

France: Nicolas Sarkozy goes to London

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Nicolas Sarkozy's first foreign excursion since his designation as official presidential candidate of France's ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People's Movement) was a trip to London. He spent January 30 visiting the Marylebone Jobcentre Plus, lunching with Prime Minister Tony Blair and addressing an election rally organised by the London branch of the UMP, which attracted 2,000 French expatriates.

The first round of the French presidential elections will be held April 22.

The *Guardian* newspaper noted: "Mr Sarkozy's choice of London for his first foreign trip since launching his presidential campaign is seen as deeply symbolic. He is keen to present himself as an international statesman, a friend of Mr. Blair and close to the US-British alliance."

Sarkozy is reported to have met Blair for discussions on no less than eight occasions. Their personal friendship is underlined by unofficial meetings, "including while on holiday in Florence and during Sarkozy's trip to London to celebrate his reconciliation with his wife Cecilia."

When Blair's wife goes to Paris, she has dinner at the ministry of the interior Sarkozy presides over.

The London visit, and particularly the rally at the end of day, provides a snapshot of Sarkozy's social base. There are 60,000 registered voters among the big French expatriate community in Britain (some 300,000), mainly living in London and the prosperous southeast. Many of them are drawn by the low taxes and deregulated economy stripped of labour and social rights, where the business of accumulating wealth is untrammelled. The January 30 *Guardian* editorial comments, "The expatriate [French] community in Britain is one of the biggest outside France. Whizz-kid bankers and businessmen fleeing a homeland in a state of political (and entrepreneurial) torpor are natural voters for the man who has promised to break the mould of French politics."

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, "Many of the new arrivals work in the Square Mile [the City, London's banking and financial district], where bonuses mean that they can earn five times what they would for the same job at home."

The *Guardian* gave this description of Sarkozy's audience: "Hundreds of well-heeled city financiers, students from Paris's posh suburbs, restaurant workers and teachers living in Britain filled a hall at Old Billingsgate market."

The *Telegraph* reported, "Upwards of 2,000 chic, prosperous supporters chanted 'Sarko president' as he told them he wanted their support for his candidacy and his vision of a new France."

Raphaël Leclerc, 21, studying politics at the London School of Economics, told the *Guardian* that he had grown up in a smart

Paris suburb and came "from a privileged background and rightwing family" and had played football against Sarkozy's sons. Alex Poitier, 29, a trader at a foreign bank, told the *Daily Telegraph*, "In terms of salary and the amount of responsibility I'm given there is no comparison with France, but I love the whole philosophy of the place."

This philosophy, dominant in these social layers, is well expressed by a piece by the French, London-based think tank *Cercle d'outre-Manche* in the January 30 *Financial Times* January 30. It asserts that Britain has overtaken France as a place for money-making:

"The UK generates 76 billion euros more gross domestic product.... Twenty-five years ago the UK's GDP was 75 percent that of France."

The article then explains the secret of this success: "Margaret Thatcher broke down many rigidities and reintroduced market practices in the economy. With Tony Blair at the helm and Gordon Brown at the purse, market fluidity has been introduced in almost all aspects of the economy."

Here we see the significance of Sarkozy's visit to the job centre. The destruction of job protection is lauded with the euphemism "hiring people has been made easier." Forcing people to accept any low-paid job offered by the job centre, on pain of withdrawal of benefits for those who do not, is approvingly described: "Welfare resources are targeted to make it easier for the long-term unemployed, older workers, young people and single mothers to get back to work with a carrot and a stick policy."

These are the people for whom Sarkozy speaks and who want him to do in France what Thatcher first did in Britain. What they applaud in Thatcher and also Blair is that, as the *Cercle d'outre-Manche* puts it, "they have held firm in the face of opposition."

The cynicism of Sarkozy's claim, in recent statements, to have the interests of workers at heart and even to approve of better remuneration for work, is clearly revealed in a January 31 interview in the *International Herald Tribune*: "I want people to be recompensed and respected for their work. I want people to understand the value of work. I'm concerned with people who want to work hard, and I want to speak to them. When people work hard, they have to be recompensed for this. And that's why I want to do away with inheritance laws, because if someone has worked hard throughout his or her life, then it must be possible to pass onto your children the fruits of your work.... I don't accept that someone is poor if they worked really hard."

Sarkozy's message is not for working people, but for the upwardly mobile and the financial elites who will have substantial wealth to leave to their children. His call for hard work to be

rewarded is in fact a call for the rich to be allowed to get richer. He employs the same bogus claims of a commitment to a meritocracy as Blair, where a supposed equality of opportunity for social advancement and wealth accumulation is counterposed to calls for greater social equality—which is denounced for holding back the “hard working” and rewarding the lazy and shiftless.

Anyone who defends social equality is out of step with the times, Sarkozy declares: “My ideas are the ideas of today’s world: respect for work, social promotion, equal opportunities. Let me tell you, I don’t like egalitarianism. I don’t like people being unnecessarily helped. I don’t like lowering in the interests of equality. I want to bring everyone upwards.”

And when quizzed as to his commitment to deregulation and privatisation, Sarkozy reassures his interlocutor, “I’m not an enemy of the state. A great country needs the state, but let me put things very simply. I believe in capitalism. I believe in the market economy. I believe in competition.”

When asked why in a recent poll 51 percent of the people said they were afraid of his policies and actions, he vaunted his success in the opinion polls and attributed this to his readiness to confront social and political opposition:

Speaking of how he faced up to 27 days of rioting in Paris and major French cities, he replied, “Fortunately I’m worrying. If I were reassuring what would things be...you come along and you say, ‘Mr. Sarkozy, why are you frightening people? Why are people worried? What should be done not to frighten people?’ I’ve been number one, so presumably, there must be some reassurance; at least that’s the perception of some.

“I’m not frightened of ideologies, credos. I’m not going to bow down to the latest fad, and I’m not frightened of facing up to difficulties,” he boasted.

It is on this basis of his role as a strongman, an authoritarian figure, that Sarkozy is making his pitch for presidential office.

He expressed his appreciation of former Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé’s courage in 1995, when he attempted to make major cuts in the pension rights of public sector workers. A mass strike movement, supported by the vast majority of the French population, forced Juppé to retreat and led to the eventual downfall of his government. Juppé’s mistake, said Sarkozy, is that “he forgot...to mobilise the electorate.”

Sarkozy’s bombastic displays of self-confidence are not due to any inherent strength or to the popularity of his elitist policies—he leads in the polls, but with only 38 percent of respondents. They are the product of the lack of any meaningful opposition from the official left parties: Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens, the trade unions and their hangers-on in the so-called “far left” and radical movements (the LCR—Revolutionary Communist League, LO—Workers Struggle, the PT—the Workers Party, José Bové and the anti-globalisation associations).

A recent poll has found that more than 70 percent of French people do not believe in the free market as a condition for social well-being. This was also expressed in the rejection of the European constitution in the May 2005 referendum, the mass protest movements of 2003 against pension cuts, and in 2006 against the dismantling of labour and social rights and protections.

Luc Chatel, a UMP spokesman observed: “Britain is a good

example of a country which has known how to be self-critical, to modernise, to look to the future. So [Sarkozy] has much to get out of an exchange of views with the British Prime Minister.”

What Sarkozy is seeking to learn from Blair is how to make a policy of the destruction of rights and living standards, imposed by an authoritarian state, palatable to the electorate by dressing it up in pseudo-progressive and liberal garb. He needs Blair’s advice on how to make enough voters believe that his credo “I believe in competition” can also encompass what he described to the *IHT* as “an ethical form of capitalism.”

He has promised, if elected, to curtail the right to strike and picket, to generalise the New Job Contract at present only enforceable in small businesses—a contract similar to the First Job Contract (CPE), which had to be withdrawn because of the mass movement of youth and workers against it in the spring of 2006. He proposes to withdraw benefits from unemployed workers who reject a second offer of a job from the state employment agency, lengthen working hours and make further drastic inroads into pension rights.

Blair is the most despised politician in Britain for his lying and complicity with US President George W. Bush in justifying the illegal invasion and colonial-style occupation of Iraq against massive national and world opposition. He is also hated for his social policies.

Sarkozy’s visit to such a discredited figure is another aspect of his alienation from the concerns of ordinary French citizens.

Under today’s conditions of accelerating competition for the world’s resources and markets, the aspiration of French big business to catch up with the UK’s rate of exploitation of its working class will demand a frontal assault on the democratic rights and workers’ living standards. Sarkozy and the Socialist Party presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, the choice placed before the French electorate, represent such an offensive. Julien Dray, speaking on behalf of Ségolène Royal, who has yet to meet Tony Blair despite having expressed approval for him, stated January 30, “But it is not impossible that she will see him before the election.”



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