

France: Socialist Party attempts “left” re-packaging of Ségolène Royal

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28 February 2007

The past two weeks have seen an attempt to repackage Ségolène Royal, the Socialist Party (PS) candidate in the French presidential elections April 22, as a more left-wing figure. She declared on France Inter Radio on February 26 that any confusion between the left and the right in French politics “is very dangerous” and would “prevent French people from choosing between two social models, two opposing political visions.”

Royal was asked about the desirability of a “French-style coalition” government (“*coalition à la française*”), which has been raised as a possibility by François Bayrou, the candidate of the centre-right UDF (Union for French Democracy). She commented “We cannot take France forward with a drop of social policy in an ocean of economic liberalism, which is what both the right-wing candidates are proposing.”

In opinion polls, Bayrou is presently running third with 17 percent of voters choosing him in the first round, behind the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People’s Party) candidate Nicolas Sarkozy and Royal, who are both at 28 percent.

This left tack by Royal is instructive. Official circles and the media have insisted that the current presidential election campaign marks a significant departure, in that both Royal and Sarkozy recognise that France’s economic and social problems stem from the failure of the its social democratic model, as opposed to the “Anglo-Saxon model.”

According to this argument, the supposed commitment to “*égalité*” [equality] has to be put aside. Moreover, the considerable cost of the French welfare state, which creates an environment “not conducive to business,” has to be reduced. Above all, the pundits argue that the country’s problems have been epitomised by the inability of French governments to push through the economic and social “reforms” required in the face of the determined resistance of the working class and the youth over the past two decades.

The mass mobilisation of 2006 against the CPE First Job Contract was the most recent expression of this resistance, which also exploded in the form of the riots on urban council estates in the autumn of 2005 in defiance of the law-and-order methods imposed by the UMP government.

Both Royal and Sarkozy present themselves as candidates of “change” and put forward right-wing remedies hostile to the interests of the broad mass of the people.

Sarkozy proclaims himself the representative of a “*rupture*”—a break with past compromises, a strong man, an avowed economic liberal who, at the same time, is aware of the dangers of social divisions in France and the discrediting of the political establishment.

He proposes to combine pro-business policies with measures to win a popular base in sections of the middle class and even the working

class by allowing them to become homeowners and by eliminating “disincentives to hard work” such as the 35-hour week and high levels of taxation. Alongside the profound undercurrents of anti-Islamic racism in his campaign, he proposes positive discrimination (affirmative action) to secure a social base in the immigrant middle class. His initiative in setting up the CFCM (French Council of the Muslim Religion) had the same objective.

Royal initially portrayed herself, with the necessary caveats, to be the French equivalent of Britain’s Tony Blair—a “moderniser” who recognised that the old-style social reformism could no longer be sustained. She proposes a more business-friendly programme with lower taxes and targeted, as opposed to universal, welfare provisions. At the same time, she offered herself as the best candidate to prevent the eruption of further social struggles—“a calmed-down France.”

Like Blair, she made much of her relative independence from the Socialist Party apparatus as proof that she was capable of pushing through economic reforms without bowing to pressure from the working class.

It must be noted in this regard, however, that one of Sarkozy’s innovations has been an attempt to cultivate the trade unions as a means of pushing through his policies.

Unfortunately for Royal, the first weeks of the campaign exposed the fault-line running through her programme: in trying to please everyone, she pleased no one. In the first place, her economic appeal to French business circles appeared less radical than Sarkozy’s: in particular, she was not considered committed enough to carry out an all-out assault on the welfare state in contrast to the semi-Bonapartist strong man Sarkozy.

Sarkozy has been able to galvanise some support among disaffected sections of the population who recognise that the French economy is indeed in crisis and entertain illusions that he might bring about a change. In contrast, the traditional support for the Socialist Party in layers of the working class and middle class, Royal’s electoral mainstay, is already in steep decline because of the party’s previous right-wing course and further diminished with every word she uttered.

Poll after poll showed that most workers were convinced that she was pro-business, while few have been fooled by her expressions of compassion.

By the time of the February 11 rally at Villepinte, at which she finally detailed her election programme, after having “listened” to “the people,” Royal was running 10 points behind Sarkozy in the opinion polls. It was in an attempt to rectify this situation and avert an electoral debacle that she emphasised her limited programme of social reforms.

When this did not succeed in raising her ratings in the polls, she

adopted her pose of feminine compassion more forcefully in her appearance on TV in the programme “I have a question to ask you” on February 19.

On both occasions, she made much of her recognition of the crisis in the *banlieues*, the impoverished urban estates, and claimed that she could heal France.

Three days after the latter show, she launched her new campaign team, which included all the grandees of the Socialist Party. It incorporates three former prime ministers—Lionel Jospin, Laurent Fabius and Pierre Mauroy—and former ministers such as Dominique Strauss Khan, all of whom have occupied the highest echelons of the party since the beginning of the 1980s.

It is most likely that the inclusion in Royal’s campaign team of these PS “elephants,” as they are known in France, is an attempt by the party apparatus to take control of a campaign that was going off the rails. But it was also an attempt to paint Royal as a representative of Socialist Party continuity rather than “change,” which to many, quite rightly, signifies further attacks on the social position of the working class.

As reassurances go, this was hardly the most convincing. All of those drafted onto Royal’s campaign team played key roles in imposing right-wing policies that have led to the plummeting support in the working class for the PS. In 1981, when François Mitterrand won the presidency for the Socialist Party on a programme of left social reforms and nationalisations, people danced in the streets and a rejoicing crowd took over the Place de la Bastille. But many of the 110 points in Mitterrand’s programme were abandoned a little more than a year later in favour of austerity policies aimed at preventing a run on the franc and shoring up French capitalism.

In contrast, after Jospin’s Plural Left government’s defeat in 2002, Socialist Party leaders could not show their faces on protests against the Gaullist government’s anti-working class measures for fear of being driven off by angry workers.

Nevertheless, the attempt to resuscitate Royal’s campaign by making a feint to the left serves to expose the true nature of Sarkozy’s recent ascendancy. It does not indicate a pronounced support for his right-wing line, but is essentially due to the fact that socialist-minded workers and young people have been politically disenfranchised by Royal and the Socialist Party.

Most of those who have deserted the Socialist Party have not gone over to Sarkozy, but have decided that there is no point in voting. Recent polls indicate that 27 percent of the electorate would abstain or cast a blank vote in the first round, and 30 percent would do likewise in the second round run-off between the two leading candidates.

Royal’s attempted repositioning is primarily a matter of style, not substance, and most people recognise this. There has been a certain rise in support for her reflected in opinion polls since February 19, but this is relatively superficial. *Figaro* reported a poll that said that 81 percent of respondents found Royal’s television performance “*sympathique*” (pleasant), as against 45 percent who found her convincing.

Her ability to win popular backing as the defender of the welfare state is limited, given that the essential thrust of her policies is dictated by big business and the requirements of finance capital for France to become globally competitive. During her television debate, she was unable to give an answer as to how her social measures would be financed. The resignation of a campaign staff member, rebuked for prematurely releasing the figure of 35 billion euros (US\$46.3 billion) as the cost of her social measures, has increased scepticism. The fact

that she had pledged to make the reduction of the public debt a priority also undermined her promises on this score.

Already, Royal has disappointed the 2.5 million people in the private sector who live on the state minimum wage, admitting that the promised raise to 1,500 euros per month from the present 1,254 gross (984,61 euros net—US\$1,303), a flagship measure of her social programme, would be before deductions. This keeps the actual cash received down to little more than 1,000 euros—around 250 euros a week! Even this paltry concession would take five years to be fully implemented.

She insisted, in line with Sarkozy, that “all those receiving benefits must actively seek employment,” a recipe for forcing unemployed people into low-paid jobs. This puts a sinister colouration on her pledge that no school leaver would have to wait six months before finding a job or training.

She also reiterated her opposition to any mass regularisation of undocumented migrants and commitment to strict immigration controls.

Any success enjoyed by Royal’s manoeuvres only serves to disarm the working class. Whoever assumes the presidency when the votes in the second round on May 1 are counted, will proceed to make a systematic assault—long overdue as far as the French bourgeoisie is concerned—on wages, working conditions and social and democratic rights.

A politically reprehensible role is played by the parties considered to be to the left of the Socialist Party—the Communist Party, the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* and *Lutte Ouvrière*—who insist that a victory for Royal and the Socialist Party in the second round is the only alternative to Sarkozy. Indeed, her present manoeuvring is in part designed to make it easier for them to give her their support. She is advised in such matters by a former central committee member of the LCR and personal confidante, Sophie Bouchet-Petersen.

Despite criticisms of aspects of Royal’s programme by these “lefts,” their fundamental task of reconciling the working class to the Socialist Party is well expressed by Arlette Laguiller, *Lutte Ouvrière*’s presidential candidate. In a November 24 editorial, she told readers of the party’s newspaper that workers “could, of course, rejoice if Ségolène Royal wins the presidency because that would mean a defeat for Sarkozy.” She even suggested that Royal could be induced to act in the interests of the working class: “The presidential election is in five months. Ségolène Royal will have the time to make some commitments which she has not so far taken.”



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