

French presidential speech

Sarkozy pushes austerity, anti-immigrant chauvinism

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Conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy addressed a special joint session of Congress (the Senate and the National Assembly) held at the former royal palace of Versailles on June 22. The speech was billed as his response to June's European elections and a further response to the economic crisis, notably with a call for a public subscription to finance government spending—i.e., massive loans to the government paid for by the population.

Citing anonymous sources at the Elysée presidential palace before the speech, *Le Monde* wrote that the speech would address “the dissatisfaction expressed by Frenchmen, notably from the popular classes, who did not vote in the European elections.” The abstention in those elections was very high, at 59 percent, and concentrated in working class areas.

The resulting speech was a nationalist and anti-immigrant appeal to the traditions of class-collaborationist politics in France, making demagogic promises to maintain France's “social pact” while slashing the living conditions of the working class. His vision of this social pact was unflinchingly reactionary. He defined “equality” to be “upward social mobility based on merit and talent,” that is to say, a principle compatible with the grotesque levels of social inequality engendered by modern capitalism.

He made reactionary appeals to anti-immigrant sentiment and law and order, in an attempt to rouse the most backward elements in French society and divert attention from his regressive policies.

In a fundamental assault on individual liberties, he singled out the tiny minority of Muslim women in France who wear a burqa—a body-covering garment that leaves an opening for the eyes—and all but declared them to be outlaws. “I want to say this formally, the burqa is not welcome in France. We cannot accept in our country women imprisoned behind a veil, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity.”

The presentation of a measure to outlaw personal behaviour based on religious belief as a defence of women's rights is utterly cynical. Though Sarkozy presented it as an extension of secularist principles (*laïcité*) mandating the neutrality of the state on

religious matters, it is in fact a deliberate intrusion of the state on a matter of individual conduct that singles out a particular religion. It sets an extremely dangerous precedent, whereby the conduct or beliefs—be they religious, political or otherwise—can be illegalized simply on the say-so of the executive.

While Sarkozy promoted anti-Muslim bigotry by chastising women wearing burqas, he went out of his way to defend the influence of the Church. “There is no threat to us from clericalism. We are more threatened by a type of intolerance that stigmatizes all religious faith.”

Sarkozy also announced a program of prison building, cynically disguised in the language of victims' rights and even compassion for prisoners. “What does liberty mean for victims if their aggressors are not punished? How can we speak of justice when there are 82,000 sentences not carried out because there is no room in the prisons?” He added that prison building was necessary to protect the “dignity” of inmates currently in overcrowded prisons.

The economic policy Sarkozy outlined is the same as that of the bourgeoisie internationally: using the global economic crisis as a pretext for a permanent reduction in the living standards of the working class. Sarkozy expressed it thus in Versailles: “To consider the crisis as a parenthesis which will soon be closed, act as if everything were to start again as before, as if we were going to be able to think like we used to, behave as before, with the same criteria, the same methods, would be a fatal error.” He added, “The crisis frees us more to imagine another future.”

Sarkozy addressed himself to the budget deficit, which is currently projected to reach over 7 percent of GDP, or €140 billion. The national debt stands at 72.9 percent of GDP, according to the Insee national statistical institute. The EU Maastricht limits designed to protect the value of the euro set limits of 3 percent and 60 percent of GDP, respectively, for the yearly budget deficit and total debts of eurozone countries.

Sarkozy divided the deficit into a “structural deficit” that “must be reduced to zero by courageous reforms” because it “finances bad spending, waste, excess bureaucracy, and overly high

expenses.” The “good deficit” was that which “finances good investment.” As the speech subsequently made clear, the “bad investment” was that associated with social services for the working class, and the “good investment” was that related to keeping French capitalism technologically and financially competitive on world markets.

The speech’s signature measure was launching a one-time national subscription to pay for high-priority investment. “With the prime minister,” he said, “we will reorganize the cabinet. Its first task will be to reflect on our national priorities and to put in place a national subscription to finance them.”

Sarkozy did not specify where the money generated from the sale of bonds to the public would be used, mentioning only high-tech and environmentally friendly industry, research and education as possible priorities. Sarkozy’s proposed national subscription has turned out to be highly unpopular: 82 percent of those consulted in a June 25-26 Ifop poll said they did not intend to lend the government money.

His speech’s promises of “raising living standards” and “increasing well-being” are belied by the social cuts he insisted on in a continuation of his reactionary reform program. He announced further pension cuts: “Everything must be put on the table: retirement age, the pay-in period, special exceptions for difficult jobs. All options will be examined. The social partners [i.e., the trade unions and employers’ groups] will make propositions ... when the time for decisions comes, in mid-2010, I will assume my responsibilities.”

Sarkozy also announced that 16,000 teachers’ jobs are to be cut, as part of a broader elimination of 34,000 public service jobs, and more “control over health expenditure.”

He proposed an overhaul of the system of local government and the drastic reduction of the number of their elected representatives. The main source of local finance for social services, the “professional tax,” which is levied on local businesses, will be abolished. Alternative resources have not yet been announced.

As if to confirm the anti-working class priorities of the government, immediately prior to Sarkozy’s speech the Labour Ministry announced that the minimum wage would only be increased by the mandatory legal minimum of 1.3 percent on July 1. It will pass from €8.71 to €8.82 per hour. This is third straight year that Sarkozy has refused to give the traditional extra “thumb flick” increase to the minimum wage.

The first steps toward implementation of the proposals in Sarkozy’s speech have made clear his reliance on the collaboration of the parties of the bourgeois left, including the Socialist Party (Parti socialiste, PS) and the Stalinists of the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF).

Sarkozy has since reorganized his cabinet, promoting both his

right-wing, law-and-order ideology and his continuing absorption of the official left. The cabinet reshuffle raised Brice Hortefeux, a long-time political collaborator of Sarkozy, to the post of minister of the interior. Hortefeux’s record is further proof of the repressive confrontation Sarkozy is preparing against workers and youth. As immigration minister, Hortefeux earned his promotion by his police roundups of illegal immigrants and attacks on immigrant aid organisations in pursuance of his target of 26,000 deportations per year of *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants).

Sarkozy appointed Frédéric Mitterrand, the nephew of the former Socialist Party president François Mitterrand, as minister of culture. This propaganda coup is a continuation of his policy of “openness,” whereby Sarkozy has brought prominent Socialist Party figures such as Bernard Kouchner and Jack Lang into his team—allowing Sarkozy to pose as a president who unifies the nation by reaching across party lines.

On June 23, the National Assembly set up a commission of investigation of the burqa issue. This body, which was pressed for most notably by PCF deputy André Gérin of Vénissieux (a suburb of Lyon), is scheduled to deliver a report in November. Such a commission will pave the way for even greater attacks on basic individual liberties and democratic rights in France.

The timing of the report is also significant, as the commission will deliberate and produce its report during a time of rising social tensions. Social unrest is seen as inevitable after the summer holidays, as over 600,000 school leavers enter a barren labour market and unemployment rates rise to over 10 percent of the workforce. Already France is experiencing a wave of strikes, occupations and “boss-nappings” in the private sector, and mass movements are developing in the public sector.

The French bourgeoisie will seek to use the burqa commission and the collaboration of the trade unions to disorient and strangle working class protest. *Le Monde* wrote on June 24, “Mr. Sarkozy wants to avoid any social explosion, as the autumn will be marked by a continuous rapid growth of unemployment and the arrival of young people onto the jobs market. The head of state intends to involve the unions and intermediary bodies.”



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