

Sarkozy television interview seeks to reassure French corporate elite

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy gave a 100-minute, nationally televised interview on April 24, covering a wide-ranging set of topics in domestic and foreign policy.

In an event ostensibly designed to shore up flagging public support for his government, Sarkozy sought to allay concerns within the French ruling elite in the face of negative economic news and mounting opposition from the working class. He sought to reassure big business that he would press ahead with his programme of economic “reforms” targeting social welfare provisions and workers’ conditions, and that close collaboration with the trade unions would allow him to push through the desired cuts.

Sarkozy’s standing has not recovered from the first major strike wave against his social cuts, the October-November 2007 railway and energy workers’ strikes in defence of their “special regime” pensions. Already embittered by the pro-business meaning of his campaign slogan—“work more to earn more”—and continuing high unemployment combined with rapid price inflation, workers were outraged by his flaunting of a super-rich lifestyle and marriage to Italian ex-supermodel Carla Bruni.

Sarkozy’s personal eccentricities were broadly seen as provocative under conditions of slowing economic growth in France as a result of the US mortgage crisis.

This year has seen an unusual extension of strike activity into the private sector, with workers demanding higher wages to keep pace with inflation. Strikes have hit retail stores such as Carrefour and Virgin Megastore, Coca-Cola, France’s major ports, and restaurants staffed by undocumented immigrant workers.

High school students have been striking for weeks against planned job cuts in teaching, and public sector workers have announced strike plans for May 15. Although the 2007 public-sector and railway strikes were defeated, due to the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy, more than 1 million of these workers attended protests in late January.

Public approval of Sarkozy in opinion polls, which dipped below 40 percent last month, has recently dropped even further. According to an Ifop poll published in *Paris Match*, 72 percent of those polled disapproved of Sarkozy’s policies, 65 percent said he had failed to fulfill his campaign commitments, and 53

percent said his measures hurt their purchasing power. Commenting on the poll, *Le Monde* noted that of all the presidents of the 50-year-old French Fifth Republic, Sarkozy was the most unpopular after one year in office.

Bourgeois political circles worry that, as class tensions rise and Sarkozy keeps announcing social cuts, the political situation could spin out of control. On April 17, former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin called for a slowing of the reforms and asked Sarkozy to “put them in a hierarchy” so that the population could better understand his goals. Current Prime Minister François Fillon said he was expecting “guidelines for the coming weeks and months to get an orientation on the reforms that must be implemented.”

Sarkozy’s April 24 interview began by addressing these concerns. Openly admitting the unpopularity of his reforms, Sarkozy said, “Of course, I didn’t think that I would spend five years commenting on my excellent poll numbers.”

In a dig at Raffarin, whose government abandoned plans for hospital and Social Security cuts in 2003, after it was destabilised by opposition to its pension cuts and its handling of the summer 2003 heat wave, Sarkozy opposed any slowing or broader explanation of the reforms. He said, “For years, governments have been putting their reforms in hierarchies. They arrive saying: we’ll do this reform, and then we’ll see about the next. They accomplish one reform if they have courage, and no reforms if they don’t.... I’ve launched 55 reforms because everything has to go together.”

He declared his continued support for an entire raft of right-wing measures and social cuts. He called for the pay-in period for pension plans to be increased to 41 years, a measure that is to be discussed with the unions at a meeting with Labor Minister Xavier Bertrand on April 28. He reiterated support for increased medical fees, as well as for a law sharply reducing unemployment benefits for workers who refuse two job offers, regardless of distance from the worker’s residence, salary, or working conditions.

He bluntly stated that he would not back down on job cuts in education, or on his opposition to undocumented immigrants’ demands for a general regularisation of their status.

Asked why the “economic growth spurt” he had promised in his election campaign had not materialised, Sarkozy cited four

international economic factors: the doubling of the price of petroleum, the US subprime mortgage crisis, the euro's rise versus the dollar, and massive price increases for food and raw materials. These factors, he said, were all outside of his control, and he concluded that the only possible response was to hasten the pace of his social cuts.

Sarkozy attempted to explain the economic crisis by demagogically denouncing "financial capitalism" that is "walking on its head." Such language rings particularly hollow from a man with intimate ties to top French financiers like Arnaud Lagardère and Vincent Bolloré. Sarkozy borrowed the private jet of the latter, a billionaire financier, to take Carla Bruni on a Christmas vacation to Luxor, Egypt.

Sarkozy said he did not know whether he believed the Société Générale's story that its multibillion-euro losses announced in January resulted solely from the operations of one low-ranking rogue trader. He did not explain why his government, including Fillon, stood by the Société Générale's story at the time.

Much of the rest of the interview was dedicated to Sarkozy's hypocritical presentation of himself as a democratic individual who cares for the little man. He promised that he would create an Active Solidarity Revenue (RSA) programme, encouraging unemployed workers to take extremely low-paying jobs by making up the income loss workers suffered by going from unemployment benefits to work. However, saying the programme would be expensive, he noted that it would not be put in place until 2009.

In his discussion of foreign policy, Sarkozy again attempted to strike a democratic pose. He largely omitted from discussion two central features of his foreign policy—its focus on bargaining with Third World countries to obtain contracts for French energy, military and transport infrastructure firms, and its alignment with the Bush administration.

Referring to recent demonstrations and riots in Tibet in the lead-up to this year's Beijing Olympics, he acknowledged Tibet to be "part of China," but declared that he was "shocked" by "what happened in Tibet." He vowed to continue to work for the release of Ingrid Betancourt, a French-Colombian dual citizen currently held captive by Colombian rebel guerillas of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). He reiterated his policy of sending French troops to Afghanistan to bolster the US occupation, justified on the grounds that the Taliban were opposed to "French values."

This pseudo-democratic charade is exposed by Sarkozy's attempts to rehabilitate French colonialism. Last year, while promoting plans for a Mediterranean Union, Sarkozy said that relations between France and its former colony, Algeria, had always been a "love affair."

He also became the first president of the Fifth Republic to welcome to the Elysée presidential palace the French neo-fascist leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who, as a paratroopers lieutenant, helped torture prisoners in Algiers during the Algerian war for independence.

The clumsiness of Sarkozy's attempts to present democratic credentials to the masses, and the cosmetic character of his proposed economic concessions to workers, underscore that he is aiming principally to solidify support for his government in the bourgeoisie. With regards to the working class, as he briefly but clearly indicated in the interview, the goal is to suppress opposition through his collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy.

At the close of the section of the interview dealing with economic questions, Sarkozy said, "I would like to pay my respects to the trade unions: our social democracy is moving in extraordinary ways, we have not seen anything like this since the Liberation [from the Nazi occupation of France during World War II]. One cannot govern a country without responsible trade union forces."

Sarkozy's comment was carefully worded, but clear. The unions are reprising their role at the end of the war, when, in collaboration with the US armed forces and the Stalinist French Communist Party, they supervised a no-strike policy aimed at preventing workers' factory councils and resistance units formed during the Liberation from undertaking a struggle for power. The Stalinists' slogan at the time was "strikes are the weapons of the trusts."

The unions, especially the Stalinist-dominated General Confederation of Labor (CGT), demonstrated their reliability to the government last year by strangling the October 2007 railway strike outright, and then opposing any political struggle against the government's "reforms" during the November strikes.

As his popularity collapses and more strikes erupt against his policies, Sarkozy is counting on continuing his close collaboration with the trade unions to keep the working class in check politically.

Sarkozy himself admitted as much in an April 18 editorial in *Le Monde*, titled "For Strong Unions." He wrote: "Right after the presidential elections [of May 2007] and even before going to the Elysée, I met with trade unions and business groups to listen to them and ask for their positions on the first actions I was planning on taking. Since then, I have continued to very regularly meet with each of their representatives. I know them well, we sometimes have divergences, but our dialogue is always frank...."

"The reform of the special regime pensions [was] successfully carried out last fall, thanks to an intense period of coordination at a national level, and negotiations in each enterprise affected by the reform."



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