France: Socialist Party chooses a Blairite presidential candidate

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Ségolène Royal had been designated Socialist Party candidate for the 2007 presidential elections. The party's 218,771 paid-up members cast their vote in 4,000 transparent ballot boxes on November 16. Of these eligible voters, 68,049 were new members who had joined the Parti Socialiste (PS) via the Internet with cut-price dues of €20 in order to participate in the ballot.

Royal received 60.6 percent of the vote. The other two contenders were Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the finance minister in Lionel Jospin's Plural Left government (1997-2002), with 20.8 percent, and Laurent Fabius, prime minister under PS president François Mitterrand (1984-86), with 18.5 percent.

All three candidates were close associates of Mitterrand, president from 1981 to 1995. They worked with him to dispel the socialist aspirations of the French working class and to impose austerity policies in the interest of the French bourgeoisie. All three pledged and maintained unswerving allegiance to the right-wing Socialist Party programme elaborated in June this year.

The vote was the culmination of a six-week selection process involving six debates: three on national television and three before the party membership.

The debates were used by the Socialist Party and its presidential hopefuls to showcase their utility to French and European big business as defenders of their interests at home and abroad. The candidates vied with each other to demonstrate their capacity to quell the resistance of the working class and the youth in defence of their living standards and social and democratic rights.

From September 2005, Royal was being boosted by the media as the favourite SP presidential candidate. The round of debates was seen by the French establishment as a test of Royal's capacity to stand firm under fire and, hopefully, to prevent a replay of the 2002 presidential elections when the SP's candidate, Lionel Jospin, was beaten into third place by the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. This provoked a massive spontaneous reaction which threatened the institutions of the bourgeois Fifth Republic. She cleared this hurdle and retained the support of the political and media elite.

Prior to the debates, Royal had made it clear to the French ruling elites that she was capable of breaking out of the constraints of the Socialist Party's traditional rhetoric, which involves giving lip service to anti-militarism, the handling of crime as a social problem, the defence of workers' rights and egalitarian aspirations. In contrast to Jospin, who had, while pursuing pro-capitalist policies, attempted to distance himself from Tony Blair's extreme market-oriented policies, Royal professed her admiration for the British prime minister.

She called for delinquent youth to be taken in hand by the military, for the weakening of regulations which prevent school choice from being the preserve of the middle and upper classes (i.e., the right wing's demand for "freedom of choice"), and for doubling of the hours of attendance for teachers in *collèges* (catering for ages 11 to 15). She made the demagogic populist proposal that citizen juries, selected at random, should assess the performance of elected representatives.

Royal won the nomination not because she put forward a popular programme, but because she was systematically built up by the media as the candidate most likely to beat the contender of the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement). As the paper *Libération* commented, the issue was not to chose "the candidate most suited to represent the party at the presidential elections" but "the candidate most able to beat the right." It was a question of "*voter utile*"—a vote for what would be most useful to gain power. This is cryptic language for choosing the candidate best capable of attracting the support of the bourgeois media and political establishment.

The two outvoted candidates immediately confirmed that they would rally to the winner. Despite the fact that Fabius had been a leading opponent of the party's support for the European constitution and had adopted a mildly reformist posture against the openly pro-business positions of his opponents, his spokesman Claude Bartelone declared, "The only thing that counts now is that the Socialists should unite under the best possible conditions, and right now get to preparing the posters and paste."

Fabius supporter SP deputy Jean-Luc Mélenchon, however, expressed fear of the complete isolation of the SP from the working class with such an openly right-wing candidate. He articulated the need for a "left" alternative credible enough to head off working class struggles. "I am very disappointed, I am perplexed," he said. "I didn't think the SP would take that sort of line.... I'm wondering what I'm going to do. The responsibility of the anti-liberal [anti-free market] collectives is greater than ever."

By "anti-liberal collectives" he was referring to the committees set up during the movement against the European constitution. "They must manage to select a common candidate so that there can be a real left dynamic," he added. The statement appears somewhat disingenuous since the positions of all three candidates have been extremely right-wing.

Similarly, the Communist Party (PCF) is fearful that its right-wing policies will be even more openly exposed when it enters into the inevitable electoral alliances with the SP in the legislative elections immediately after the presidential ballot. The PCF paper, *l'Humanité*, complained, "And the three of them have been more or less adapting to the political and ideological shift to the right. What, for example, is this concession to 'law and order' if not to sound the retreat and abandon ground to the right-wing adversary?"

While Ségolène Royal was no doubt the most right-wing of the three candidates, the differences between them were minimal and not of a principled character.

The class nature of these defenders of French and world imperialism came out most clearly, perhaps, in the public TV debate on foreign policy, which took place on November 7. Both Royal and Fabius concurred with Strauss-Kahn's assessment that "the world is dangerous, tangibly more

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dangerous than yesterday," and that "in the systematic search for profit . . . the competition for resources has always been one of the primary causes of wars" and that the "globalisation of profits has brought about the globalisation of conflicts."

Their response to this situation was nationalistic to the point of chauvinism. Strauss-Kahn stated, "The president of the Republic must both protect French people and arm France against these threats." He insisted that for France to "carry weight where she has a presence, in the international organisations, in the IMF and the UN," defence capability is crucial. "And for that France needs Europe. That is why it is urgent to build the Europe of diplomacy and defence, which today is in limbo."

Fabius agreed and stressed the need to face up to "the American superpower . . . and the massive imbalance due to American unilateralism."

When the candidates evoked problems of poverty and inequality in the world, they did so in order to warn and prepare against resistance against imperialist exploitation and plunder, such as is taking place in Africa and particularly in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Lebanon, which may destabilise the world order. Ségolène Royal put it this way: "If we do not deal with the problem of security in the world, then we will have terrorism in our countries . . . the immigration of destitution . . . In other words, to defend another world order is also to defend the well-understood interests of France."

They were adamant that France's armed forces be kept up. Fabius insisted that "no financial consideration can take priority over the necessity of security in a dangerous world." Royal, granddaughter of a World War I general, expanded on this. "In the unstable world we live in," she said, "it is out of the question to reduce France's defence effort, both for the protection of our nationals but also for the protection of strategic interests and for interventions under the aegis of the UN."

In discussing France's role in the building of a European army, even the notion of the sharing of control over France's nuclear weapons was categorically rejected. "Absolutely not," retorted Royal to the interviewer, "otherwise there's no more nuclear deterrent." Fabius, inadvertently expressing his support for the Bonapartist conception of the presidency in the Fifth Republic, emphasised that the "nuclear key is the responsibility of the president of the Republic. And its credibility depends on the strength of mind and decision of the president." Strauss-Kahn agreed entirely, stating, "Obviously, France must keep for itself the capacity to engage when it involves nuclear weapons."

All three supported the deployment of the French military anywhere in the world to defend national interests.

On Iraq, Royal made the remarkable statement that the present US puppet regime, imposed by an army of occupation, is "a democratic government." She opposed the immediate withdrawal of American troops and proposed that prior to withdrawal "we must make an effort in collaboration and development aid." Similarly, Strauss-Kahn asserted that the American troop withdrawal should be rapid, "but it can't be done if there is a risk of a civil war."

That the fomenters of civil war are the neo-colonial occupiers, practicing devastating divide-and-rule tactics in order to maintain their domination, was wilfully and cynically ignored. And the PS presidential hopefuls remained silent over the real motivation of the war: to gain control over the strategic resources of the planet, most particularly the oil in Iraq. While being critical of Bush they were at pains to show that they consider America to be an ally.

All three praised the "magnificent" role played by France's troops, participating alongside the Germans and Italians in the United Nations FINUL force in Lebanon, in order to disarm the Hezbollah resistance to Israeli aggression. They made no critique of the murderous actions of Israel, the most ruthless ally of the US, against the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples. They expressed disappointment that the US was not directly involved in Lebanon.

They put a priority on the security of Israel while mouthing platitudes about the right of the Palestinians to their own state. Fabius stressed that as president of France he would refuse to receive either president Ahmadinejad of Iran or Hamas leaders from Lebanon because of their aim to destroy the state of Israel.

On the question of Iran they were adamant that the country should not be able to make or obtain weapons-grade uranium. They approved of sanctions if the Iranians did not comply with UN injunctions. Royal went as far as denying Iran's right to the independent development of peaceful nuclear technology for energy production because it represented a step towards its use for military purposes.

The most noticeable difference between the candidates was on the question of the European Union. In the 2005 referendum on the European constitution Fabius argued for a "no" vote, while Royal and Strauss-Kahn supported the constitution in line with the party majority. But these are only tactical differences on the question of how French interests in the EU can best be defended.

All three advocated a strong capitalist EU and sought to peddle the illusion that it could be reformed to provide decent social services and living standards and prevent mass unemployment and relocations. Strauss-Kahn looked to the renewal of the Franco-German axis.

Fabius reiterated his theory of circles: the inner group would be the countries of the eurozone, the second would be the non-euro countries such as the UK and the third would be an outer ring which would have special trading relationships with the EU—countries such as Ukraine and Turkey—and the countries of the Magreb—the former French colonies Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. They all agreed that there had to be a pause in the expansion of Europe and categorically ruled out the idea of a Europe of 50 nations.

Strauss-Kahn, speaking as a responsible statesman of European imperialism, favoured the continuation of negotiations with Turkey on EU entry, although he did not think that was possible before 2040-2050. "But Turkey, if not linked to Europe, will go over to the other side and we will have at our gates a country strongly connected to Iraq and Iran," he said.

None of the candidates have pledged to repeal the deeply regressive and authoritarian anti-terrorism and Prevention of Delinquency laws. Nor did they condemn the use of the state-of-emergency law by President Jacques Chirac and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. The law was drafted for the colonial war in Algeria (1954-62), but was applied domestically during the youth riots in French suburbs in autumn of 2005.

On social issues certain cosmetic proposals were made in the SP election programme. Their unseriousness is apparent from the fact that they have not been budgeted in any detail. According to independent experts for *Le Figaro* they would cost €46 billion—a sum the Socialist Party has no provisions to raise.

The November 13 editorial of *Le Figaro* compared Royal with the right-wing, law-and-order leader of the ruling Gaullist UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, who in all probability will be her main adversary in the presidential election, writing, "Same message: protection—against the threat from without (globalisation, outsourcing) and from within (crime, the crisis in the education system, the failure of integration)."

The conservative *Le Figaro* speculates about which of the two would best serve the interests of the French bourgeoisie in the times of class struggle ahead: "When the storm thunders, will they listen to the pilot who, with a gentle voice, promises to take them to shelter from 'an ill wind.' Or will they judge that what is needed is a captain prepared to take on the roaring forties?"

The SP selection process underscores the urgent need to build in France and Europe a party completely independent of such forces on the basis of an internationalist and socialist programme.

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