

French President Chirac appoints new government with right-wing agenda

Peter Schwarz

17 May 2002

The French constitution imparts powers to the president that are unique in Europe. On May 5, the Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac was confirmed as president with a large majority thanks to the support of France's "Plural Left" parties—the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens. Now he is systematically using the powers accorded to him by the constitution to strengthen his position.

In the final and decisive round of voting between Chirac and the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, the Plural Left parties, which had formed the outgoing government under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, called for a vote for the incumbent president, arguing that this was the only way to defend the Fifth Republic and democracy. Now, Chirac, is using his re-election to erect a regime that has more in common with a Bonapartist dictatorship than a democracy. He is seeking powers previously possessed only by his role model, Charles de Gaulle. In this way he hopes to carry out the type of attacks against the working class that led to the fall of previous French governments.

Immediately after his re-election, Chirac exercised his legal right as president to name at his own discretion a new head of government and new cabinet. He appointed a conservative prime minister and chose a collection of right-wing ministers who can govern the country on an interim basis without the agreement of parliament (still legally controlled by the coalition of left parties) until new legislative elections are held on June 9 and June 16. According to the constitution, the president has the right to simply name the head of government, who then appoints his ministers, who in turn are ratified by the president. In a break with common practice, however, Chirac has himself taken charge of selecting the cabinet ministers.

All the key posts in the government—the Interior, Foreign, Defence, Social and Justice ministries—have been filled by close associates of Chirac. The Economics Ministry, which is responsible for finance and industry, is to be led by the manager of a steel company and representative of the employers' federation, Medef.

The prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, is a member of the Liberal Democrats. He has been appointed as a symbol of moderation to lure supporters of the former governing majority. Of the 28 ministers and state secretaries, 12 belong to the Gaullist RPR, 6 to the centrist UDF, and 5 to the Liberal Democrats (DL). Five are independents.

The composition of the new government serves a number of purposes. The first and most important is to ensure a majority for the right wing in the run-up to the legislative elections. A number of ministers have been appointed exclusively with the aim of attracting voters from the former governing majority as well as from the camp of Len Pen's National Front.

As president, Chirac is responsible for French foreign policy. If he succeeds in obtaining his own governing majority in the legislative elections, he will also be in a position to determine domestic policies. Unlike the US, where the constitution gives the Congress broad powers to serve as a counterweight to the president, the French National Assembly has far more limited authority.

Chirac has also used the formation of the new government to sort out his own camp. His supporters have been rewarded, and his rivals ditched. From the parties on the right that traditionally vie for power with the Gaullists, i.e., the UDF and DL, he has mainly chosen politicians who supported him in the recent election campaign.

For example, the new head of government, Raffarin, called for a vote for Chirac in the first round of the presidential election instead of backing the Liberal Democratic candidate, Alain Madelin, even though Raffarin is himself vice-chairman of the DL. Raffarin also supported the new grouping called into being by Chirac to support his candidacy—UMP (Union for a Presidential Majority)—which brought together all of the right-wing bourgeois parties to seek a parliamentary majority for Chirac in the upcoming legislative vote.

Chirac has sought to achieve a fait accompli in the short period between the presidential and parliamentary elections, when he is not subject to parliamentary control. He wants to impress the electorate while implementing measures that cannot be subsequently reversed.

The new head of government, Raffarin, is regarded as a moderate and a man of the political centre. His reputation is based on his support for a corporatist course in the realm of economic policy. In his first official speech after taking office, he declared that, together with re-establishing the authority of the state, his most important working priority was to establish a social dialogue. He accused the previous government of Jospin of allowing such a dialogue to collapse.

Raffarin's notion of social dialogue is close collaboration between the government, the employers' organisations and the trade unions. Following the catastrophic results for the Socialist and Communist parties in the presidential elections, the trade union bureaucracy is more than willing to listen to encouraging noises from the new government. Facing a dramatic loss of members—less than 8 percent of all French employees are organised in trade unions—the union hierarchy fears for its very existence, should the government prove unwilling to accept it as a partner.

Marc Blondel, the general secretary of the Force Ouvrière union, responded immediately to Raffarin's offer and made his own demand for a "social dialogue" with the government. All of the other main trade union organisations have indicated their willingness to engage in government talks with their "social partners."

It is also Raffarin's job to counter the broad dissatisfaction with the remote and corrupt political establishment in France's capital city. The 54-year-old president of the region of Poitou-Charentes is generally credited with being affable and down to earth. In recent years he has kept his distance from the discredited centre of national politics and struck up close relations with middle-class layers in the French countryside. He first held national office between 1995 and 1997 as minister for small and middle-sized industry, a post to which he was appointed by Chirac as a reward for supporting Chirac against Chirac's major rival at the time, Édouard Balladur.

Alongside Raffarin, two other state secretaries have been appointed to

appeal to moderate voters. The appointment of Tokia Saïfi to the Environment Ministry marks the first time that the offspring of a so-called “Beur,” or Algerian immigrant, has been included in the national government. In charge of the “struggle against poverty and discrimination” is the former head of the social emergency service in Paris, Dominique Versini.

While Raffarin has been given the task of presenting a liberal image, the real strongman in the new government is a confirmed right-winger. The former general secretary of the Gaullists and close confidante of Chirac, Nikolas Sarkozy, has been appointed head of an expanded Interior Ministry, with powers far exceeding those of previous interior ministers.

Originally Sarkozy sought the post of prime minister. He is so far to the right, however, that his appointment was regarded as unacceptable to a broad spectrum of the electorate. In 1998, for example, he agitated in favour of prioritising the allocation of jobs, social benefits and accommodation to French citizens at the expense of immigrants—a basic demand of the National Front.

Sarkozy’s appointment, together with that of his deputy, Patrick Devedjian, underscores the narrowness of the differences between the interim government and the neo-fascists. Devedjian, a legal advisor to Chirac, was in his youth a member of the fascist organisation “Occident.” On January 12, 1967 he took part in an assault at the University of Rouen on an information table of the Vietnam Liberation Front. A number of students ended up in the hospital as a result of beatings administered with the aid of iron bars. Devedjian was merely fined, while other participants in the attack ended up in jail. In 1976 Devedjian helped draw up the legal statutes for the newly founded Gaullist party.

The Foreign Ministry is also in the hands of a confidante of Chirac. Officially registered as an independent, Dominique Galouzeau de Villepin formerly served the president as general secretary in the Elysée palace, and has been one of Chirac’s closest associates for the past 10 years.

The Defence Ministry is to be headed by the former chairman of the RPR, Michèle Alliot-Marie, who is regarded as Chirac’s right-hand man in the Gaullist party.

The Justice Ministry is to be led by one of the few ministers with a long record of government office. In the 1990s Dominique Perben was an official in the governments of Balladur and Alain Juppé. At that time he was responsible for a number of laws curtailing trade union rights in the factories and attacking the conditions of workers in marginal jobs.

The only close associate of Chirac not included in the new government is Juppé, the luckless prime minister during the first two years of Chirac’s initial presidential term. Nevertheless, Juppé remains a key figure, feverishly pulling strings in the background. Should the Gaullists strengthen their position in the upcoming parliamentary elections, Juppé is regarded as a possible replacement for Raffarin.

The nomination of Francis Mer as super-minister for economy, finance and industry is a clear signal to big business. Mer is a leading representative of the employers’ federation, Medef, and was formerly general director of the European steel concern Arcelor.

As a steel executive, Mer was for 15 years responsible for the “renovation” of the steel industry in the region of Lothring, a process that involved the destruction of 70,000 jobs. He is a close friend of François Bayrou (the candidate of the UDF, which favours a “free-market” economic policy), and the Socialist Party politician Jacques Delors, long-time president of the European Union Commission, as well as Jean Peyrelade, the executive chairman of the Bank Crédit Lyonnais. Mer is reputed to have a high estimation of Nicole Notat, the general secretary of the Socialist Party-linked CFDT trade union.

Last year, as the representative of Medef, Mer negotiated a job training program with the unions that contributed substantially to the transformation of the unemployed savings scheme *Unedic*. This “reform” was aimed at doing away with the right of the unemployed to receive

financial support from the state. It was the first step toward the so-called *Refondation sociale* introduced by the Jospin government. The continuation of such “reforms,” in particular, the aligning of pension and health schemes to the requirements of the market, is a central aim of the new government.

An additional priority for the economics minister is to open up the state-owned energy concern EDF-GDF to private capital—a measure that was already agreed at the recent European Union summit in Barcelona. In line with the plans of the new economics minister is the appointment of Roselyne Bachelot as minister for environment and development. She is a declared advocate of nuclear energy.

Another representative of industry is François Loos, a counsellor in the Ministry for Youth, Education and Research. Loos has a background in the chemical industry and was director of the Rhône-Poulenc factory in Thann-Mulhouse. He will head the department for research and universities.

Another minister, François Fillon, also has a background with business ties. His specialty—military affairs—would not appear to have prepared him to take up his new responsibilities in the Ministry for Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity. However, as a minister in the government of Juppé in 1996, he oversaw the privatisation of France Télécom, securing the agreement of the unions for early retirements.

Little wonder that Medef has expressed enthusiasm for the new government. According to the organisation’s leader, de Seillièvre, Prime Minister Raffarin is “a down-to-earth man with entrepreneurial experience, and someone prepared to listen.” Francis Mer is “splendidly informed on the situation of the French economy and the necessity to make it competitive. He is aware of the burden of taxes and deductions that employers are forced to bear.”

At its first meeting, on the initiative of Chirac, the new cabinet agreed an extensive catalogue of measures to be implemented before the coming parliamentary elections. After the meeting, Raffarin declared that he and his colleagues were progressing at a “breakneck pace.”

At the heart of the agreed measures are issues affecting domestic security. Immediately after his appointment, Interior Minister Sarkozy accompanied Parisian police on a night-time patrol of suburban areas in a show of solidarity with the forces of law and order. After the cabinet sitting, he announced plans for extensive legal changes in the spheres of security and justice, due to be completed by the summer and agreed on by the incoming National Assembly.

Measures to be implemented immediately include the close collaboration of police, gendarmes, customs officials, investigative judges and tax evasion inspectors in the prosecution of organised crime in suburban areas, and the increased use of the paramilitary CRS, which up to now had only been used for special operations. The CRS is to work more closely with the police.

On May 15 the cabinet agreed by decree to subordinate the Council for Domestic Security (CSI) directly to the president. The CSI, which includes the interior, defence, justice, economics and finance ministers, was founded in 1988 by Socialist Party Prime Minister Michel Rocard, and its mandate was renewed by Jospin in 1997. It was previously under the control of the prime minister and constituted a major centre of government power.

Now, under the control of the president, the council’s powers will be considerably expanded. In practical terms the council now assumes oversight of key areas of domestic policy. According to the speaker of the new government, the council has the job of determining key aspects of domestic security policy, coordinating the work of diverse ministries and overseeing the implementation of the new security policy. Its status will correspond to the defence council, which has traditionally been subordinate to the president and responsible for foreign security issues.

In a further decision, the cabinet agreed to elaborate a draft law for a 5

percent cut in income tax. It is to be completed in the next 10 days and passed immediately after the new elections.

Another measure demonstrates how ably the new government is working to exploit popular opposition to actions taken by the previous government. Transport and Construction Minister Gilles de Robien announced a fundamental review of plans for a third major airport in the vicinity of the capital. These plans had been pushed through by his predecessor, Jean-Claude Gaiotto of the Communist Party, in the face of considerable opposition from the population at large, which feared the resulting increase in noise and pollution.

The new government has succeeded in winning support from circles usually associated with the left. The newspaper *Le Monde*, which, since the period of François Mitterrand, has tended to support the Socialists, has expressed high praise for the government. Raffarin's government cuts a fine figure, the newspaper commented, and declared that the nomination of the independent ministers Mer (Economy and Finance) and Ferry (Education) were particular coups for Chirac. The paper went on to declare that Chirac had struck a blow against Le Pen with his appointment of a state secretary, Saifi, of Algerian origin.

The broad chorus of approval for Chirac's new government represents a consolidation of all those bourgeois forces that supported Chirac in the second round of the presidential election. The new-found unity behind Chirac has less to do, however, with a rejection of Le Pen—in many respects the new government, by beefing up the state, is adapting itself to Le Pen's demands—than with a fear of the popular anger and discontent reflected in the massive abstention and the three million votes cast for candidates claiming to be revolutionary socialists in the first round of the presidential election.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact