French referendum on European constitution: the official debate

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The past few weeks in France have witnessed an intensive debate leading up to the May 29 referendum on the European Union constitution. But the debate has been exclusively restricted to the sphere of official bourgeois politics. There is not a trace of an independent perspective which would permit the mass of the population to articulate and realize its own demands and interests.

Such a perspective, based on the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe, has been advanced only by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International. (See: "Vote 'no' in French referendum on European Constitution")

The "yes" camp is headed by the leaders of the political establishment: President Jacques Chirac and his supporters in the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), and the "free market" liberal Union for the French Democracy (UDF), which also belongs to the government camp, on the one side, and the leadership of the Socialist Party under François Hollande on the other. Also prominent in the official "yes" camp is the Green Party.

The Socialist Party, which under President Francois Mitterrand and European Union Commission President Jacques Delors was regarded as the most prominent French pro-Europe party, is deeply split over the referendum. Former prime minister Laurent Fabius, a right-winger in the party establishment, as well as deputies Henri Emmanuelli and Jean Luc Mélenchon, who are both regarded as belonging to the left of the party, are campaigning for a "no" vote. In an internal party vote over the issue at the end of last year, 40 percent of the membership voted against the constitution.

There are also substantial tensions in the government camp. Apart from a small group of dissidents, the UMP is opting for a "yes" vote, but the party's two most important representatives, President Chirac and party chief Nicolas Sarkozy, justify their respective campaigns for a "yes" vote on the basis of widely divergent and even opposed arguments.

As for the "no" camp, one wing consists of the extreme right. It describes the European Union as a threat to the French nation and wages a racist, anti-Islamic campaign against the admission of Turkey into the EU.

The other wing consists of a broad left grouping, ranging from the minority wing of the Socialist Party to the sovereignists led by Jean Pierre Chevènement, to the opponents of globalization in Attac, to the Communist Party and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR).

When Chirac announced a referendum on the European constitution last July 14, the French national holiday, he never contemplated the possibility of rejection. Public opinion polls at the time reported a two-thirds majority in favor of the constitution. With the referendum, Chirac sought to boost his popularity following painful defeats for the government camp in European and regional elections.

Since then, however, the mood has changed. Some weeks ago polls were recording up to 60 per cent for a "no" vote, and the result of the ballot remains in doubt as polling day approaches. This change in mood is first and foremost an expression of popular fears about the effects of the "free market" economic policies embodied in the constitution, and widespread opposition to the social policies of Chirac and his prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

The proponents of the constitution appeal openly to French chauvinism rather than to any broad European ideal. The fate of other European peoples does not play a role in their campaign. Their core argument is that only within the context of the European Union will it be possible to keep France strong and capable of holding its ground in the face of the challenge from America.

French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, a trusted friend of Chirac, declared that the referendum was the means by which the French people would decide whether they wanted a "European Europe" or a "Europe under American influence." Should the constitution be rejected, he argued, France would suffer a decline in its international influence.

UDF boss François Bayrou expressed himself even more clearly. When asked in an interview to give reasons for voting "yes," he answered: "We need a united and strong Europe against the US, China and developing powers. Look at the enormous pressure from China. Look at American supremacy. Without Europe, without a constitution, we find ourselves in a position of submission."

The Socialist Party advocates of a "yes" vote argue along similar lines. In an article in the magazine *Politique Internationale*, Pierre Moscovici, European minister in the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin, wrote that an expanded Europe "will amplify the influence of France." He warned: "Since the United States has awarded George Bush an incontestable leadership role which, in his domestic and foreign policy, rests on a deeply reactionary basis, any weakening of Europe or rejection of the constitution would be absurd ...suicidal. Europe in crisis, paralyzed and divided, would be an unexpected—better, hoped-for—gift to an American government that already recognizes no limits to its power."

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Chirac expressed essentially the same position when they issued a joint statement at the end of April. The ratification of the European constitution is "an important step" in maintaining "Europe's influence on the international stage," they declared.

With regard to popular fears of the economic and social consequences of the constitution, proponents argue that only a strong European Union can shield the European social model against the impact of globalization. This is the classical argument of social chauvinism.

The social interests of the working class are to be subordinated and made dependent on the need of French and European imperialism to "maintain Europe's influence on the international stage." With the same logic—the defense of one's own country as the prerequisite for socialism—the Social Democrats of the various European powers sent millions of workers to a senseless death on the battlegrounds in the First World War.

The arguments of most of the prominent opponents of the constitution hardly differ from those of the "yes" camp. They also advocate a strong France within a strong Europe. However, they reject the constitution

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because, in their opinion, it cedes to the United States too great an influence on European politics. They argue as well that France cannot simultaneously face up to the US and conduct a war against its own working class.

On this basis, they are calling for a revised constitution, whose "free market" liberal economic bias and anti-social character would be less obvious. They in no way challenge the capitalist and imperialist character of the European Union itself.

On his web site, Laurent Fabius posts "Six Reasons for Voting No." The first three are openly chauvinist: the constitution would result in an "impotent Europe," a "weakened France," and "blocked institutions."

As evidence of the impotence of Europe, he cites the subordination of its defence policy to a US-dominated NATO and the EU requirement for unanimity in foreign policy decisions. He then argues that France will be weakened if, under the terms of the constitution, it loses voting parity with Germany, and he denounces the fact that, after 2014, France will no longer be automatically entitled to appoint an EU commissioner. He asserts further that the expansion of the EU will lessen the relative weight of France.

The fact that the constitution can be amended only by unanimous vote, he continues, will lead to "blocked institutions," and make the formation of a "European avant-garde" impossible.

His remaining three reasons for a "no" vote are directed against the constitution's "free market" liberal economic thrust and the absence of a policy of social reconciliation. This is pure demagogy on the part of Fabius, who played an important role in implementing the very policy he is now criticizing. From 1984 to 1986, Fabius carried out a strict austerity policy as Mitterrand's prime minister. In the 1990s, he supported the EU treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice, the precursors to the current constitution.

While opposing the proposed constitution, Fabius declares his explicit support for the European Union, for a Europe "capable of acting," and for a strengthening of the Franco-German axis. "The Franco-German partnership is absolutely crucial," he said in an interview with France inter. "For my part," he added, "I favour moving toward a common Franco-German defence, and that we unite our forces in the IMF and the World Bank and jointly help the developing countries."

In an article in *l'Humanité*, he justified supporting European monetary union with the argument that the euro serves as an "instrument of stability and power within a global framework." He continued: "The common currency should make it possible for the European Union, and by implication France, to equalize the monetary balance of power with the US."

Fabius advocates renegotiation of the constitution—something, he stresses, that was expressly intended in the event that the document was rejected by several countries. If France were to reject the constitution, this would increase its influence in any renegotiation process, he argues.

That this would ever take place is highly doubtful—something Fabius knows only too well. The logic of his position is that it is better to have no constitution than one which limits French power and in which decisions are taken by a majority influenced by Washington.

The majority, pro-constitution wing of the Socialist Party regard Fabius' position as highly risky. Jospin, who following his defeat in the 2002 presidential elections withdrew from politics altogether, has broken his silence to publicly oppose Fabius. "If one wants Europe, then one must say 'yes' to Europe; one should not say 'no' to Europe," he said in his first television appearance in three years.

The French Communist Party (PCF), which never had any scruples about indulging in unrestrained French nationalism, has finessed Fabius' arguments even further. The PCF presents France as the "voice of the people," a champion in the fight against economic neo-liberalism and a defender of "social Europe." On this basis, the Stalinist organisation supports greater power and influence for France.

"A French rejection of the constitution would strengthen France's position and ensure a hearing for those who urge that European construction take another direction"—is how the party organ *l'Humanité* argues for a "no" vote. The newspaper seeks to reassure those inclined to vote "yes" by arguing that if the constitution were rejected, Europe could still continue on the basis of the 2002 Nice treaty, "with France at its heart" and "its voice and standpoint" commanding greater respect.

Again and again, *l'Humanité* continues, we have seen how "France gains prestige and influence when it finds the courage to articulate the voice of the people in the concert of international institutions." As an example, it cites Chirac's opposition to the Iraq war in the United Nations and French insistence that the Bolkestein directive be revised in the European Commission.

The PCF organ goes so far as to criticize the constitution because it enables the US, via NATO, to torpedo European military rearmament: "Every military programme that displeases the US government could be frozen immediately by those EU states whose defence is presently ensured by Washington through NATO. Certain EU countries, like Britain, are already blocking the military development of Galileo, Europe's satellite-based positioning system, which threatens the monopoly of the Global Positioning System (GPS) entirely controlled by the US."

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) is an integral component of the bourgeois "no" camp, providing a left fig leaf for its nationalist politics. Their speakers regularly appear alongside representatives of the Socialist Party and Communist Party, Attac and the "sovereignists" at joint meetings against the constitution. While they do not employ the nationalistic rhetoric of the Stalinists and social democrats, and advocate a "Workers' Europe," their essential political function is to obscure the social chauvinism of their allies in the "no" camp. The LCR refrains from any polemics against them, and endeavours to gloss over the irreconcilable contradictions between the politics of the bourgeois camp opposing the constitution and a socialist programme in the interest of the working class.

While representatives of both the "yes" and "no" camps present the French state as the guarantor and defender of the "French social model" against "ultra-liberalism," Nicolas Sarkozy, the chairman of the UMP and Chirac's fiercest rival, maintains the opposite point of view within the party. *Le Figaro* summarized the differences between Chirac and Sarkozy with the words: "There is the 'yes' of Chirac, supported by praise of the 'French social model,' and the 'yes' of Sarkozy, which regards Europe as a lever to reform France."

Sarkozy justifies his support for the constitution precisely on the grounds that it will facilitate the reform of France's economy along neo-liberal lines. "I am a European, because Europe is an excellent lever to accomplish reforms in France," he said in an interview with *le Monde*. At a meeting in Montpellier, he scoffed at the campaign against neo-liberalism: "Our present social model means twice as many unemployed persons as the others. Fortunately, absurdity is not lethal. I do not believe that France is threatened with being overwhelmed by liberalism. I do not share this tremor before ultra-liberalism."

Sarkozy has clearly come to the conclusion that the attacks on the working class deemed necessary by French business, under the pressure of global markets, can no longer be reconciled with rhetoric about the "French social model" and a "social Europe" that is still employed by Chirac and the other proponents of the constitution.

Sarkozy's call for a sort of French Thatcherism is bound up with a different foreign policy orientation. An analysis of the conflict between the two UMP protagonists that appeared recently in the German academic journal *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* noted: "In foreign policy, Sarkozy stands for a far stronger pro-Atlantic profile than Chirac.... He prefers rapprochement with the US and closer relations with

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Israel, where he conducted his first foreign visit in December as the newly elected party chairman."

On a European level, the journal continued, he is critical of the doctrine that cedes "priority to a Franco-German block and sets the tone within the EU, and sees partners in Britain's Tony Blair, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Spain's Jose Maria Aznar."

Sarkozy links his support for the European constitution with a clear rejection of Turkish membership in the EU. In an affront to Chirac, Sarkozy won the support of 90 percent of party officials for a resolution rejecting Turkish entry, clearing signalling opposition to the further expansion of the EU.

Sarkozy's foreign policy rapprochement with the US is accompanied by the same domestic policy orientation as the Bush administration. While Chirac continues to utilise the support of the trade unions and the official left parties to achieve his goals—in 2002, they called for a vote for him in the second round of the presidential elections and are now supporting the government campaign for the constitution—Sarkozy utilises law-and-order demagogy and religious prejudice in an attempt to establish a social basis for his right-wing politics. As interior minister from 2002 to 2004, he fed the media with spectacular police actions and the mass deportation of immigrants. A devout Catholic, he established the Representative Council of French Muslims (CMCF) with the aim of integrating conservative Islamic forces into the state.

The fierce dispute over the European constitution expresses a deep crisis in French foreign policy.

Between 1870 (when Germany defeated France at Sedan) and 1945 (when the Third Reich collapsed), French foreign policy was dominated by the conflict with its German neighbour. In the First World War, France was on the side of the victors, but the attempt to tether its German rival through the Treaty of Versailles completely failed. Two decades after the end of the war, a highly armed German Wehrmacht overran French defence positions in a *blitzkrieg*.

After the Second World War, France embarked upon another foreign policy strategy. Bled dry by the war, discredited by the collaboration of the Vichy regime with the Nazis, and driven to the verge of civil war by the futile attempt to preserve its colonial possessions in Indochina and Algeria, the French bourgeoisie set its hopes on European integration. France was one of the founding states of the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), the European Economic Community (1957), the European Community (1967) and the European Union (1992). It thereby pursued two aims: to integrate Germany into Europe in order to avoid reigniting Franco-German conflict, and to increase France's own political weight in the world.

This course proved successful because it was supported by the US financially and politically, and also coincided with Germany's interest. The US needed a stable Western Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union and a market for its own economy.

In the 1970s, when tensions arose between the US and an economically strengthened Europe, France placed even more store on European integration. While De Gaulle still conducted foreign policy in the name of the "grand nation," the policy of "Europe puissance"—a Europe strong and capable of acting—came to the fore.

The German magazine *Internationale Politik* commented recently: "To a large extent, French foreign policy can still be explained by its goals of preserving its own standing as well as its independence. Since at least the 1970s, France has been conscious that it can achieve these goals only with the help of European integration."

Europe was to be developed into a political and economic counterweight to the US in order to challenge America on an equal footing. Cooperation with Germany was intensified. A close relationship developed between the respective government heads, even though they nearly always came from differing political camps—between the "free market" liberal Giscard and the Social Democrat Schmidt (in the 1970s), the Socialist Mitterrand and the Christian Democrat Kohl (in the 1980s), and, finally, between the Gaullist Chirac and the Social Democrat Schröder.

However, the objective basis for this policy received a serious blow in 1990: the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, German reunification, and the end of the Soviet Union changed the balance of power in Europe. America no longer needed Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet superpower and felt less need to pay heed to European interests. With the fall of the Stalinist regimes, Germany, whose weight had increased considerably as compared to France, once more stood clearly at the heart of Europe.

After a brief and futile attempt to prevent German reunification, Mitterrand took the bull by the horns, driving forward the economic and political integration of Europe and the expansion of the EU into Eastern Europe. He pushed for Europe to become the largest internal market in the world, overtaking the US economically and speaking to the outside world with its own voice on foreign and defence policy. This course was supported by Germany.

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the establishment of the European Union, the introduction of a common currency, and the extension of the European Union from 15 to 25 members were primarily the product of the joint efforts of Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand.

The European constitution was to be the pinnacle of this process, consolidating economic integration and crowning it with political integration. But this has encountered increasingly daunting obstacles.

Instead of EU eastward expansion increasing the weight of Europe against the US, it has strengthened American influence within Europe. The weak and unstable regimes that emerged from the collapse of the Eastern Bloc looked to the US for military and political protection. Strongly anti-Russian, they regard Franco-German domination in the EU with distrust and fear the development of a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis. Although economically dependent upon the EU, as soon as tensions arise they side with the US politically.

Britain, which had faced the danger of being isolated in Europe, felt bolstered by its alliance with the US and was no longer inclined toward joining the monetary union or granting Brussels greater authority. The right-wing governments in Italy and Spain likewise oriented towards Washington.

The Iraq war finally brought the divisions in Europe to the surface. Since then, Germany and France have suffered repeated setbacks.

The present European constitution is only a poor version of the original draft, which granted Berlin and Paris far more weight and possibilities for forcing their will through majority decisions. Last summer, Chirac and Schröder were unable to gain acceptance for their candidate for the European Commission presidency, the Belgian Guy Verhofstadt, and had to accept the Portuguese José Manuel Barroso.

How to proceed? How can France maintain its status in a globalised world fracturing into power blocks? Should it hold onto the perspective of an expanding European Union, even if it is threatened with being relegated to a minority position? Should it work toward a "core Europe" capable of taking independent foreign policy initiatives—against the will of other EU states when necessary?

And what about Germany? Can it be trusted? What would happen if, following a change of government, Germany made overtures to Washington at the expense of France? Should France anticipate such a move by seeking its own accommodation to Washington? Bearing in mind the growth in influence of both China and India, is it even credible to contemplate a confrontation with the US?

These and similar questions confront the ruling class of France. They form the context of the conflicts over the French referendum—conflicts that will intensify should the constitution be rejected in Sunday's referendum.

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