

Macron prepares “global security” law banning the filming of French police

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On Tuesday, President Emmanuel Macron’s government presented its “global security” bill to the National Assembly. Coming after the announcement of plans for a law against “separatism” ostensibly targeting Islamist groups, this bill is part of a campaign to establish a permanent state of emergency, handing draconian powers to the police.

Its provisions are unprecedented. Anyone publishing of images of a public event including police agents in a way that could “harm the agent’s physical or psychological well-being” faces one year in jail and a €45,000 fine. This purely subjective criterion, which allows police to arrest anyone filming them simply by stating that they feel uncomfortable being filmed, undermines freedom of the press and any attempt to hold security forces accountable for police brutality.

The law also grants police vast new powers to carry out video-surveillance of the population. Access to security cameras in stores or public institutions as well as apartment complexes will be granted not only to national but also municipal police. Moreover, the bill authorises police to deploy drones with facial recognition technology to overfly and monitor public protest marches.

It comes, moreover, after it emerged that the government quietly slipped a provision into its law authorising university research funding to effectively ban protests in universities. It reads: “Penetrating or remaining in an institution of higher education without authorisation by legislative or regulatory acts or by the appropriate authorities, in order to disturb the tranquility or good order of the establishment, can face penalties.” These include three years in prison and a €45,000 fine.

It is evident that, after years of mounting social protests in France and internationally, a turning point has been reached. After bloody repression of strikes and “yellow vest” protests, the Macron government was terrified by international mass protests that erupted, including in France, after the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis this spring. Facing mounting public anger at the massive death toll from COVID-19, the ruling elite is trying to establish a

police dictatorship.

Unsustainable levels of social inequality and the state criminality like that revealed by the pandemic are everywhere undermining whatever remains of democratic forms of rule. In America, Trump is refusing to admit defeat in the presidential elections and launching a coup, appealing to far-right militias to try to keep him in office. In France, the government is trampling upon constitutionally protected rights, such as press freedom and the right to protest, ramming through an illegitimate law in a desperate attempt to silence opposition by creating a climate of police terror.

There is no question that this law is illegitimate and incompatible with a democratic form of government. The United Nations Human Rights Council and the French government’s own human rights ombudsman have both denounced the law as violating fundamental democratic principles.

The UN noted that publishing images of police is “not only essential to respect the right to free information, but also legitimate in order to exercise democratic control of public institutions. Their absence could in particular prevent the documentation of potential abuses and excessive use of force by security forces during demonstrations.” The UN warned that by enacting the law, France would violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the European Convention of Human Rights.

Claire Héron, France’s human rights ombudsman, warned that the law is “not necessary to protect police and paramilitary police, unduly threatens freedom of expression, and creates obstacles to control their action.” She also found that filming demonstrators as under the terms of the law could “directly threaten the privacy” of demonstrators and “potentially threaten the freedom to demonstration, which the state is tasked with protecting.”

While the bill was being presented to the National Assembly, journalists’ unions and human rights groups held protests against this antidemocratic law. In Toulouse, around 1,300 people, including “yellow vest” protesters marking the two-year anniversary of their protests, met in the city centre

and were dispersed by riot police firing tear gas an hour later. Around 700 attended in Bordeaux and Lyon, where protests took place before the police prefecture, as well as several hundred in Marseille and Rennes, on Republic Square.

In Paris, several hundred protesters gathered in front of the National Assembly on Tuesday, while deputies inside began debating the bill. Riot police surrounded them, firing volleys of tear gas and arresting 33 people.

A journalist at the France3 public television station filming the demonstration on assignment with a cell phone was arrested and detained. “Identified by his press card, he was nonetheless arrested and freed today in the early afternoon. No reason for the detention was given and no charges were filed,” France3-Paris stated, adding that it “condemns with the greatest firmness this abusive and arbitrary arrest of a journalist while at work.”

France’s public television authority issued a statement, declaring: “Management of France-Télévisions condemns this restriction on press freedom and the exercise of the right to inform” and “reserves the right to undertake necessary legal action.”

Nonetheless, members of Macron’s Republic on the March (LREM) party insisted they would ram the law through at all costs. Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, who while presenting his “anti-separatism” law has appealed to anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment by denouncing kosher and halal food aisles in supermarkets, made clear that this law is intended to muzzle the press.

Darmanin defended the arrest of French state television personnel, saying that if they want to cover demonstrations, journalists “must be closer to the authorities” and “furnish them with reports.”

A fascist stench is rising from the Macron administration. Jean-Michel Fauvergue, a co-sponsor of the “global security” bill and the former leader of the French national police’s RAID assault squad, indicated that he felt censorship is necessary to stem rising public outrage at the state and the security forces. He said that the law would “win back terrain” lost in the “war of images” that “authority, the state in particular, is currently losing.”

Fauvergue did not say it, but the target of the war waged by the state is the people, and above all the working class.

In the last five years, countless videos on social media have exposed acts of savage police brutality against “yellow vest” protesters, striking transport workers, and student protesters. During the “yellow vest” protests alone, more than 11,000 people were arrested and detained, over 4,400 wounded by police, two-dozen people lost eyes and five lost hands, while one onlooker, Zineb Redouane, aged 80, was shot and killed with a police tear gas canister. The Macron

government decorated the police officer who led the unit that killed Redouane.

Fighting the Macron administration’s fascistic policies, including its policy of forcing workers and youth to remain at work and school and thus spread the coronavirus, requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist and internationalist programme. The union bureaucracies and their political allies, including the big-business Socialist Party (PS) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Rebellious France (LFI) party are all integrated into the police-state apparatus.

While LFI official Danièle Obono criticised the “global security” bill for potentially encouraging “self-censorship” in France, Hervé Saulignac for the PS commented: “There are red lines that should not be crossed. Even [former conservative President Nicolas] Sarkozy never went that far.” These criticisms are hypocritical, however: it was the PS that set into motion the suspension of democratic rights, imposing a two-year state of emergency in 2015. Mélenchon’s legislative group voted for the state of emergency in the National Assembly at the time.

The “global security” law is in the direct continuity of the policy carried out by the PS, backed by the LFI, preparing the legal terrain for Macron to install a permanent state of emergency.

The twin threats of COVID-19 and the financial aristocracy’s drive to dictatorship pose vast challenges to workers and youth. Halting the virus at schools and workplaces worldwide requires the forming of safety committees—independent from the unions, which support the back-to-work drive—to inform workers and students, and press for a lock-down policy allowing them to safely shelter at home. Fighting the drive to dictatorship requires a socialist political movement, fighting to transfer power to such independent bodies of the working class in France and internationally.



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