

Vote “no” in French referendum on European constitution

For the United Socialist States of Europe

WSWS Editorial Board
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On May 29, voters in France will go to the polls to accept or reject the constitution of the European Union. The editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* is decisively opposed to the constitution. We call for a “no” vote on May 29.

Comprising 500 pages, 448 articles and 36 supplementary protocols, the proposed European constitution was signed at a ceremony in Rome on October 29, 2004 by the heads of state and government leaders of the European Union. It must be ratified by all 25 member countries.

In 10 countries, this is to be done by means of a popular vote; in the other 15, the national parliaments will decide. To date, the constitution has been accepted only in Spain, where a popular referendum registered a clear majority, but with a low level of voter participation.

Rejection of the constitution in France, a key member of the European Union, would deliver a mortal blow in the long term to the constitution project. The functioning of the European Union would continue to be based on the agreement reached in Nice in 2002, which, due to the extensive veto rights of individual members, would make a uniform policy for the European Union in the fields of foreign, security and economic affairs virtually impossible.

The editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* rejects the constitution on the basis of fundamental, rather than merely tactical, considerations. Whoever votes “yes” is not voting “for Europe,” as the proponents of the constitution state. Such a vote legitimises the bourgeois state, capitalist private property, militarism and imperialist foreign policy. It legitimises a Europe in which the elementary interests of the population are subordinated to the profit interests of the major corporations and banks.

Among the basic principles laid down in the constitution are “an internal market where competition is free and undistorted” and “a highly competitive social market economy.” This makes the domination of the interests of big business over all aspects of social life a constitutional principle.

Such a stipulation is historically unprecedented. The great bourgeois constitutions in modern history—the American Constitution of 1787 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789—do not defend capitalist market relations, but rather “the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man.” They defend the social and democratic rights of the individual citizen, not the power or free movement of capital.

The text of the EU document resembles more the statutes of a “Europe Inc.” than a democratic constitution. By raising the market and competition to the status of constitutional axioms, it in effect declares that any fundamental social struggle is unconstitutional.

Even from the standpoint of elementary bourgeois democratic principles, the constitution is a travesty. Legal principles such as the separation of powers, the responsibilities of government, and popular

sovereignty are ignored.

The Council of Ministers, consisting of the governments of the member states, is legislative body and executive in one. Alongside it is a second executive body in the form of the European Union Commission, which leads a largely uncontrolled and independent existence and has extensive powers and latitude for political intervention.

The European Parliament—the only elected institution of the European Union—lacks the right to either select the executive or enact laws. With only limited authority and restricted veto powers, it recalls the spineless parliaments maintained in the nineteenth century by European princes.

Compared to the 200-year-old American Constitution, the EU document reads like a relic of the dim and distant past. The constitution includes an (extremely modest) catalogue of fundamental rights, but these cannot be contested before the European Union Court of Justice and exist only on paper.

The very fact that this document is presented to the French people with an official recommendation to vote in favour is a measure of the erosion of democratic consciousness within the political elite. France was the home of some of the most outstanding democratic and socialist thinkers and activists in human history—Condorcet, Danton and Robespierre, Proudhon, Louis Blanc and Jaurès. What would they have said about a document that places selfish commerce above human dignity?

France looks back on a history that, more than any other country, has been shaped by great revolutions—1789, 1848, 1871. It introduced the term “socialism” into the vocabulary of the world. And now, in the name of socialism, François Hollande and Lionel Jospin peddle this miserable text! What a testimony to the decline of perspectives and ideas! They have prostrated themselves before the power of capital and broken from any conception of democracy, socialism or progressive reform.

Over the past few weeks, the French people have been subjected to an unrelenting campaign in support of the constitution. Public and private media outlets, as well as public tax monies, have been employed to this end.

The government has produced millions of copies of the constitution, and glossy brochures agitating for a “yes” vote have been distributed to every household. News announcers have abandoned all semblance of objectivity and repeatedly warned that a rejection of the constitution would be a “dreadful mistake.” The partiality of the media has been so blatant that the broadcasting authority has reprimanded radio and television channels for their failure to give equal time to those arguing against acceptance of the constitution, as required by law.

Attempts to pressure voters to accept the constitution have not been limited to France. The constitution is to be ratified by the German upper house of parliament just two days before the French referendum. The date was chosen in order to give a final impetus to the “yes” campaign in

France.

German Chancellor Schröder and Spain's Prime Minister Zapatero have repeatedly made appearances in France to argue for the constitution. German Social Democrats and members of the Green Party have travelled across France on behalf of a "yes" vote. Well-known artistic figures and intellectuals such as the writer Günter Grass and the philosopher Jürgen Habermas have also called for support for the constitution.

Despite this barrage of propaganda, the people sense that the referendum is directed against their interests. Since the referendum was announced by President Jacques Chirac last year, support for the proposed constitution has plummeted from two thirds in favour to something between 40 and 50 percent. The main factor in the change in mood is fear of the effects of the economic liberalism embodied in the constitution and widespread opposition to the social policies of Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The result of the ballot on Sunday remains in doubt.

The arguments of the "yes" camp

Supporters of the constitution—Chirac, his ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), the majority of the Socialist Party, the "free market" liberal UDF (Union for the French Democracy) and the Greens—speak openly in favour of a European imperialism. They support the constitution with the argument that it will enable France and Europe to counter American imperialism economically, politically and militarily.

Schröder and Chirac describe the constitution as an "important step" to "maintain Europe's influence on the international stage." Pierre Moscovici of the Socialist Party has warned that failure of the constitution would result in the paralysis and division of Europe and be a welcome gift to the American government. French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier has declared that the referendum will decide whether the French people want a "European Europe" or a "Europe under American influence."

This anti-American orientation is linked to the claim that the building of a "strong Europe" will facilitate the defence of the "social market economy" and the "French and European social model" against "Anglo-American liberalism." UDF leader François Bayrou declared that acceptance of the constitution would offer protection against "American individualist liberalism and the totalitarian ultra-liberalism of China."

The Belgian Socialist Party leader Elio Di Rupo warned that rejection would transfer the European "model of economic prosperity, social protection and cultural variety into the hands of Great Britain, which could implement its ultra-liberal views." The social interests of the working class are thereby subordinated and made dependent on the needs of French and European imperialism "to maintain Europe's influence on the international stage."

With the same kind of logic—that the defence of one's own country is the prerequisite for building socialism—the European Social Democrats sent millions of workers to a senseless death on the battlegrounds of the First World War.

A further argument used by supporters of the constitution is the claim that it offers protection against the danger of a return to war and fascism. In a speech to the German parliament, Schröder declared that what was at stake was a truly historical question: the idea of a Europe united in response to the horrors of fascism.

Just the opposite is the case. The entire constitution project is the response of the major European powers to the growing tensions between Europe and the United States, as well as other powers such as Russia and China—differences that clearly surfaced during the Iraq war. Europe is to be built up into a great power able to stand up to the unilateralism of the US by means of a common foreign policy and its own independent

military forces. The inevitable result of such a process will be intensified conflicts and military engagements in the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and other regions of strategic importance that possess vital raw materials. The price for this drive towards militarism will, as always, be paid by the working class.

Moreover, European capitalism cannot compete with its US rival without introducing "American conditions" across the continent. This is the basic task of the constitution, which aims to sweep aside all barriers that still inhibit the free circulation of capital and unrestrained exploitation of the working class. Should the constitution be accepted, it would serve to accelerate the destruction of past social gains that has been in progress for the past two decades—by Social Democratic no less than conservative governments. From the standpoint of international capital, European wages, social conditions and taxes remain far too high.

At least one member of the "yes" camp speaks frankly in this respect. The head of the governing UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, has ridiculed the campaign against ultra-liberalism and declared that he is supporting the constitution because it would assist the imposition of neo-liberal measures in France. He told the newspaper *Le Monde*, "I am a European because Europe is an excellent lever to implement reforms in France."

The arguments of the "no" camp

A number of groups opposing the constitution openly share the imperialist aims of its supporters. They also favour a strong France in a strong Europe. In their view, however, the constitution represents an obstacle to this end.

The extreme right regard Europe as a threat to the French nation. Their campaign is characterised by unvarnished chauvinism. At the heart of their agitation against the constitution is a racist offensive against Muslims, in general, and Turkey's bid to join the EU, in particular.

The left opposition to the constitution—a broad alliance stretching from a minority faction of the Socialist Party to the sovereignists, led by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the anti-globalisation movement Attac, the Communist Party and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR)—places the emphasis in its campaign on the neo-liberal character of the proposed constitution. But these groups also argue for rejection on the basis that the constitution provides too much room for US influence over Europe.

The most prominent spokesman for the "no" camp inside the Socialist Party, Laurent Fabius, warns of an "impotent Europe" and a "weakened France" should the constitution come into effect. He argues that Europe would be tied down by the defence policies of a US-dominated NATO, veto rights would be awarded to all EU member countries with regard to foreign policy decisions, and Germany would have greater voting weight in the new EU than France. The newspaper of the French Communist Party, *L'Humanité*, went so far as to warn that the US could sabotage European rearmament should the constitution come into force.

The conception that the "French social model" can be defended against "neo-liberalism" within the framework of the French nation state is just as illusory as Chirac's absurd claim that it can be done within the framework of the European constitution. The globalisation of production and financial markets has removed the basis for any sort of social reformist policy—within France or Europe as a whole. No nation state can withstand the pressure of global markets.

This is demonstrated by the rightward trajectory of all social democratic parties and trade unions, including those that continue to talk about social justice. In those countries where they recently held or presently hold government power—such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in

Germany, the Socialist Party under Lionel Jospin in France, or, in its most extreme form, the Labour Party in Britain—social democrats have continued and even escalated the offensive against social conditions and democratic rights launched by conservative governments.

The trade unions have long since ceased to defend the gains of their members, and instead systematically work to sabotage resistance to redundancies and attacks on wages and social conditions. If and when they organise protests, they do so for the purpose of letting off steam and insuring that working class resistance does not get out of hand. In France, the CFDT union is currently campaigning together with the European Trade Union organisation for a “yes” vote in the referendum. CGT General Secretary Bernard Thibault has also spoken out in favour of the constitution, in opposition to the standpoint of the majority of his organisation’s members.

An independent perspective for the working class

The working class cannot support either of these opposed camps, or it will be reduced to a pawn in the hands of one or another faction of the bourgeoisie. It requires its own independent perspective. It must decisively reject the reactionary constitution, but that does not mean support for the bourgeois “no” lobby, which pursues aims no less reactionary than those of the “yes”-vote advocates.

Its perspective—the maintenance of the European Union on the basis of the Nice agreement, the development of a core Europe dominated by France and Germany, or the drifting apart of Europe into rival nation states—contains just as many dangers as the perspective animating those who support the constitution: growing nationalism, the closing of borders, economic decline, and the renewed risk of war on the European continent.

Even the most elementary rights and gains of the working class can be defended today only within the framework of a socialist programme that challenges capitalist property relations. Such a socialist programme can be realised, moreover, only on an international basis. It requires the unification of the working class across all national, ethnic and cultural divides. The only alternative to the European Union and its constitution that genuinely embodies the interests of the working class is the United Socialist States of Europe.

Only on this basis is it possible to overcome the division of the continent into rival nation states and further develop Europe’s enormous wealth and productive power for the benefit of society as a whole. A united socialist Europe would enable the working class—the social force whose interests are objectively opposed to imperialism—to challenge US imperialism. It would encourage American workers to take up their own fight against the warmongers in the White House. And it would provide an enormous source of inspiration for oppressed masses all over the world to challenge imperialism and take on the oppressors within their own countries.

The realisation of this perspective requires the working class to break with all those parties that tie it to the bourgeois order, and organise itself independently in an international socialist party. The primary political role of those parties in France generally referred to as the “extreme left” is to prevent such a development.

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire is an integral part of the bourgeois “no” lobby, for which it seeks to provide a left cover. Speakers for the organisation appear regularly at anti-constitution rallies alongside members of the Socialist and Communist parties, the Attac organisation and the sovereignists. The fact that they are united in an official campaign with hardened nationalists is the supreme expression of their hostility to the independent political activity of the working class.

The LCR does not use the same nationalist rhetoric as the Stalinists of

the Communist Party or the social democrats of the Socialist Party, and they even call for a “Workers’ Europe,” but this only provides a fig leaf for the social chauvinists. The LCR refrains from any polemics against its campaign partners and seeks instead to conceal the irreconcilable differences between the politics of the bourgeois opponents of the constitution and a socialist programme that articulates the interest of the working class.

Irrespective of its name, the politics of the LCR are neither communist nor revolutionary. It calls for a “social and democratic Europe,” not a socialist Europe. It opposes “neo-liberalism,” not capitalism. This is not just a question of terminology, but one of perspective.

The LCR denounces the worse excesses of the capitalist profit system, but does not challenge the system as such. It encourages the illusion that capitalism can be reformed in the interests of the working class and seeks to rehabilitate social democrats and Stalinists who have been thoroughly discredited by years of government activity. They are prepared to take up government responsibility as part of the capitalist state themselves—as demonstrated by their sister organisation in Brazil.

While the LCR seeks actively to channel widespread opposition to the government and the European Union behind bourgeois parties, Lutte Ouvrière (LO) does the same—but in a passive manner. It urges workers to keep out of politics, concentrate on protests and strikes, and leave the political initiative to others.

Thus, in an editorial published March 18, LO leader Arlette Laguiller wrote: “During and after the demonstrations of March 10, it was said that one should transform their success into a success for a ‘no’ vote in the referendum. Whoever says this betrays the interests of the workers. Growing dissatisfaction must not be diverted in the direction of the ballot box.... In the factories and on the streets we are strong.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was founded in 1953 to defend the perspective and programme of the Fourth International, the party of world socialism established by Leon Trotsky, against the political revisions of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, whose heir is today’s LCR. The international publication of the ICFI, the *World Socialist Web Site*, is aimed at theoretically and politically preparing the development of an international mass socialist party. On a daily basis, it analyses the most important political events and provides a socialist orientation and perspective.

We call upon all those in France who genuinely want to fight for an international socialist perspective to follow and support the *World Socialist Web Site* and participate in the struggle of the International Committee of the Fourth International to build a revolutionary socialist movement of the European and international working class.



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