Meloni's far-right Fratelli d'Italia party since 2022

[17] #bloquonstout: "let's block everything", a social media hashtag calling for a general strike

[18] Les Essentiels: a far-right media network and political organisation in France

[19] Solidaires: a left-wing trade union federation in France, known for its radical positions

[20] ATTAC: Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne, an international organisation promoting financial transaction taxes and citizen action

[21] Les Soulèvements de la Terre: "Earth Uprisings", an environmental activist movement in France known for direct action against industrial agriculture and infrastructure projects

[22] RATP: Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens, the public transport operator for Paris and its suburbs

[23] SNCF: Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français, France's national railway company

[24] Pink Bloc: refers to LGBTQ+ activist groups that participate in demonstrations as organised blocs, often wearing pink

[25] Sébastien Lecornu: Macronist politician appointed as Prime Minister in September 2025, previously Defence Minister