

France: Sarkozy prepares shock therapy

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The new French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, wants to use the momentum of his election success to rush through a number of reactionary measures this summer. This was the message given last week by Sarkozy's new prime minister, François Fillon, to the TV channel Europe 1.

Fillon did not beat about the bush. France, he said, needs not just a "break" (Sarkozy's election slogan), but an "electric shock". He went on to compare the country with a Formula 1 racing car: "One has to drive it at its limits in order to land in first place against the international competition."

Alluding to Sarkozy's predecessor, Jacques Chirac, Fillon explained: "France has seen too many politicians who won elections with projects that then failed because of resistance from special interest groups."

Now, Fillon sees a unique chance to carry out the sort of "reforms" demanded by the financial markets—measures that have repeatedly failed in the past in the face of massive popular opposition. "With a voter turnout of 84 percent and over 53 percent of the vote, Nicolas Sarkozy's success creates a historic opportunity to fundamentally change France," Fillon said.

The liberal newspaper *Libération* summarized Sarkozy's program for the next six months as follows: "He will set about thoroughly transforming the ill-reputed 'French social model'. The first term of his presidency will be directed against its core principle: the entitlement to equality..."

The new French Assembly, due to be elected on June 10 and 17, is to be convened for a special session lasting from June 26 to August 10 in order to adopt draft laws prioritized by the government. Fillon is counting on a safe majority.

The bankruptcy of France's so-called "lefts", who are profoundly demoralized and divided after their defeat at the polls, combined with the readiness of the trade unions to cooperate with Sarkozy and Fillon, and the shift of a number of former "lefts" and environmental activists into the camp of the new president all point to a victory for Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) in the parliamentary elections.

In particular, Fillon regards the entry into the government of former leading Socialist Party figures, such as the new foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, to be a political coup. It has created an "immediate political shock," he told Europe 1. "We broke up all party barriers and smashed all the prejudices and prefabricated scenarios," he declared.

As he was preparing to assume the presidency, Sarkozy went about wooing the unions, which responded by declaring their readiness to cooperate with the new government. Then, on May 21, Sarkozy and Alain Juppé, his deputy prime minister and environment secretary, met with the representatives of nine environmental federations in the presidential palace. The environmentalists reacted enthusiastically to the discussions.

According to bird preservationist Allain Bougrain Dubourg, "It is a historic step. For the first time it was possible to talk about the diversity of species without being treated as a fundamentalist." The renowned environmentalist and writer Nicolas Hulot gushed, "They met us without prejudices. Environmental protection has stepped out of its ghetto." Even Yannick Jadot of Greenpeace observed "signs of an opening up".

Later in the day there was a further meeting with environmental scientists and experts in the presence of Hulot and the 85-year-old philosopher and one-time *résistance* fighter, Edgar Morin. They likewise had good things to say about their meeting with Sarkozy and Juppé.

"The mere presence of Edgar Morin was enough to turn the discussion towards humanist issues and global topics," said the specialist for species diversity, Yvon Le Maho. "The expertise and the way in which politics can test out different theories were at the heart of the discussion."

Sarkozy has promised to hold in the autumn an environmental "Grenelle"—a conference bringing together government representatives, environmental groups, unions and business federations to negotiate concrete measures for environmental protection. The term "Grenelle" refers to the May 1968 agreement—hammered out in the Labour Ministry on Paris' Rue de Grenelle—between the unions, business associations and the government that was used to strangle the general strike of that year.

The embrace of the right-wing Sarkozy government by environmentalists, animal rights groups and human rights activists is a development that requires closer scrutiny. Such figures are predominantly drawn from better-off sections of the middle class and tend to detach their own sphere of interest from broader social issues.

In this case, they are allowing themselves to be used to provide a "progressive" cover for Sarkozy's attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of working people. The

new government sees an opportunity to use humanitarian and environmental issues to advance its own agenda.

Thus the topic of climate change, which plays an important role in Juppé's ministry, can be used to exert diplomatic pressure on the US, which has so far refused to endorse international climate treaties. Similarly, the new foreign minister Kouchner, formerly of the Socialist Party, who helped found Doctors Without Borders and became a vocal advocate of the so-called "humanitarian" wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, will be used to provide a "human rights" cover for a more militarist and interventionist foreign policy.

Juppé and Sarkozy have made clear that their concern for environmental questions ends where the interests of French corporations and banks begin. This is particularly the case with regard to the development and production of genetically modified foodstuffs and the building of a new type of EPR nuclear reactor.

Already, only a few days after Sarkozy's assumption of power, a certain division of labour has emerged between the new president and his head of government, Fillon. The former strives to establish a broader base of support for his anti-working class policies, while the latter is responsible for the tough work of putting them into practice.

Amongst the laws to be pushed through this summer is the introduction of a fixed minimal prison sentence for repeat offenders. Such a law would violate the French constitution and the European convention on human rights, which both stipulate that punishment be appropriate to the individual offence.

In addition, the government wants to lower the age for the imprisonment of juvenile repeat offenders from 18 to 16, which means 16-year-olds will be treated as adults. Experts expect this measure to lead to a drastic increase in the number of juvenile prisoners.

Other prioritized measures on Fillon's legislative agenda include restrictions on the right to strike and increased labour flexibility. One measure would legally require the continuation of a minimum level of service in the event of public transport strikes. Fillon has said he will discuss such proposals with the unions and called upon them to make their own suggestions by the end of the summer. He added, however: "If they fail to do that by the end of the summer, we will submit our own draft at the beginning of September".

The government is not giving priority to a consolidation of the national budget. Although France's level of indebtedness violates the Maastricht criteria drawn up by the European Union, French Budget Minister Eric Woerth has announced a "pause" in consolidating the budget. Debt-reduction will have to wait until the end of the upcoming legislative period: Tax cuts promised in the election campaign will have priority.

In this respect, the regime of Sarkozy and Fillon is following in the footsteps of other right-wing governments (Berlusconi in Italy, Bush in the US), whose main budget priority has been massive tax cuts for the rich, combined with increased military

expenditure. So-called "left" governments (Schröder in Germany, Prodi in Italy) have assumed the task of reducing budget deficits—at the expense of the working class electorate that provided the majority of votes to place them in power.

Sarkozy is seeking to exploit the disorientation in the working class resulting from the right-wing politics of the Socialist Party and its "left" adjutants—which made possible his election victory—in order to carry out a right-wing offensive. He knows he has only limited time at his disposal to implement an unpopular program that will inevitably provoke broad resistance.

In the meantime, the Socialist Party is preparing for an internal settling of scores. The knives have already been sharpened and the inevitable clash inside the party is being delayed only until the parliamentary election. Party chief François Hollande has announced he will not stand again for his post at the next party congress, but has declined to give a date for such a conference.

There are a number of rivals lining up to take over his post, all of whom stand in one way or another for a further shift to the right. There is Ségolène Royal, the party's defeated presidential candidate, who took steps in her election campaign to woo the right-wing bourgeois Union for French Democracy (UDF), led by François Bayrou. Then there is the former finance minister, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who claims that the Socialist Party was defeated because its campaign was insufficiently right wing. And there is Laurent Fabius, who was long regarded as a representative of the party's right wing, but is now posing as a "left".

The working class cannot take a step forward against Sarkozy without breaking with the Socialist Party, its "far left" hangers-on, and the trade unions, and developing an independent movement on the basis of an international socialist program.



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