

France: Ségolène Royal fears return of “class struggle”

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15 April 2009

Ségolène Royal, the defeated Socialist Party (PS) candidate in the 2007 French presidential elections, has provoked a major controversy in France, coming out in defense of several groups of workers who, threatened with mass firings, have sequestered their bosses at their workplaces. Such statements by a thoroughly establishment politician like Royal suggest the intensity of the class tensions now emerging in France.

Repeated boss-nappings, typically to demand redundancy payments, have become a major political question in France. Workers have held their employers at a 3M pharmaceutical plant in Pithiviers, a Scapa adhesives plant at Bellegarde-sur-Valserine, a Sony plant in Pontonx-sur-l'Adour—where Sony-France CEO Serge Foucher was held—and a Caterpillar plant near Grenoble.

Royal made these comments in an extensive April 4 interview with the weekly *Journal du Dimanche* (JDD). Asked about Caterpillar management officials held by workers, Royal said, “It’s not pleasant to be held, and it is illegal to deprive someone of his freedom of movement. However, no one humiliated or brutalized them. Those who are threatened, trampled, and scorned are the workers who are lied to before they are kicked out the door.”

She continued, “There is a delinquency of certain hyper-privileged people, the way they loot the resources of companies that are firing people. We are forced to submit to an iniquitous disorder; there is a profound anarchy of the system.... When one hears certain right-wing officials earnestly explaining that tax cuts for the rich protect the poor, one would think one has returned to the Ancien Régime [monarchy, before the 1789 French Revolution]. So, is it a return to the class struggle? Maybe.”

Such statements testify to the immense shifts in political consciousness taking place under the impact of the global economic crisis. Working people are outraged by the hundreds of billions of euros mobilized to bail out the

banks, after decades during which state officials and the trade union tops jointly justified social cuts by claiming it was impossible to find a few billion euros for the population’s basic needs.

As executives of banks and auto companies take home seven-figure salaries while posting big losses and firing large numbers of workers, corporate management is coming to be seen as a class as reactionary and parasitic as the pre-Revolutionary aristocracy. The operation of the capitalist market throws hundreds of thousands of workers out of work in France, and tens of millions of workers are losing their jobs worldwide. When Royal’s speechwriters try to find words to echo popular sentiment about capitalism, the words that come to mind are “iniquitous” and “anarchy.”

In talking about the Ancien Régime, Royal speaks for layers of the establishment afraid that workers’ struggles to protect their jobs and workplaces could, with certain shifts in political consciousness, coalesce into a revolutionary struggle for power by the workers.

Boss-nappers currently enjoy significant public support. An April 10 article in *Le Monde*, “Why the boss-nappings are popular,” gave the results of two opinion polling agencies on the topic. CSA showed that 45 percent of people polled found such a method of protest “acceptable.” IFOP found that 63 percent understood why the workers detained their bosses, and 30 percent supported such actions outright.

Le Monde added, “The sympathy for strikes and demonstrations now seems to be spreading to more radical actions. The revelations on the remuneration of some bosses, the successive announcements of redundancy plans in profit-making companies, the dividends paid to shareholders in a context of general recession, have provoked a broad feeling of indignation.”

A statement April 3 by Henri Guaino, special advisor to President Nicolas Sarkozy, gives a sense of the extreme

anxiety of the administration. Citing a “very deep crisis,” Guaino said, “Everything could slide out of control, the political risks are strong, the risk of violence, of revolt is very great, and it can degenerate.” He added, “All politicians, all leaders must be conscious of this problem.”

For this reason, the bourgeoisie has found it impossible to move against the boss-nappers, despite the draconian penalties laws prescribe for such actions—five-year prison sentences and fines of up to €75,000. For the time being, only a minority of conservatives are calling for the laws to be applied.

Broader layers of the bourgeoisie are seeking to defuse hostility to capitalism by falsely promoting certain figures of the political establishment as its representatives. In this context, it is worth noting that the JDD, which interviewed Royal, is owned by Arnaud Lagardère, a multi-billionaire with holdings in finance, media, and defense industries and a close personal friend of Sarkozy.

They hope that, despite massive social anger, it will be possible to fire workers and shut down their plants with the assistance of the trade unions. Thus Laurent Joffrin wrote in his April 10 editorial in *Libération* that “in the majority of the cases we are concerned with, the workers had accepted the principle of the reduction of the workforce. They kidnapped their bosses in order to obtain a fairer compensation.” Joffrin blamed such conflicts on “the lack of social dialogue in many enterprises.”

The JDD made somewhat off-key attempts to present Royal as a radical, writing, “She whom her enemies accused of crypto-centrism is, in fact, the reddest of the socialists: an angry woman speaking to an angry country.”

As masses of people seek someone who expresses their instinctive opposition to the capitalist crisis, such promotion has apparently given Royal a boost in opinion polls. In an April 8-9 poll, asking which politician could best stand against Sarkozy, Royal pushed New Anti-Capitalist Party leader Olivier Besancenot, for some time in the lead, into second place. She polled 14 percent, up 9 points, with Besancenot stable at 13 percent, and PS First Secretary Martine Aubry at 9 percent.

Royal is, however, a hardened defender of capitalism, whose embrace of workers’ struggles is intended to confuse and stifle, rather than lead a political movement of the working class against the current crisis. A member of the Socialist Party’s right wing, she is primarily known for her repeated attempts to arrange an unusual alliance between the PS and the right-wing MoDem of François

Bayrou. During her 2007 presidential campaign, she advocated pension cuts and harsher penalties for juvenile offenders. After she lost the election, she denounced her own calls for an increase in the minimum wage during the campaign as an unrealistic policy forced upon her by other PS members.

Perhaps the best antidote to any misconception that Royal is some sort of insurgent supporter of the working class is her own JDD interview. Her proposal to end the crisis was to intensify negotiations between management and the trade unions—even though these negotiations have over the past two decades devastated the pensions and working conditions of the proletariat, with the resulting profits for the bourgeoisie feeding the criminal financial speculation that led to the present crisis.

Thus Royal bemoaned the “trade unions’ weakness,” adding, “With each crisis, one learns that the trade unions had sounded the alarm in advance, but in vain. If they were listened to, if difficulties were anticipated, the harm would be diminished.”

Royal came out in resolute opposition to the forms of political consciousness and social struggle that will be needed to defend workers and the economy against the depredations of the bourgeoisie. Noting that she was not a “Cassandra,” she said, “I neither predict nor desire a social insurrection.”

Even though she had previously described the ruling class as recalling the Ancien Régime aristocracy by its arrogance, she bluntly said, “The prejudice of little people against big people is stupid.”



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