

French government party leaders solidarize themselves with American imperialism

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The current conflict between French President Jacques Chirac and the Bush administration over war plans for Iraq has enabled the French government to posture temporarily on the world stage as a force for peace and international harmony. French imperialism has not changed its spots, however, and the present dispute has everything to do with how Paris believes its economic and geopolitical interests can be best served.

The proceedings of a press conference held on February 15 by top officials of the majority government party—the newly formed grab-bag of right-wing politicians known as the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)—ought to disabuse anyone under serious illusions about the Chirac government's policies and aims.

The UMP, presented with great fanfare by the former prime minister Alain Juppé as the right-center party for which the French people have been waiting for decades, has hardly taken off. Nor is it likely to.

Just as Juppé's regime was shown to be isolated and despised, despite a large parliamentary majority, when a mass strike wave erupted in 1995-96, the present administration of Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin has no serious base of mass support. It is the product primarily of popular anger, disgust and disillusionment with years of "left" and "plural left" (Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens) governments, which carried out attack after attack on workers' rights and living standards. The UMP, some have said, is more or less a "virtual party."

It is a sign of the UMP's distance from the population that the press conference was scheduled for Saturday afternoon, at a time when millions of anti-war demonstrators were marching across Paris.

For that reason, and perhaps as well a general lack of interest, hardly anyone from the media turned up at

UMP headquarters in Rue La Boétie to hear party officials explain their Iraq policy. The handful of reporters that did attend at first confronted five empty chairs. At the appropriate moment, the five UMP officials marched in rather self-importantly and took their seats.

These gentlemen were:

Philippe Douste-Blazy, the secretary-general of the UMP. He is the mayor of Toulouse, a former member of the rival Union for French Democracy (UDF), a former culture minister and a prime ministerial hopeful last spring.

Jacques Barrot, president of the UMP faction in the National Assembly;

Guy Tessier, the chairman of the Assembly's defense and armed forces committee and one of the most influential French figures in military and intelligence matters;

Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, formerly of the UDF and formerly a deputy minister in Raffarin's first cabinet last spring. He resigned because of his implication in an illegal party financing scheme.

Xavier de Villepin, also originally from the UDF, the former chairman of the French Senate's foreign affairs, defense and armed forces committee and father of the current foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin.

All in all, the five constituted a well-connected and thoroughly reactionary group.

Dousté-Blazy opened the press conference by declaring how proud everyone present felt, following the performance of Dominique de Villepin at the United Nations Security Council the day before, to see the "refound strength" of French diplomacy. He spoke about the "camp of peace," to which presumably France belonged, but went on to declare that "Every attitude concerning Iraq must be at the same time

credible and responsible.” By “responsible” he meant maintaining pressure on Iraq in order to obtain its “full and thorough cooperation.”

Douste-Blazy observed that the French government was not in a conflict with the US, but had a two-fold objective: “the peaceful and effective disarmament [of Iraq] and the struggle against terrorism.” There were “two dangerous attitudes: [to succumb to] a complacent and naïve pacifism and to give international legitimacy to those who want to make war immediately.”

The UMP secretary-general thus made clear that the Chirac government accepted entirely the line of reasoning pursued by the Bush government: that Iraq is a dangerous rogue state that must be “disarmed” and that the great powers have the right to launch colonial-style interventions.

At a certain point a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* asked the following question: “Can you recall the last time a government went to war in the face of such opposition from world public opinion as revealed in today’s international demonstrations?”

This type of question was clearly not welcomed by the assembled UMP officials. They hastened to reply. Jacques Barrot responded: “It is necessary to avoid any misunderstanding. We are not passive. We have a more global vision of the international order. The return of equilibrium in the world and notably in the Middle East demands a more global treatment of affairs.” We need, he said, “to maintain the dialogue with the Americans. It is not a matter of falling into pacifism or anti-Americanism.”

Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres was more explicit, making clear that the French government had no differences with US aims, but was concerned about the consequences of reckless actions. He remarked that one had to “avoid caricature.” He continued: “France acts as the most solid and loyal ally of the US. International violence, the powder-keg in which we live today, obliges us to exercise a great deal of vigilance and a great deal of prudence. The French position, which is the absolute opposite of cowardice, has this double objective—the disarmament [of the Hussein regime] and the effective struggle against terrorism.”

The WSWS reporter later posed a second question: “Do you see the possibility of war crimes trials arising from this conflict?” At this point an audible gasp could be heard from the direction of the UMP leaders.

Xavier de Villepin perhaps spoke for all of them: “In the Senate there are many of us who belong to the French-American friendship group and we have no desire to systematically oppose” the US or Washington’s policies. “We are not seeking to put Americans on trial,” he went on, “but to be a loyal ally that speaks and expresses its point of view.”

Guy Tessier, an extreme right-winger, solidarized himself with the aims of the Bush administration, arguing for the application of “double pressure, at one and the same time military—exercised by the hundreds of thousands of men pre-positioned in Kuwait—and, on the other side, diplomatic.” He asserted that “Contrary to smug pacifism, we desire the full and entire disarmament of this country, and at the same time, the capitulation of Saddam Hussein so that he quits power, because it is not conceivable that this situation can drag on.”

Such is the official French “camp of peace.”



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