

France: Royal's campaign falters as Sarkozy consolidates support of big business

Antoine Lerougetel
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Nicolas Sarkozy, the presidential candidate for the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People's Movement), has made a forthright attack on the programme of Socialist Party contender Ségolène Royal.

The Socialist Party was hoping that some superficial social concessions in the programme, which Royal presented at a rally in Villepinte on February 11, would resuscitate her support in the French electorate. This has not happened. Opinion polls after the rally give Sarkozy 33.5 percent in the first round and Royal 26 percent. In a two way contest in the run-off Sarkozy would get 54 percent and Royal 46 percent—a loss of about 2 per cent for Royal and a similar gain for Sarkozy in comparison with polls preceding the Villepinte rally.

Three days later, Sarkozy gave his response to Royal's programme in an interview appearing in the major journals of big business, the *Financial Times* and its sister paper *Les Echos*. Putting clear blue water between himself and the SP candidate, as Margaret Thatcher was wont to say, he said: "The values Madame Royal puts to the fore are those of state handouts and mollycoddling, egalitarianism and leveling."

Sarkozy's brash assertion of the right of the rich to further enrich themselves and his dismissal of even the most minimal palliatives designed to ameliorate the impoverishment that free-market policies have foisted on working class people, is a statement of intent for his friends in the employers' organisation MEDEF (Movement of French Businesses). Sarkozy was proclaiming that there would be no compromise over their demand for the economic and social reform of France in the interests of French and European big business.

He is also trying to consolidate a base in the better off layers of the population. He insisted, "My tax priorities are the exemption of overtime from taxation, the exemption from inheritance tax of almost all households, and tax relief for interest payments on household mortgages. The aim is simple: we have to give back to the middle class the opportunity to become home-owners."

Sarkozy's pretense of universalism is transparent. Inheritance tax is a bugbear of the rich and mortgage relief would also disproportionately benefit the most well off. There are echoes here of Thatcher's pledge to create a "share-holding and home-owning democracy," as the leitmotif of her programme of "popular capitalism." Once again the aim is to create a social base of support for an offensive against the working class and the destruction of the welfare state.

The huge spending cuts Sarkozy's measures involve will require mass job losses. Complaining that the public sector had created one million new jobs, he promised to replace no more than half of civil servants who retire. "I will make reform of the state a key presidential project," he said. He is also looking at the German policy of raising purchase tax by three percent, thus further shifting the tax burden on to the poor.

Sarkozy pointedly criticised Royal for not adopting the pro-big business and social austerity policies of Tony Blair's New Labour government and of the former German Social Democrat prime minister Gerhard Schröder, asking, "Where are the new initiatives? Where is the evolution of French socialism to European socialism?"

Attacking Royal's pledge to add five percent to the lowest pensions and to raise the minimum wage to 1,500 euros a month (a promise which she has refused to set a date for) he said, "On the one hand, there is investment, on the other mollycoddling." Echoing the rhetoric of Blair in Britain, he denounced Royal for seeking "to create new rights without matching responsibilities."

What these "responsibilities" amount to is a form of workfare, in which unemployed workers will be forced to accept any work they are offered at any rate of pay, or lose their welfare payments: "When I talk about rights and duties, I am precise: no minimum benefits without working in exchange."

There will also be no let-up on the hounding of immigrants, with "no papers to stay in France long-term if one can't write, if one can't read, if one can't speak French."

Any increase in pensions will be financed by increases in workers' contributions and the lengthening of the working life, with "no increase in minimum pensions without consolidation of the pension system."

Sarkozy clearly lays out his plan for imposing his socially destructive measures if elected. In line with European Union's Lisbon agenda policy he would engage with the trade unions, as he had successfully done in defusing the "crisis of the CPE" (the mass movement of youth and workers against the First Job Contract in the spring of 2006) by inviting the main union confederations to discussions on labour relations.

"My first priority would be the modernisation of social democracy," he said. This means in the first place using the trade unions to suppress strikes. First, there would be a systematic period of "six to eight months" enforced consultation between "the social partners" [EU bureaucracy-speak for the employers']

associations and the trade unions] to find “answers to the questions they face about workers rights.”

In the event of a strike, he then wants the trade unions, mostly affiliated either to the Socialist Party or the Communist Party, to make “commitments to [provide] minimum service standards in transport and other public services.”

There would then be a further mandatory “secret vote in companies, universities and the civil service after eight days of strike action.” If there was a majority vote to return to work across the workforce, no trade union would “have the right to mount pickets.”

Sarkozy’s aggressive response to Royal was in tune with the sentiment of French business, circles, which were unimpressed by her campaign pledges. What was particularly considered anathema was her promised social reforms. She judged them to be essential in attempting to win some popular support for her overall right-wing agenda, but the major corporations want a decisive end to the stalemate that has been produced by the resistance of the working class to the structural reforms repeatedly attempted by the Gaullists under Jacques Chirac.

SP economic spokesman Luc Besson even felt obliged to resign from the presidential campaign after being rebuked by Royal for putting a price on her social policies in the face of sustained criticism from the media. Royal intended to keep things suitably vague, but Besson had stated that her social programme would cost 35 billion euros.

This does not detract from the overall right-wing character of Royal’s own programme. Indeed on every other front she must have calculated that she had given the French bourgeoisie what they were demanding of her.

In line with Sarkozy, she intends to bring together the employers and the trade unions to impose the cuts in rights and living standards necessary to make Europe’s economy “the most competitive in the world.” This is the essence of her “Republican Pact” (a term also used by Sarkozy).

Royal too expresses her implicit agreement with Sarkozy’s neo-liberal economic project, declaring, “Europe must fight for an industrial policy following the example of the United States and the emerging nations.”

She had neither mentioned nor pledged to repeal a raft of measures, many of them sponsored by Sarkozy, attacking democratic rights and freedoms, including enhanced police powers: two anti-terror laws massively increasing state surveillance of the population, the Equality of Opportunity Law, the Prevention of Delinquency Law, the suppression of labour protections, the State of Emergency Law. Clearly, she intends to keep them on the statute book.

She reiterated her intention to involve the military in establishments for delinquent youth. She also agrees with him on the establishment of an obligatory six-month period of civic service for all young people, suggesting too that this could be carried out in the army. Proposal 54 of her 100 point programme is, “The creation of a new neighbourhood police force.” Like Sarkozy on benefit payments, she says, “every new right goes together with duties.”

Her speech was a profession of support for an imperialist and

militarist foreign policy. She proposed “a pact of honour . . so that France may stand back up on her feet.”

“France is more than France . . France, in any case, will not fear to keep the rank that she is due from her history,” she told her audience.

Royal expressed her belief in “multipolar world” in which France’s interests would be served in an imperialist Europe: “That is why all efforts to get Europe going again and also to make it a political power will be pursued with particular ardour.”

She closed her remarks with the declaration, “Long live the Republic . . Long live France.”

Royal made no direct reference to the escalating war in Iraq and expressed no concern for the misery being visited on the Iraqi people by US imperialism, which, in a debate during the campaign for the party nomination, she had congratulated for bringing democracy to the country. Nor did she acknowledge the imminent threat of an American military attack on Iran.

While supporting Chirac’s opposition to the unilateral decision of the US to go to war on Iraq in 2003—a stance motivated in large part by a desire to protect important French investments in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Iran today—of French imperialism’s relations with the US she said, “Wherever we go into action the US, of course, will not be far away. It is there, powerful, friendly, noble and also, as recent history has demonstrated, induced to error by the very weight of its power. We will live with the United States, as a solid and reliable partner.”

“I have declared, as you know, for the greatest firmness to the current Iranian regime and its repeated provocations,” she boasted. “Vigilance for the security of all is also showing an example. That is why we will continue to deploy forces to defend the law, if necessary, in Africa as well as the Middle East.”

Item 93 of the list of 100 proposals which she issued at the rally was the pledge to “Endow our national defense with means adequate for the new risks . . Our capability for nuclear dissuasion must be preserved.”

If Royal were, against the present odds, to win the presidential election, she would herself at the head a fiercely anti-working class administration. The fact that the official left, including the Communist Party, the Greens, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and Workers Struggle (LO) persist in portraying the Socialist Party and Ségolène Royal as some sort of alternative to the Gaullists makes them partners in a political betrayal.



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