

French government on brink of collapse over 2025 budget vote

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French Prime Minister Michel Barnier's government, installed after the July 2024 elections, is hanging by a thread amid growing conflicts in the ruling elite over his 2025 austerity budget. Last night, Barnier went on prime-time TF1 news and threatened to ram the budget through parliament without a vote, using Article 49.3 of the constitution. He warned of "several turbulence on financial markets" if the National Assembly reacted by censuring and bringing down his government.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's New Popular Front (NFP) coalition and Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (RN) have both threatened to censure the government over the budget, which imposes €40 billion in social cuts. The French state is already technically in violation of the law: it must approve a budget each year by October 1, which it has failed to do. But if the NFP and RN both voted to censure the government, it could lead to an unprecedented situation of France having no budget as the 2025 year begins.

The 2025 Social Security budget is to be presented on December 2, the end-of-year 2024 budget on December 4, and the full 2025 budget on December 18. In each case, censure votes against the Barnier government could be held in the National Assembly two days later.

The fall of Barnier's government by itself would not stop French and European capitalism's downward spiral of austerity and war. France's parliamentary parties are not seeking to give expression to mass popular dissatisfaction with the established order. Rather, Barnier's cuts are no longer deep enough to satisfy the bourgeoisie. A bitter debate is unfolding in the ruling class over how to recalibrate its policies as it prepares, sooner rather than later, for explosive conflicts with the working class.

After Trump's victory in the US presidential elections, French imperialism is on the warpath against

Russia and against the working class at home. Trump's team is threatening to cut a staggering \$2 trillion in US government spending and cancel US military aid to Ukraine for war with Russia. Top French diplomats have called to bomb Russia with French SCALP missiles and to send French ground troops to Ukraine to fight the Russian army.

Arming the French military for total war with Russia, and keeping French capitalism economically competitive amid the onslaught Trump is preparing against US workers, would require a massive plundering of financial resources from the French working class to the army and the banks.

Instead, ruling circles are increasingly dissatisfied with Barnier's budget and the draft amendments proposed by government ministers and the Assembly's parliamentary subcommittees. Members of Mélenchon's NFP, far-right Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau and leaders of right-wing government parties like Laurent Wauquiez of The Republicans (LR) have all intervened to eliminate spending cuts and posture as friends of the people.

"The budget-cutting objectives for 2025 increasingly lack ambition," *Le Monde* wrote last week. "If it agrees to the demands of this or that person, letting go €500 million here, €1 or 2 billion there, can the government keep to its initial objective of solving the budget deficit? ... Financial markets, already highly dubious of the announced focus on austerity, could at any time punish France by sharply raising interest rates."

Charles Sitzenstuhl, a deputy of Macron's Renaissance party, complained: "While Michel Barnier claimed budget deficits would be cut mainly by slashing spending and a bit by increasing taxes, each passing day shows the reverse: we are preparing budget stimulus like a left-wing government."

As this dissatisfaction grew within the bourgeoisie, Le Pen ultimately shifted her position on Barnier. When Barnier's minority government was initially formed, Le Pen and the RN pledged to support the government's austerity agenda, vote for its measures in parliament, and provide it with a working parliamentary majority.

But on November 20, as NFP members including Mélenchon ally Eric Coquerel called to censure Barnier's government to punish it for its austerity policies, Le Pen turned 180 degrees and said she might support censuring Barnier. She told RTL radio: "We will not accept any further reductions to the French people's purchasing power. That is a red line for us. If the red line is crossed, we will vote for censure."

Yesterday, Le Pen published a column in *Le Figaro*, defending threats to bring down Barnier and block the budget. This, she implausibly claimed, would have no major consequences: "Even if the government is censured, taxes would be gathered, state officials paid, pensions paid out, and health costs would be reimbursed. All the censured government would have to do would be to vote, in a caretaker capacity, a special law allowing at a minimum the continued application of the 2024 budget [into 2025], until a new government emerges and a formal budget is voted."

The prospect of a vote by significant sections of the NFP and the RN that could bring down Barnier has intensified the factional struggle within the political establishment.

While NFP leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon is campaigning to censure Barnier and predicting that his government will fall "between December 18 and 21," other NFP officials oppose this. Former Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve of the big-business Socialist Party (PS) stated that bringing down Barnier "risks a big jump into a crisis of rule." He called on "all democratic political forces" to be "lucid enough to rally together" to support Barnier.

Significantly, among those spreading rumors about a fall of the government is its titular leader, President Emmanuel Macron. At a recent meeting in the Elysée presidential palace, he told Renaissance officials: "The government will fall. She [Marine Le Pen] will censure it at a certain point, and it will come earlier than what people expect." Macron, these officials told *Le Parisien*, thinks that "RN legislators could act on her

threats in the coming days, during the votes of the different budgets in the National Assembly."

The debate on the French budget is a carnival of political reaction. Neither the reactionaries supporting Barnier's austerity budget, nor the bourgeois supporters of his parliamentary ouster represent the interests of workers.

There is overwhelming opposition among workers to the Gaza genocide, plans for total war with Russia, and austerity policies to fund a war economy. Yet none of these views find expression in the policies of the parliamentary parties, including those promoted by capitalist media as "left." To secure the PS' participation in the NFP, Mélenchon said he threw "into the river" his criticisms of the Gaza genocide. He also included reactionary provisions in the NFP program like increasing funding for riot police and sending French ground troops to Ukraine.

One thing is certain: Marine Le Pen did not turn against Barnier based on national calculations of how to defend the purchasing power of the French poor. The decision on whether to bring down a government is bound up with global imperialist strategy. Bringing down Barnier without preparing workers to also oppose Le Pen and Trump is to disarm the working class in the face of capitalist reaction.

Deep-rooted mass opposition to imperialism will erupt, sooner rather than later, on both sides of the Atlantic. These struggles cannot, however, be waged on a national basis, under the control of corrupt organizations like France's parliamentary parties. The struggle to halt the arming of Israel for genocide in Gaza, to alert workers to the danger of catastrophic escalation in the NATO-Russia conflict and stop that war, and to halt further social cuts to fund war requires building an international, socialist movement in the working class.



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