

France: Likely Socialist Party presidential candidate wants unruly youth drafted into the military

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10 June 2006

On May 31, Ségolène Royal, former Socialist Party minister for the family, staked her claim as the hardline law-and-order candidate in the 2007 presidential elections. Royal gave a speech in Bondy in the north Paris suburbs, close to Monfermeil and Clichy-sous-Bois—the scene of two previous nights of anti-police rioting by youth.

She accused the present interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, of not being sufficiently tough. Criticising Sarkozy, she declared: “Today, we can see it, the flagrant bankruptcy of the law-and-order policy. It represents a failure for the main person in charge, who himself contributes to upheavals, disorder and inefficiency. Another, much firmer policy is required.”

Sarkozy is the chairman of the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People’s Party) and leading contender for the party’s nomination for the presidency. He has been responsible for legislation increasing police powers of repression and surveillance and has pursued aggressive and provocative policing methods on working class housing estates.

Royal’s statements, signifying the Socialist Party’s open abandonment of a social reform approach to the crisis facing youth in France’s urban ghettos in favour of a policy of repression, have been widely recognised as a significant shift to the right. The lip service that the Socialist Party has given to humanitarian principles is being dropped.

The seventeenth century moralist François duc de la Rochefoucauld observed: “Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue.” Even the traditional forms of hypocrisy are now being abandoned by wide sections of the official left within the political establishment.

Royal made her remarks in the context of a growing crisis of the Gaullist government. In the face of mass opposition, it was obliged in April to back down on the “New Jobs Contract” (CPE), a measure that would have given arbitrary powers of dismissal to employers of young workers. Since then, the approval ratings for President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin have hit record lows, and they have become entangled in multiple corruption scandals.

With her tough talk against immigrant and working class youth, Royal sent a clear signal to French and European ruling circles that their interests would be in safe hands under a Socialist Party administration with her at the top.

At the same time, her authoritarian stance, nominally directed against Sarkozy, has lent credibility to the reactionary policies associated with the right wing of the governing UMP. It is, moreover, an oblique attack on the mass movement of the university and high

school students against the CPE. One of their main demands was amnesty for all those who had been victims of police repression and had been sentenced by the courts, not only in their own movement but also among youth punished for their alleged involvement in anti-police riots that spread throughout France’s immigrant and working class suburbs last autumn.

Since last September, Royal has been promoted by the media as a leading candidate to become the Socialist Party standard bearer in the 2007 presidential elections. This suggests that powerful forces in the French political and business elite are behind her bid to sever the past association of the Socialist Party with social democratic reformism and place it squarely on a capitalist market footing, after the manner of British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s “New Labour.” Royal has repeatedly expressed admiration for Blair.

Reading from notes in a carefully prepared intervention, Royal said in her Bondy speech that it was necessary to “*remettre au carré les familles*,” i.e., make families “toe the line”—a phrase with a military connotation. She said that disruptive children may be “failing, but there is no room for commiseration.”

Calling for disciplinary actions against parents of unruly primary school children, she proposed “an obligatory system for parents to take courses in parenting, and to have ways of placing family welfare payments under administrative control, as happens now, but with the aim of educating parents for the purpose of social reintegration.”

In regard to secondary education, she suggested “the withdrawal of the eight to ten disruptive pupils who dominate and spoil the entire school.” They would be “automatically placed in *internats-relais* [educational boarding institutions] in the vicinity.”

Royal’s most draconian proposal was reserved for delinquent youth over 16, who, she declared, should be placed in the custody of the military. She demanded that from “the first act of delinquency” they be placed “automatically in a service supervised by the military.” She added: “For them it would represent a revival of obligatory military service, where they would learn citizenship.”

The national leadership of the Socialist Party, meeting on June 6, incorporated the substance of Royal’s proposals into the party’s draft programme for the 2007 elections, while excising her reference to the military. In this manner, the party has adopted an authoritarian posture.

The Gaullists and the far right immediately recognised this. Sarkozy commented: “Bravo, Madam Royal, you are on the right track.” Prime Minister de Villepin said: “I note that she is going the same way as we are.”

The UMP deputy for Saône-et-Loire remarked that “Madam Royal is in line,” adding that she was a true “officer’s daughter.” Georges Fenech, UMP deputy for Rhône, expressed his delight at Royal’s “break from bleeding-heart socialism [*angélisme*]” and urged “military centres on the Chicago boot camp model.”

Karl Lang, member of the European Parliament for the neo-fascist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, exclaimed: “The Lепенisation of people’s minds is progressing well beyond our hopes.”

When Royal came under attack from sections of the Socialist Party, who felt uncomfortable with so open an espousal of authoritarianism and criticised the military supervision proposal, she hit back vehemently. “The abolition of military service was a mistake, we must devise another,” she said. She challenged her critics to declare any contradiction between socialism and the men in uniform: “Who goes straight away to humanitarian catastrophes around the world? The military, the firemen, the gendarmes...that is, the uniformed professions.”

Other elements within the party supported Royal’s propositions. Julien Dray, official party spokesman and former member of the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), expressed his approval, as did the Socialist Party mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, and many others.

Manuel Valls, who supports the nomination of former prime minister Lionel Jospin as the Socialist Party candidate in the upcoming presidential elections, said: “Nothing shocks me in what I have heard and read of what she said—that is, priority for law and order, authority, abiding by the rules.” He added: “I don’t think she got out of line. I think that she made things clear and said what was expected in working class neighbourhoods.”

François Hollande, Royal’s common law husband and first secretary of the Socialist Party, declared: “If you want to address working class people, you have to speak to people who experience these difficulties, that is, unstable social and work situations [*précarité*] and law-and-order problems.” He later distanced himself from Royal’s recourse to the military.

François Chérèque, general secretary of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), told the media that Royal was “right to raise the issue” of the struggle against delinquency, even if her statements might “shock.” He added: “The left would be making a great mistake” if it did not take up these questions. “What shocks me is the fact that we can’t discuss them,” he said. He added that her call for military supervision was “a bit strong.”

The CFDT is France’s largest trade union body. It is close to the Socialist Party and played a leading role in the *Intersyndicale*, the grouping of 12 student and labour organisations that worked to stifle the mass movement against the CPE.

The media has responded to Royal’s remarks by praising her “courage.” Tributes to the “originality” of her ideas have abounded, even though she has merely recycled nostrums long considered the hobbyhorses of the far-right fringe of French politics.

Le Monde, generally considered the centre-left newspaper of the bourgeois intelligentsia, said in a June 3 editorial: “Madam Royal’s audacity is real. She could not care less about taboos, she speaks directly, and advances proposals of the kind to raise the hackles of most of her political friends. The language of repression grates on the ears of Socialists and the left in general.... Madam Royal has the merit of clearly giving notice that the right does not have the monopoly on law and order. This is what redounds to the credit of the SP’s putative candidate.”

On the same *Le* day, the conservative *Figaro* enthusiastically: “She dared to do it! Ségolène Royal dared to say that delinquency, together with unemployment, was the main cause of ‘social suffering.’ ” The editorial added that though the ideas were not new, “coming from where they do, this statement is an event: it represents a complete break with the bleeding-heart ‘rights-of-manism’ that, since the mid-80s, dominated the SP on the ruins of an exhausted Marxism.” The editorialist rejoiced that long-derided values were coming back into fashion: “authority, work, family, merit, nation.”

Royal, 53, was born in the then-French West African colony of Sénégal, the daughter of an artillery colonel. Her brother, also a military man, was involved in the sinking in New Zealand of the Greenpeace ship the *Rainbow Warrior* by French secret service agents in 1985. The ship had been involved in protests against the testing of nuclear weapons in the Pacific by the Socialist government of then-President François Mitterrand and Prime Minister Laurent Fabius.

She is a graduate of the ENA (National School of Administration, where most of France’s political and civil service élite are trained) and in 1982 became a technical advisor to Mitterrand. She has been, for more than 25 years, the partner of François Hollande, and has four children.

She was a junior minister in the Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) and is presently the president of the Poitou-Charente regional council, elected in the 2004 regional elections.

She represents a layer of technocrats and management personnel who gathered round Mitterrand. Nationalist, ferociously hostile to Marxism and any independent revolutionary perspective for the working class, this layer in the past associated itself with the defence of gay rights, minority rights and feminism, and presented itself as the defender of democratic principles against the rise of Le Pen’s National Front.

This is no longer the case. The sharp rightward shift of the forces represented by Royal are part of a more general abandonment of democratic principles within the political establishments of all capitalist countries, driven by a deepening global crisis. That crisis is taking a particularly acute form in France.



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