

The French referendum: Sarkozy leads turn to right in ruling party

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Nicolas Sarkozy—French president Jacques Chirac’s rival for leadership of the ruling conservative party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), and for candidacy for the 2007 presidential elections—has come out openly against his president’s approach in the campaign in favour of the European constitution in the referendum to be held on May 29.

This is his second major challenge to Chirac’s political outlook: a UMP national council in late 2004 supported Sarkozy against Chirac over Turkish entry into the European Union: a 90.8 percent majority voted to oppose Turkish membership.

In a sharp shift to the right, the ex-minister of the interior and treasury minister before taking the chairmanship of the UMP, savagely attacked Chirac’s refusal to make an uninhibited defence of the free market the centrepiece of the referendum campaign. Speaking on April 13 at a meeting in Montpellier for the “yes” vote in the referendum, using language reminiscent of the far right, Sarkozy likened the president and his supporters to sheep afflicted with scrapy, the sheep version of Mad Cow Disease.

An article in *Le Figaro* (7 May) gives a roundup of UMP figures who object to Chirac’s defence of the proposed constitution because it will maintain “the French social model”:

“Whether close to Sarkozy or not, a significant number of deputies campaigning for the ‘yes’ vote are openly distancing themselves from Jacques Chirac’s diatribes against economic liberalism. During his April 14 TV debate, he had been pleased to note that the constitution complies with ‘a non-liberal logic.’ This argument, supposed to reassure those French people inclined towards the ‘no’ [largely working class and left voters], is relayed by senior ministers. ‘This treaty is anything but liberal,’ affirmed Jean-Louis Borloo, minister of employment, labour and social cohesion. Jean-François Copé, budget minister and government spokesman, reinforced the point: ‘This constitution bears within it the French social model’.”

Sarkozy, on May 6, accused the Chirac camp of fear and trepidation about supporting the free market and consequently of dismantling France’s welfare state. He abandoned the language of polite public debate. The article reports: “In his campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy is careful to clearly disassociate

himself from the Chirac line: ‘Our social model means twice as many unemployed as the others. Fortunately, being ridiculous is not a fatal condition. I don’t think that what is threatening France is an excess of the free market. I don’t subscribe to this fit of the ‘sheep-shakes’ about ultraliberal economics ... liberal economics is an ideology which never killed anyone in the world’.”

The senior UMP deputy for Paris, Pierre Lellouche, chairman of the parliamentary military committee and a strong supporter of a militarily strong Europe that can compete with the US, urged support for the constitution: “France has everything to gain from it. The modernisation of the French economy has been imposed by Brussels. Europe is the spur for reform.... Our country has a tendency to oppose change and only pressure from without forces it to shift.”

The UMP deputy from Drôme, Hervé Mariton, also reproves the Chirac camp for not openly defending the free market: “The free market reforms coming from Europe have never been properly endorsed by the right for fear of incurring displeasure.”

The extreme free-marketeer of French politics, Alain Madelin, previously somewhat marginalized, now finds himself on the same wavelength as the chairman of the UMP. He castigates Chirac for adopting “the most left of rhetoric on globalisation when he should be raising consciousness about modern economic liberalism and the required changes.”

A *Le Figaro* journalist summed up the situation thus: “There is the Chirac ‘yes’ based on the exaltation of the ‘French social model’ and the Sarkozy ‘yes,’ which sees Europe as a lever to reform France.”

This provocative hardening of the right wing against the aspirations of the working class that surrounds the referendum campaign was given voice by François Fillon. It was Fillon who, as civil service minister in 2003, imposed the draconian reduction of pension rights in the teeth of mass opposition and who is now imposing unpopular changes in the education system against widespread and determined resistance from the school students. “Rather than a phoney social dialogue with the minorities who are trying to get back in the streets what they lost in the ballot box, we need determined politicians,” he declared. “When the going starts to get rough, you have to

tighten your seat belt and press on.”

The eruption of this conflict between Chirac and Sarkozy within the UMP is redolent of Margaret Thatcher’s break with Edward Heath and the “one nation” Tories as she prepared to wage open war with the working class. She despised consensual Tories as “wets”—perhaps not quite such a brutal image as Sarkozy’s scrapy-infected sheep, but every bit as contemptuous.

This significant political shift, which rips the social Gaullist mask from the UMP, has not been made much of in the media nor received an open riposte from Chirac or his entourage. Only the right-wing *Le Figaro* has reported it, commenting in its May 13 editorial: “>From now on, things are clear. Behind the conflict of individuals two conflicting models are apparent. The logic of change versus the imperative of consensus. Liberal economics versus Gaullism. Sarkozy versus Chirac or Villepin [Dominique de Villepin, minister of the interior]. Between these two models, says Sarkozy, ‘the French people want to see the contest.’ From the point of view of electoral effectiveness, the matter is debatable. But no one will deny that the debate, which has occupied the French right for years, will one day have to be finally decided.”

An open crisis in the UMP may have been narrowly avoided. At a campaign meeting, on May 17 in Chirac’s Corrèze stronghold, it appeared that some urgent fence mending had been carried out.

Le Figaro reports: “In Brive, in a speech to an audience of close to 1,000 people, the UMP chairman evoked his personal relations with Jacques Chirac since they had first met in 1975, without skating over the moments of tension over the past three and a half years. But over this period, ‘there has been one person who has held her hand out to me, who has respected me, who has listened to me, it was you, Madam,’ he said, looking at Bernadette Chirac [the president’s wife]. ‘And if things have never got to an irremediable situation, it is because there was a good fairy who kept watch so that things did not go beyond the limits of freedom and respect.’”

He went on to present himself as the “guarantor” of the “continuity” of his political family: “I am perfectly aware that this political family would not exist if Jacques Chirac had not won the 2002 presidential election.” An unaccustomed tribute to the head of state.

Evidently, the pressures of the global market are making it increasingly difficult for the political representatives of French big business to cover up their aim to strip the working class of its social rights in order to compete on the world market. Virtually every political tendency in France—whether calling for a “yes” or a “no” vote in the referendum, from Chirac to the radical left *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* and *Lutte Ouvrière*—is peddling the lie that it is possible to maintain capitalist property relations in a globalised world and also maintain social services and living standards. They call it “the social market economy” and say that neo-liberalism is

something different that can be rejected within capitalism while leaving the system intact.

Sarkozy, representing important sections of French big business—his brother Guillaume is at present in contention for the leadership of the main large employers’ association, the MEDEF (Movement of French Enterprises)—appears to be impatient to declare that the myth of the social market and consensus politics is no longer viable and that the brute imposition of measures impoverishing the working class is the order of the day. Despite the patch-up in the UMP, his exposure of the demagoguery of the claims for the social market economy is a service and a warning to the working class.

Indeed, the increasing turn to racism to divert the attention of the working class—and to divide it—is very much on the agenda. The proclamation of absolute hostility to Turkish membership of the EU is common to the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, the ultra-nationalist Catholic Philippe de Villiers, the former Socialist prime minister and leading campaigner for the “no” vote Laurent Fabius, as well as Sarkozy. A coded Islamophobic message is clearly being sent out. The opponents of Turkish entry barely attempt to argue their case—it is enough that they are Turks.

Right on cue, Dominique de Villepin, as his contribution to the “yes” in the referendum debate, has announced a high-profile crackdown on illegal immigrants with legislation which will make it much harder to gain legal immigrant status.

The WSWS calls for a “no” vote in the referendum, but on the basis of a rejection of a capitalist Europe and the construction from below of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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