

# No to the draft in France and Europe!

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Amid mass protests against its austerity policies, the bitterly unpopular government of French President Emmanuel Macron announced Monday a plan to introduce military conscription. The first draftees are to serve starting in seven months, in a program that, no later than 2026, will draft all 800,000 French citizens then aged 16 into the military.

The press all but admitted that this initiative aims to suppress working class opposition via an appeal to nationalism and a military build-up. “At a time when France is torn apart by divisions that threaten its unity,” *Le Parisien* wrote, “the idea of bringing back national service seems a timely initiative.” Two days later, on Wednesday night, Macron announced that military forces would deploy to France’s Réunion island to suppress protests.

Across the European Union (EU), ruling elites are preparing to bring back conscription. After the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, France ended conscription in 1997, followed by Spain (2001), Italy (2005), Poland (2008) and Germany (2010). This proved only a brief interlude, however. After Sweden last year and France this year announced a return to military service, other major EU powers including Germany are all debating whether to do likewise.

After two horrendous world wars, deep, historically-rooted opposition exists in the European working class to a return to conscription. A 2015 Gallup poll found that only 29 percent of French people would agree to fight for their country; in the 2017 “Generation What” survey of EU youth, 60 percent refused to do so.

With an approval rating of only 20 percent, the Macron government is careful not to admit that it is resurrecting the draft. Its officials advance absurd pretexts: next year’s program will only last a month and involve 16-year-olds; not every youth will serve in combat units; Education Ministry officials will be

involved; the army will teach teenagers “crisis management” and “sustainable development.”

Europe’s plunge into fascism and then world war in the 1930s teaches one unforgettable lesson, however: the bourgeoisie’s resort to nationalism and militarism to try to suppress the class struggle has a devastating objective dynamic. The implications of the return to universal military service cannot be understood based on official euphemisms and obfuscations. They flow from the mounting objective crisis of the world capitalist system, that has seen more than a quarter century of unbroken imperialist wars since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The claim that the end of the USSR marked the End of History lies in tatters. Rather, the dissolution of the Soviet Union signaled the return of all the historical conflicts that twice plunged the world into world war. For those who do not want to fight and die—or see their children die—in wars like those in Afghanistan, Syria and Mali, or while “pacifying” cities at home, the decisive question is building an anti-war movement in the working class.

The escalation of wars and underlying inter-imperialist rivalries in the last 25 years has produced a qualitatively new stage in the capitalist crisis. Faced with the collapse of its world hegemony, Washington adopted last year a National Security Strategy downplaying the “war on terror,” and declaring that US foreign policy is based on “great power conflict.” And as US-EU trade wars erupt, Berlin and Paris are stepping up calls for an EU army to compete with America.

Inside the US military, calls are growing for the draft. US forces spent \$5.6 trillion waging war in at least 76 countries since 2001, *Military.com* wrote, which “begs the question: Can an all-volunteer force stand ready to answer the call?” It cited retired Major General Dennis Laich, a supporter of the draft: “If you do the math, only three out of 10 Americans meet the criteria to

serve, and only 15 percent of those able have the propensity to serve. This is unsustainable ...”

Touring the killing fields of World War I before the centenary of the war’s end two weeks ago, Macron said the EU needed an army capable of confronting not only Russia and China, but also the United States.

As they try to band together to rival US military power while confronting workers at home, the EU imperialists are impelled to also return to fascistic nationalism. Debating a return to military service, Germany’s Grand Coalition government is promoting the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD); Interior Minister Horst Seehofer applauded the participants in a neo-Nazi riot in Chemnitz in which a Jewish restaurant was attacked. In France, Macron hailed Nazi-collaborationist dictator and anti-Semite Philippe Pétain as a war hero, citing his World War I record.

As mass opposition to austerity and social inequality erupts across Europe, the decisive question is raising the consciousness of the working class to the level of its historic tasks. A new anti-war movement must be based on an internationalist and socialist perspective, led by a political vanguard in the working class fighting for this perspective. This means building the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, and the ICFI’s French section, the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES).

The PES makes the sharpest possible warnings about the reactionary European middle class “left” groups that emerged from the post-1968 student movement: they support war and nationalism. Sweden’s Left Party voted for the draft, deputies of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) party are planning the draft from the French National Assembly’s military committee. And top Left Party officials sit, sworn to secrecy, on the German parliament’s military commission.

The political alternative is the ICFI. The PES reaffirms the principles laid out in the ICFI’s 2016 statement, “Socialism and the Fight Against War”:

\* The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.

\* The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of

finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

\* The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.

\* The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism. The permanent war of the bourgeoisie must be answered with the perspective of permanent revolution by the working class, the strategic goal of which is the abolition of the nation-state system and the establishment of a world socialist federation. This will make possible the rational, planned development of global resources and, on this basis, the eradication of poverty and the raising of human culture to new heights.

Parti de l’égalité socialiste

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