

French presidential debate: Royal and Sarkozy spar over right-wing agendas

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Wednesday's two-and-a-half-hour televised debate between Nicolas Sarkozy, the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People's Party) candidate and former minister of the interior, and Ségolène Royal of the opposition Socialist Party was a contest between two ruthless defenders of the interests of French imperialism and big business.

While the debate was viewed by 20 million people—beating the ratings for the World Cup final—opinions are divided as to who won the encounter. *Libération's* editorial read, "Nicolas Sarkozy did not lose. But Ségolène Royal won."

The debate was almost entirely centred on France. One commentator remarked, "Extraordinarily hexagonal!" (The hexagon is a term frequently used for France.) There was no mention of the wars in Iraq (for which France supplies crucial logistical support), in Afghanistan (where France has troops and has suffered losses), in Lebanon or the various African countries where France is involved in active military interventions to defend its imperialist interests.

There is a tacit agreement within the political establishment, ranging from the far left to the far right, not to make the role of French imperialism or its alternating rivalry and complicity with US militarism a point of political contention. This is especially the case during the presidential elections, despite the fact that the president is constitutionally responsible for foreign policy and military matters.

One issue that was central to the debate was immigration. Both candidates openly opposed any general legalization of *sans papiers* (undocumented immigrants) and agreed that the case of each immigrant should be dealt with individually ("au cas par cas").

Sarkozy said, "France cannot welcome the destitute of the world (*misère du monde*)."

Royal agreed, saying that this was a "difficult problem, humanly very painful."

Royal, charged Sarkozy with responsibility for a widely publicized case in which a Chinese grandfather, a *sans papier*, was arrested as he came to pick up his two grandchildren from school. Sarkozy asked her if she still adhered to her stated position—which she later withdrew—that all the parents and grandparents of *sans papier* children enrolled in French schools should automatically be given residential permits. She was forced to admit that her policy—in line with the SP programme—was that each case would have to be examined on its merits: "I never asked for a global and general regularisation of generations," she insisted.

Sarkozy replied, "As I ordered it, we agree."

Ségolène Royal: "Yes, each case on its merits, we agree."

Sarkozy spelled out the inhumane character of his immigration policies, one element of which makes it virtually impossible for families to reunite with members legally resident in France—a policy that Royal accepts as well. "I will not authorise anyone to bring over their family when they cannot prove that they have accommodation," he said. "That they have income from work and not from welfare benefits ... I want the family members who come to join them to learn French before coming."

Neither candidate mentioned the 500 expulsions from France per week of undocumented immigrants, many to deprivation, arrest, torture and death, as part of Sarkozy's annual target of 26,000. Both agreed that a general legalization was out of the question.

In this context, the much commented upon display of righteous anger staged by Royal in accusing the UMP government of cutting aid for handicapped children attending mainstream schools rang sickeningly false.

Indeed, the two candidates' lack of concern for human distress did not only apply to foreigners.

They both agreed on the need to force those dependent upon welfare benefits, such as the unemployed, to accept any job offered, i.e., forced labour. This has very sinister connotations in France, where under the Nazi occupation the collaborationist regime of Marshal Pétain levied the STO (Service de Travail Obligatoire—Obligatory Work Service) for Germany. (Thousands of workers joined the French Resistance in opposition to this and transformed it into a mass movement.)

Royal asserted, "On the issue of rights and duties, one point on which we agree, and which is in the programme I'm proposing, is that there should be no new rights accorded without something in return."

Sarkozy asserted that he would maintain the pension reforms that François Fillon, his chief advisor and one of the most hated politicians in France, had imposed as a minister in the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The law provoked an enormous and determined opposition. Sarkozy asserted falsely that its present stipulations, which already condemn the aged to a reduced quality of life, would be left as they are. In fact, the provisions of Fillon's law are due to be reviewed next year, with possible increases in monthly payments and reductions in pensions, not just for new retirees but for all of them.

Royal forcefully denied that she would abolish the law: "To closely scrutinise is not to demolish." She would only deal with certain injustices, especially for women who had lost entitlement through child-raising. "I am not dismantling the Fillon laws, I am scrutinising them and getting rid of the most crying injustices," she said. She would also question the "special regimes," the favourable pension schemes enjoyed by the powerfully organised electricity, railway, and other state employees, long a special target of the right.

"Everything will be looked at," she said, including the special regimes.

The two candidates essentially agreed on the need to intensify repressive measures against impoverished youth, and Royal made no mention of the vast legislative programme enhancing police powers of arrest and surveillance put through parliament by Sarkozy. She again criticised him from the right for not carrying out his promise of zero tolerance on juvenile

delinquency.

A striking feature of both candidates' policies is their reliance upon the trade unions to aid them in imposing their reactionary policies. Royal spelled this out most explicitly. "The second axis of restarting growth is the quality of the social dialogue," she said. "It is known that the countries of Northern Europe that have succeeded in restarting growth are the countries which have set up a good social dialogue, which enables the trade unions to make social compromises," i.e., impose cuts in wages and conditions upon the working class.



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