

French presidential elections: Four in ten voters undecided

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The presidential election campaign in France has now entered its official phase. Posters of the 12 candidates have been put up in front of the country's 65,000 polling stations, every household will receive their election statements, and up to the first round of the election on April 22, every candidate has 45 minutes, divided into several short clips, to present his or her election programme on public radio and television.

The election campaign in fact began weeks ago, months ago if one counts the process of selecting candidates. The candidates have travelled through the country, holding election meetings, and participated in numerous rounds of discussion on television. The election has dominated the media for a long time, and the standpoints of the candidates are well known.

Nevertheless, 18 million voters are still undecided which candidate will receive their vote. According to two polls published on Sunday, 42 percent of the electorate have made no firm choice—a figure 10 percent higher than a similar poll two weeks before the 2002 presidential election. The number of undecided voters is exceptionally high among young voters, women and workers—i.e., all those who have been particularly hard-hit by the country's social crisis.

The reason for this high number of undecided voters is not difficult to understand. None of the candidates enjoys the confidence of broad social layers or has any answer to the urgent social problems confronting the French people.

Up until now, the tone of the election campaign has been laid down by Nicolas Sarkozy, the candidate of the Gaullist government party UMP (Union for a Popular Movement). Sarkozy has taken up a host of themes that are traditionally the reserve of the extreme right: immigration, security, public order and repeatedly, national identity and the greatness of France.

He has made a lot of noise but has left little lasting impression. No topic stayed in the headlines for more than a week. Sarkozy knows how to provoke, attract attention and distract from more substantial questions, but he remains on the surface of things.

This week, he stirred controversy with a remark that pedophilia and the 1,300 youth suicides per year in France are innate and genetically conditioned, rather than the result of social and family circumstances. For once, he antagonised some of his right-wing supporters, such as the Catholic Church, who accused him of denying the role of self-responsibility in favour of eugenics.

Sarkozy is continually taking pages from the book of Jean Marie Le Pen, the leader of the right-wing extremist National Front, who has reacted with an air of self-satisfaction. When one is continually copied, Le Pen argues, this only increases the value of the original. The polls seem to back up this claim, where Le Pen stands now in fourth place with 15 percent of the vote. In 2002, he won 17 percent of the vote and moved into the second round to challenge the existing president, Jacques Chirac.

Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal either allows herself to be pushed along by Sarkozy or trots obediently behind him. Just two weeks

ago, they held a bizarre contest aimed at proving who loved the nation most. In the manner of Sarkozy, Royal played the national anthem at her rallies and recommended all Frenchman to raise the tricolour on national holidays. Her proposal that delinquent youth should be educated by the military could also originate from Sarkozy's armoury.

Sarkozy is deeply hated in the working class and by broad layers of youth. The anti-working class nature of his policies is unmistakable even though they are packaged in right-wing populist clichés. He recently outlined his programme for his first hundred days should he win office and left no doubts about the direction of his policies.

This summer, he intends to push through an anti-strike law, which calls for secret ballots before strikes and obliges strikers in the public service to maintain a minimum level of services. This measure is directed particularly against workers in public service, such as the railways, public transport, and the post office, as well as those working in water, gas and power stations—i.e., those layers of workers who formed the backbone of the large strike movements during the past decade, which repeatedly brought parts of the country to a standstill. The anti-strike law is to prepare extensive cuts in pensions for the autumn. In the past, such a pension reform has repeatedly failed following wide-scale resistance by workers.

Sarkozy's second proposal for immediate implementation is the tightening up of criminal law for repeat offenders. Those guilty of three offences will be automatically subject to the highest possible penalty—even in the case of trivial offences, or crimes committed by underage offenders. Experts expect a drastic rise in the French prison population, should the law be passed. With his new plan, based on US-type punitive laws, Sarkozy is violating both French legal tradition and the European convention on human rights, which both declare that individual circumstances must be taken into account when determining the level of punishment.

Finally, Sarkozy is seeking to abolish social security contributions and taxes on overtime working. Such a measure would effectively abolish the 35-hour week introduced by the government led by Lionel Jospin. At the same time, it would encourage companies to increase overtime working and hinder the creation of new jobs.

Royal cannot openly challenge this right-wing programme because she essentially agrees with Sarkozy. She is also in favour of a "modernisation" of French capitalism in order to be competitive in the global economy. As is the case with Sarkozy, this "modernisation" means increasing the profits and rights of the big companies at the expense of their workforces.

At the heart of Royal's hundred-day programme is the promise that no young person remain unemployed for more than six months. Royal has declared her intention of creating 500,000 jobs for youth. However, a closer look at this first-chance contract (*contrat première chance*) reveals distinct similarities with the First Job Contract (CPE—*contrat première embauche*), whose proposal led to massive protests by French youth in the

spring of 2006. It is nothing other than a programme for the promotion of cheap labour.

As was the case with similar measures introduced by the Jospin government, Royal's proposal is based on the principle of subsidising companies and small businesses. They are to be subsidised for one year should they employ untrained young people. Experience has shown that such schemes inevitably lead to regularly employed workers losing their jobs to new, cheaper, subsidised workers—who after a year, when the subsidy has run out, also find themselves back on the street.

Although Sarkozy is rejected by broad layers of the population and bitterly hated in the suburbs, where many immigrants and poorly paid workers live, Royal's cowardly adaptations have meant that he has led the opinion polls so far. This lead varies from day to day, but Sarkozy regularly has a 1 percent or greater lead over Royal. One of the recent polls gave him 28 percent compared to Royal's 24 percent. In the second ballot, which is restricted to just two candidates, he has a 2- to 4-point advantage over Royal.

Royal's opportunism has also lifted the fortunes of another right-wing candidate, François Bayrou of the liberal UDF. Many voters who traditionally gravitate to the Socialist Party are now considering a vote for Bayrou in the first round because they think he has better chances of defeating Sarkozy in the second round.

Bayrou poses as a man who favours reconciliation and has announced that in the event of his victory, he will form a government that includes both the Socialist Party and the Gaullists. Bayrou, the son of a farmer, is appealing to middle-class layers based in the countryside and all those who fear uncontrollable social conflict should Sarkozy become president.

He has been very vague on programmatic statements. He also advocates the creation of a low-wage sector through subsidies to French companies. In addition, he plans a comprehensive reorganisation of social security benefits, in which the current nine different forms of social support (ranging from social welfare assistance, minimum pensions and widow's pensions), upon which 3.5 million citizens depend, would be combined into a single social security benefit. Such a step would be bound up with major cuts.

Bayrou has on occasion drawn level with Royal in the polls. At present, he stands around 18 percent, but the poll institutes agree that his result is difficult to forecast and could vary between 12 and 29 percent of the vote.

The four main candidates who, according to the polls, command 85 percent of the vote include two right-wing bourgeois candidates (Sarkozy and Bayrou), one extreme right (Le Pen) and Royal, a right-wing Socialist in the manner of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In all likelihood, the run-off second round on May 6 will be a contest between two of these candidates.

But such a choice does not correspond to the mood of large segments of the population, who have repeatedly expressed their opposition to official policy—most recently with the rejection of the European constitution in 2005 and then in 2006 against the First Job Contract, which the government withdrew after large protests. Nevertheless, right-wing figures and parties dominate the elections.

This is not only due to the policy of Royal, who plays into the hands of the right wing, but also to the role of the so-called left candidates. Six of the total of 12 certified candidates regard themselves as left of the Socialist Party.

However, not one of these candidates states the obvious: that the working class must break with its old organisations and develop an independent political movement that opposes the capitalist organisation of society. Instead, they try to head off popular discontent and opposition and divert it into support for the Socialist Party.

This is especially apparent in the case of Oliver Besancenot, the candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire—LCR). He is the only one among these candidates who,

according to the polls, currently stands between 4 and 5 percent. All other left candidates are below 2 percent.

Besancenot has been able to win support from the party's traditional milieu in academic circles, as well as young people who have registered in large numbers to vote. He has been able to win a certain degree of support with his verbose denunciations of the capitalist system.

Rap singers with a broad popular base in the suburbs of French cities, where violent battles with police took place just a year ago, have called for a big election turnout. Some of them—such as Diam's, Akhenaton and Axiom—have even included instructions on voter registration in their CD covers. The rappers are unequivocally opposed to Sarkozy and Le Pen, but have made no concrete recommendation of any particular candidate. Instead, they stress the significance of taking part in the election and call for a close and critical study of the various election programmes.

Such appeals have had an effect. New voter registrations in the region of Seine Saint Denis, which houses several Paris suburbs, have risen by 8.5 percent compared to 2002. In the Paris suburb of Saint Denis, home to the radical hip-hop group NTM, this figure rose to a phenomenal 40 percent.

This political awaking by layers of oppressed youth has profound significance and marks the intervention of new layers of the working class into political life. But Besancenot reacts by trying to nip this development in the bud. He articulates the moods and needs of young people, but has nothing to offer in the way of political orientation.

The election statements of the LCR give no explanation of such crucial issues as the turn to the right by the Socialist Party, the treacherous role of the trade unions or the decline of the Stalinist Communist Party. Besancenot's aim is to fog the issues rather than educate and clarify. When stripped of its radical rhetoric, his election programme consists merely of hollow reformist promises, which are impossible to achieve within the framework of globalised capitalism.

In the second round, the LCR will appeal for support for Royal or even Bayrou—in the event that the latter stands against Sarkozy or Le Pen. There can be no doubt about this, following the organisation's support for Jacques Chirac in 2002.

The LCR is intent on developing an amorphous "left" movement that could function as a coalition partner of a Socialist Party government, in the event of an increase in class tensions. To this end, Besancenot has continually made appeals to other "left" candidates to unite.

The sister parties of the LCR in Brazil and Italy have already taken this path. In Brazil, their organisation has a minister in the Lula government; in Italy, they have joined the coalition led by Romano Prodi. In both countries, they are paving the way for the return of the discredited right wing to power. Lula has emerged as a favourite of international financial capital and as a close ally of the US. In Italy, the betrayals of the Prodi government are paving the way for a second comeback of Silvio Berlusconi.

A similar development also threatens to take place in France. The strong poll ratings for Sarkozy and Le Pen have nothing to do with their own popularity, but are above all a result of the bankruptcy of the official left—including its radical wing.



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