

# French referendum on the European constitution: opinion polls point to defeat

**Richard Dufour**  
**4 April 2005**

According to two recent opinion polls conducted by the firms CSA and Ipsos, if the European constitution had been submitted to the popular vote this week, it would have been rejected by slightly more than half the voters.

This is the first time the “no” vote has moved into the lead in the campaign for the referendum to be held May 29. But the turnaround had been indicated by the continued decline in the percentage of people intending to vote “yes”: from 65 percent three months ago to 56 percent in a survey conducted by Sofres-Unilog just before the latest polls. In each case, a considerable abstention is predicted.

The announcement of the latest poll results has produced turmoil in the French political establishment, which, together with that of Germany, has led the charge for a “strong” capitalist Europe. If the “no” vote prevailed, thundered French President Jacques Chirac, “we would be completely isolated, with all that goes along with that...in terms of consequences for France and her capacity to defend her interests.”

And François Bayrou, head of the UDF (Union pour la démocratie française—Union for French Democracy), one of the components of the right-wing coalition government of the UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire—Union for a Popular Movement), announced that “it would be the end of Europe as a political entity.”

The leaders of the Socialist Party (PS) adopted the same tone of alarm, with the hint of a threat against those who would dare to break the official consensus. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former minister for the economy in the government of Lionel Jospin, declared, “What is at stake is the future of Europe, the future of France.” And the head of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, repeats tirelessly that “if the treaty is rejected, we will be left with no constitution at all.”

What Hollande and the whole ruling elite fear most is that the protest movements that have broken out since the beginning of the year against the attack on living standards by the employers and the government will swell the “no” vote. “It is intolerable,” the head of the Socialist Party blurted out, “that anger and frustration have risen to this level, referendum or no referendum.”

The CSA and Ipsos polls have taken the political temperature of the French people at the beginning of the referendum campaign. A remarkable and largely unmentioned fact is that the “no” vote has gained the lead despite a strong bias in favor of a “yes” vote in the media—69 percent of television coverage, 80 percent of radio

commentators and 85 percent of opinions expressed in the written press in the first two weeks of March, according to one observer.

Most analysts have drawn a connection between the rise in the “no” vote and recent events, pointing to the massive student and union protests of March 8 and 10, as well as the controversy aroused by the so-called Bolkestein directive on the “liberalisation” of services. But the opposition to the antisocial measures of the ruling class and the distrust over its constitutional plans, of which the Bolkestein directive is justifiably seen as a symbol, have a deeper cause.

Above all, they express the persistence of a profound popular alienation, which erupts at regular intervals. On April 21, 2002, there was the vote of no confidence in Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, when he was eliminated from the second round of the presidential election to the benefit of the head of the extreme right-wing National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen. This “political earthquake” was followed by a record level of abstention in the European elections of June 2004. Now, the May 29 referendum holds out the real possibility of a rejection of the constitution—a plan aimed at establishing a legal framework for the brutal turn by big capital towards the American social model, with the elimination of all restrictions on its “right” to accumulate profits via privatisation, the export of jobs and the dismantling of social security.

Far from being a conjunctural phenomenon, the increase of the “no” vote in the polls is the symptom of an unprecedented crisis for which the capitalist ruling class has no progressive answer.

The magnitude of this crisis is shown by several social indices. On March 15, after registering a more than 10 percent rise in unemployment for the first time in five years, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Study (Insee) published a study showing that average net salaries fell by 0.3 percent in 2003, allowing for inflation. Another revealing statistic recently published is the number of workers receiving the minimal stipend paid only to those who have exhausted all other benefits (Revenu minimum d’insertion), which grew by 9 percent in 2003.

On the other hand, 2004 was a year of record profit for the biggest firms, mainly because of the transfer of operations to countries in eastern Europe that have recently joined the European Union, where the labour force is qualified but subjected to minimal wage levels and social benefits compared to the countries in the west of Europe.

Incapable of providing a real solution to the socioeconomic

crisis, the political elite, with the help of the mass media, seeks to manipulate public opinion in the hope of reversing the tendency revealed in the recent polls.

This is why the Raffarin government is pretending to heed the popular voice by letting it be thought that it might revisit the wage offer made to public servants. But that was only one of the numerous issues at the heart of the mass protests of recent days. The demonstrations were provoked as much by the lengthening of the working week, the attack on education, the destruction of jobs and the dismantling of public services. In addition, it is not certain that the government will implement even this slight retreat. At the supposed reopening of the salary negotiations this week, the public service minister, Renaud Dutreil, refused to make a specific offer on an increase in salaries for 2005.

This has not prevented the union leaderships from participating fully in this semblance of negotiations. In this they are continuing their essential role of neutralising the combativity of the membership by keeping it within the narrow framework of collective negotiation, without calling into question the profit system or the current political order.

The government's verbal concessions have been badly received among certain sections of the large employers. The employers' organisation Medef (Mouvement des entreprises de France), has demanded "a quid pro quo in jobs, productivity and reforms"—that is, a worsening of working conditions for public servants. The government's vague promise to "encourage" enterprises to raise the minimum salary in numerous branches of industry has been met with a flat refusal by the employers' group. "To suddenly raise these minimums to the level of the minimum wage," group president Ernest-Antoine Seillère declared, "would be an extremely strong signal of a wages policy totally incompatible with our economy."

UMP deputies have denounced the Raffarin government's lack of "courage." "If we rub the electorate the wrong way by giving the impression we are retreating," stormed Claude Goasguen, the president of the UMP group in the Paris Council, "we will end up with serious problems during the next elections." "At a UMP policy meeting last week, attended by eight government ministers and 80 members of parliament, UMP President Nicolas Sarkozy, the rising star of the French right, reaffirmed that "it is the market that determines wage levels. "As a "solution" to the lack of wage increases, he advocated overtime and a reduction in employer costs and payroll taxes.

The height of hypocrisy in the official political debate was perhaps reached in the controversy over the directive on the "liberalisation" of services inside the European Union, named after the Dutch commissioner Fris Bolkestein, who sponsored it.

This directive is part of the Lisbon strategy, adopted in March 2000 during the summit of the 15 held in the Portuguese capital, at the height of the grandiose plans for Europe that would supposedly make it within 10 years "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world." It was unanimously adopted without debate in January 2004 by the Prodi Commission, whose members include the French commissioners Pascal Lamy and Michel Barnier, the current minister for foreign affairs.

By introducing the principle that a service provider in any

country of the European Union would be subject to the legal and social standards in its country of origin, this directive opens the door to the leveling down of social conditions across the continent. Two years ago, for example, Chantiers de l'Atlantique (Atlantic shipbuilders) in the western port city of Saint-Nazaire, part of the giant French Alstom group, was heavily affected by a strike of Romanian and Indian workers. They were protesting against conditions imposed on them by the subcontractors who were selling their labour to Chantiers.

Chirac suddenly discovered the "outrageous" nature of this directive and adopted the attitude of defender of the public service and the living standards of French workers. Far from being ridiculed by the media, this posture was generally accepted as being of good faith. Everyone pretended not to know that by shouting from the rooftops that the Bolkestein directive had nothing to do with the European constitution—whereas it reveals its very nature—the president is desperately trying to rein in the strong feeling against the constitution recorded at the beginning of the week.

Meeting in Brussels this week, the 25 countries of the European Union seemed to want to nudge along the French political elite, which is clearly in difficulty as the referendum approaches. But they limited themselves to a joint declaration that in no way questions the directive but promises "modifications to take into account our concern to maintain the European social model."

The direction these modifications will take, the details of which will be discussed only in the fall, long after the French referendum, was indicated by the remarks of Jean-Claude Juncker, prime minister of Luxembourg and current president of the EU. "If the [Bolkestein] directive was withdrawn," he explained, "we would be giving the impression that the opening up of the services market had disappeared from the European agenda."

This political theater will doubtless please the new French commissioner, Jacques Barrot, who had said, "It will be better to avoid having discussions that are too adversarial during the referendum campaign, as they could trigger an explosion." But it is doubtful that that will be enough to calm the social discontent or reduce the feeling of popular alienation towards the official policy—including the European constitution itself.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**