

Divisions erupt in the French Socialist Party

Antoine Lerougetel, Peter Schwarz
30 June 2007

The knives have come out in France's Socialist Party (PS) following its defeats in the presidential and parliamentary elections. The party's national council meeting held last weekend in Paris was dominated by sharp divisions between the camp of presidential candidate Ségolène Royal and the party apparatus, led by her former partner François Hollande, the PS first secretary. Many of the 306 delegates attending the meeting attacked Royal, and she, for her part, disavowed the party by refusing to turn up at the gathering of its highest body.

During the presidential election campaign Royal shifted the Socialist Party further to the right. She embraced the nationalism and the law-and-order rhetoric of her Gaullist opponent Nicolas Sarkozy and made overtures to the centre-right politician François Bayrou, a former ally of the Gaullists. She went so far as to suggest that she might appoint Bayrou prime minister if she were to win the presidency.

After her defeat on May 6 her agenda emerged ever more clearly: A breach with the traditional "left" allies of the Socialist Party in favour of an alliance with Bayrou's newly formed Democratic Movement (MoDem), and a shift of the official party line in a more openly pro-capitalist, Blairite direction.

Last week Royal went even further and publicly repudiated her own election programme. She told the media that two central planks of her platform—a monthly minimum wage of 1,500 euros gross and the application of the 35-hour week to the entire population—were "not credible" and had only been included in her campaign at the insistence of the party.

Manuel Valls, one of the few delegates who defended Royal at the national council meeting, left no doubt about the political orientation of her camp. In a speech which could have been made by Sarkozy, he put the PS's electoral defeat down to its insufficiently right-wing stance.

"Lacking a realistic approach to globalisation, the PS lost its credibility with the working classes who feel most threatened by economic relocations and immigration," Valls said. "On the question of work we did not grasp the essential issue, the need to enhance the value of labour, the fair payment for work according to merit which Nicolas Sarkozy has harnessed."

He continued by exalting law and order and attacking immigrants. "Opposition to law and order and empathy with deviant behaviour have profoundly alienated us from our working class constituency, which is the direct victim of

violence. Opposition to law and order must not be the rallying call of our political family," he told the national council, and: "We must stop thinking that uncontrolled immigration does not contribute to the social breakdown of the poorest people, whether they be French or immigrants." He spoke out against "mass legalisations" and called for "vigilance on marriage procedures" amongst immigrants.

Even muted opposition in the Socialist Party leadership to this right-wing stampede was a long time coming. Royal, supported by the media, prepared to take over the leadership of the party. The conservative daily *Le Figaro* commented that Royal "is now set on winning the leadership of the PS and, more broadly, the leadership of the opposition to Nicolas Sarkozy."

Royal campaigned for the immediate renewal of the PS leadership, instead of waiting for the next congress due in autumn of 2008 after the municipal elections. She indicated that she herself was prepared to take over the post of first secretary of the PS, at present occupied by Hollande. She also demanded that the PS candidate for the 2012 presidential elections should be nominated immediately—again proposing herself as the best candidate.

Bypassing the party hierarchy, Royal invoked the membership and the support of the media to corroborate her claim for leadership. A huge portion of the alleged 300,000 members joined the party via the internet during Royal's election campaign. All they had to do was to pay 20 euros. They are considered Royal supporters. Most of them, however, have never surfaced again and exist only on paper.

The party officialdom finally reacted to Royal's offensive after the second round of the parliamentary elections June 17. There is of course an element of self-preservation involved—the reaction of an apparatus against a politician who, in true American style, is acting over their heads and completely independently of any party decisions. There are, however, also profound political reasons why Royal's campaign suddenly bogged down.

The second round of the parliamentary election revealed the massive opposition to Sarkozy's right-wing social policies. The incautious announcement by economic Minister Jean-Louis Borloo of government plans to increase the purchase tax (VAT) by 5 percent was sufficient to knock all the predictions on the outcome of the election on their head. Instead of more than 400

the Gaullist UMP only won 323 seats in the 577-deputy National Assembly. The Socialist Party, with 205 seats, did much better than expected.

This served as a warning, or a reminder, that the Socialist Party, which has served the French ruling class so well in controlling the working class over the last three decades, is still needed. To liquidate it along the lines proposed by Royal would create the danger of a movement of the working class emerging outside the present political set-up and turning in a revolutionary direction.

Most of the speeches delivered at the national council attacked Royal along these lines. Martine Aubry, a former minister, said: "I don't think we lost because we defended the minimum wage of 1,500 euros, I think we lost because we did not defend it enough, because we did not defend adequately the fair distribution of wealth in our country." Henri Weber, a supporter of PS "left" Laurent Fabius, slammed Royal's overtures to François Bayrou. He chided her for speaking out against the minimum wage of 1,500 euros, "which had been discussed and unanimously adopted."

The different factions in the PS "parliament" of national and regional leaders and party functionaries and the national bureau united behind Hollande. There will be no early leadership election and he will stay at the head of the party until the autumn of 2008. A motion to this effect was passed with only two or three dissenting votes. Most of Royal's camp followers kept a low profile and voted for Hollande's motion.

Pierre Mauroy, a former prime minister, said: "The Socialist Party is a big organisation and will not be taken by assault." Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a PS "left," opined: "The putsch has been aborted."

The recognition that the Socialist Party plays an invaluable role in French political life as a safety valve should not be confused with a shift to the left. In fact, one speaker after another affirmed the party's commitment to the defence of capitalism.

Hollande exclaimed: "When I hear that we must make our *aggiornamento* [bringing an institution up to date] on the issue of the market! That was done long ago, certainly in the beginning of the eighties." Bernard Delanoë, the mayor of Paris, assured the delegates that "To be a socialist today, is to accept that the market economy is no longer up for discussion, it is a fact." He continued defending the vast accumulation of wealth already owned by the capitalist class: "Yes, we are for the sharing of wealth, but we know that before sharing it, we must first be willing to create it, and therefore, give ourselves the means."

Aubry boasted that the PS had "reconciled France and the French with the market." And Weber advocated a globalised capitalism with a human face: "All the European socialists have to solve the same problem: how to control and humanise the new capitalism, a capitalism which is no longer national and industrial as it was last century, but a globalised capitalism

dominated by finance."

While leading Socialist Party figures are fighting amongst themselves over the best tactic for preventing the working class from breaking free of bourgeois politics, Nicolas Sarkozy is recruiting prominent PS members into his government in preparation for future confrontations with wide layers of the population.

Following the defection of Bernard Kouchner—the founder of Doctors without Borders and Sarkozy's new foreign minister—from the Socialist Party, Fadela Amara, PS councillor in Clermont Ferrand and well-known social activist in the immigrant community, and Jean-Marie Bockel, self-proclaimed Blairite PS mayor of Mulhouse and senator of the Haut-Rhin department, have now joined Prime Minister François Fillon's cabinet.

While Kouchner was immediately expelled from the Socialist Party, there was no outcry at the national council against the others who have followed Royal's arguments to their logical conclusion and joined the Sarkozy government. Catherine Hoffart, the PS delegate from Mulhouse, reported that the "departure of Jean-Marie Bockel was a real earthquake for us," but that, nevertheless, the PS town hall majority in Mulhouse "remains loyal to Jean-Marie Bockel."

Sarkozy himself has sent a clear signal to his supporters that recruiting former Socialist Party members to the government does not mean the abandonment of his right-wing policies. In an unprecedented step, he invited Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the National Front, for talks to the Elysée presidential palace—and this despite the fact that the National Front had its worst election result since the early 1980s and is not represented in parliament. Previous presidents had always rejected any contact with Le Pen. It was the first such invitation in 30 years.

By holding talks with the neo-fascist Le Pen at the Elysée, Sarkozy makes clear to his right-wing supporters and the security forces, where the National Front has a substantial following, that his recruitment of "left" figures signifies no weakening of his reactionary agenda.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact