

# France: Sarkozy woos Socialist Party and trade unions

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Gaullist leader Nicolas Sarkozy, who takes over the presidency of France on Wednesday, is offering cabinet posts to former Socialist Party ministers. In advance of his assumption of power, he has also met with the leaders of all of France's major trade union federations.

The new government will be put in place only after Sarkozy takes office, but it is widely expected that the newly elected president will appoint his close confidante François Fillon as prime minister on Thursday and complete the government line-up by next Monday at the latest. The government will have a provisional character and take final shape only after parliamentary elections on June 17.

The last few days have been dominated by intensive consultations and speculation over the composition of the future government. Last Friday, Sarkozy had a meeting with Hubert Védrine, the foreign minister in the Plural Left government (1997-2002), headed by then-Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin. According to media reports, Sarkozy has offered Védrine the post of foreign minister in his own government.

Bernard Kouchner, who for a brief period was health minister in the Jospin government, is also said to have been offered the office of foreign minister. Kouchner's political career has been eventful. The co-founder of the relief organization Médecins sans frontières (Doctors without Borders) held a number of senior government posts between 1988 and 1993 under several Socialist Party prime ministers. Between 1999 and 2001 he was the United Nations administrator in Kosovo. He then joined the Jospin government and in 2003 supported the US invasion of Iraq.

A third former member of the Jospin government regarded as a candidate for a ministerial post is Claude Allègre. The boyhood friend of Jospin and education minister from 1997 to 2000 refused to support the Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal in this month's

presidential election.

Védrine and Allègre are reported to have rejected Sarkozy's offer—at least for the time being. However, Allègre enthusiastically praised the incoming president. "The man impresses me. He has charisma and is extremely likeable," he told *Le Figaro*.

Kouchner, on the other hand, is said to have expressed interest in a ministerial post. According to a source close to Sarkozy, Kouchner is "ready to enter the government."

It remains to be seen if the new government will actually include a member of the Socialist Party. But the fact that such a possibility is being seriously considered is of great political significance. It once again demonstrates that Sarkozy's success is less the result of his own strength than the bankruptcy of the French "left."

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an earlier article that Sarkozy's election victory was primarily the result of the right-wing and cowardly policies of those organizations which were traditionally based on support from the working population. (See "Sarkozy's electoral victory and the bankruptcy of the French 'left'")

The right-wing Gaullist is now dependent on the support of these same "left" organizations to press ahead with his program of attacks on workers—a neo-liberal policy that is widely opposed by the French people.

In the short term, he hopes that his attempt to recruit former Socialist Party ministers will improve the chances of his party in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. He is anxious to allay fears that his confrontational style will unleash uncontrollable social conflict. And as the reaction of the newspaper *Libération* demonstrates, his efforts are not without success.

The nominally left newspaper, which had supported Royal in the election campaign, now writes that one could interpret Sarkozy's offers "purely as a tactical manoeuvre for the parliamentary elections." It continues, "A single swallow makes no spring for a government that remains

essentially right-wing.”

Nevertheless, *Libération* goes on to say, “One would have to be sectarian not to recognize that his government ... [might] be less conservative and free-market oriented than one feared. Let us judge it by its deeds...”

In fact, Sarkozy has made no concessions with regard to his right-wing, pro-big business program. He has lined up close allies known for their uncompromising adherence to neo-liberal policies for all of the government’s key ministries—economics, finance, labour, etc.

Sarkozy himself maintains closer relations with prominent business circles than any of his presidential predecessors. The best men at his marriage were two prominent industrialists. After his election on May 5 he took a brief vacation on the luxury yacht of a billionaire friend, and up until two years ago his brother, Guillaume, was vice president of the Medef business federation.

The new president is also refusing to give an inch on his hard line against young offenders and immigrants.

It is expected that the implementation of his program will provoke sharp resistance. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* warns: “So far, nearly every attempt at reform by a French government has ended with burning barricades.” It then quotes a prominent confidante of ex-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who noted: “Sarkozy still has to pass the barricade test.”

This is why Sarkozy is now stretching out his hand to former Socialist ministers. He knows that they have no principled political differences with him and are ready to assist in suppressing opposition to his policies. The same applies to the unions.

On Monday and Tuesday Sarkozy met in succession with the leaders of all the large union federations. This is most unusual. Normally, such meetings take place only after the new president has officially assumed office.

The chairman of the Force Ouvrière (FO) union, Jean Claude Mailly, expressed his pleasure at the invitation. “This is an all-time first,” he said in an interview with *Libération*. “We will listen to what he has to say to us. For our part, we want to discuss content as well as methods.”

Mailly signalled his readiness to cooperate with Sarkozy. He declared, “Either the appointed government proceeds very quickly and enforces a series of measures, or it proves to be pragmatic and begins to consult, seek agreement and negotiate over the outstanding issues. We will obviously plead for the latter course. On a question like unemployment insurance, for example, it is necessary to carry out negotiations.”

Other union leaders put forward similar positions. All of them avowed their readiness to cooperate with the government in the implementation of “reforms”—a synonym for welfare cuts—as long as they are accepted as partners.

François Chérèque of the CFDT said: “The answers to economic and social questions at the centre of public debate must be tackled with the active participation of the social partners.... The method chosen by the head of state to implement reforms will be crucial.” Bernard Thibault of the CGT stressed his basic agreement with this position: “The trade unions are a priori neither a force for opposition nor a force for cooperation,” he said.

The conservative newspaper *Figaro* expressed its satisfaction: “Not that the unions questioned the election result. Quite the opposite. All unanimously welcomed the revival of democracy and the legitimacy which the result provided Nicolas Sarkozy.”

While some Socialist ex-ministers are preparing for possible entry into a government led by Fillon, the Socialist Party as a whole is preparing a further shift to the right. On Sunday, Socialist Party chairman François Hollande announced new plans to create a “large party of the left” after the parliamentary elections. It should, he said, cover “the whole sphere of the left, into the left-centre or the centre, but not the extreme left.”

“Centre” is the official term used in French politics to describe the right-wing bourgeois UDF of François Bayrou. Hollande’s latest declaration must therefore be seen as an attempt to close ranks with Bayrou. Even the term “social democratic,” which traditionally has a right-wing connotation within the French Socialist Party, is too “left” for Hollande. Social democracy is “an aging model, which stems from the vocabulary of the 1970s or 1980s,” he said.



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