

France: What is behind the Socialist Party's plans for a presidential primary?

Kumaran Ira
5 September 2009

The Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS) has endorsed the principle of a US-style open primary system, allowing all self-described left-wing voters to vote on who, among a field of PS candidates, should be the PS presidential nominee. As documents produced by advocates of the measure show, it is a reactionary initiative to rally popular support behind the PS, despite growing popular disillusionment with its pro-business policies.

The principle of the open primary has long been associated with the PS's defeated 2007 presidential candidate, Ségolène Royal. In leadership contests inside the PS, she received significant numbers of votes from new members who had joined through the Internet and at a reduced dues level of €20 during her 2006 nomination. At the Reims Congress of the PS last November, she spoke of "opening the party to the masses" and the "transformation of our party into a big popular party."

On August 26, the French daily *Libération* published the text of a "call for a popular primary open to all citizens of the left!" initiated by Terra Nova, a think-tank linked to the PS. Since then, Terra Nova's proposal has been embraced by virtually the entire leadership of the PS.

As the Terra Nova proposal circulated, other prominent PS leaders quickly fell into line. Former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius called the open primaries "inevitable." Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë said, "I think that indeed we have to open the doors and the windows and invite in all the citizens of the left."

Finally, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry—the leader of the more ostensibly state-interventionist faction inside the PS, and Royal's main rival—threw her support behind the proposal. On the eve of party's annual conference held August 28-30 in La Rochelle, the PS's first secretary wrote an editorial in *Le Monde*, advocating "profoundly changing the practices and political rules inside our party," especially "organizing open primaries to select our candidate."

These changes were made official at the La Rochelle Conference. In her opening speech, Aubry called for "a

change in the PS from A to Z." She announced that "Members will be asked for their agreement on the principle of open primaries to designate the candidate in the 2012 presidential elections."

Royal stated, "I have always thought that the PS should open itself up, broaden itself. I see that the right ideas are going forward. But the decision to act on them must be taken quickly."

As documents produced by the Terra Nova foundation make clear, the goal of instituting the open primary is to repair the PS's failing electoral fortunes. In successive periods of PS rule—the presidency of François Mitterrand (1981-1995), then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's Plural Left government (1997-2002)—the PS has discredited itself before the masses with its austerity measures, social cuts and privatizations of public enterprises.

Since Jospin's defeat in the 2002 presidential election, the PS has suffered numerous setbacks, most recently its defeat in the 2007 presidential elections and a very poor showing in the 2009 European elections. Internal divisions inside the party boiled over at the most recent PS congress, held last November in Reims. The Royal faction publicly accused Aubry of fraud in the course of her election as party leader at Reims.

In a report titled "For a French-style primary," Terra Nova wrote: "The succession of Lionel Jospin is still not assured. The cause is structural: there is no lasting institutional procedure that allows the selection of a candidate to take over as party leader. Under these conditions, only the emergence of a 'natural' leader will allow a resolution of the crisis.... It is vital for the Socialist Party to put in place an efficient and lasting procedure of selection."

Traditionally, the nomination of the PS presidential candidate has been based on a vote of the party membership. However, Terra Nova advocates that the nomination should be open to anyone claiming to be a socialist voter: "We call for a popular primary, open to the votes of sympathizers, so that citizens of the left and of progress can choose their candidate to the presidential election."

Terra Nova then explains the political motivation for this shift: “It is a question of favouring the appearance of modernity and the dynamics offered by the open primary. There is an electoral dynamic: the open primary produces first a strong legitimacy for the candidate. The strength of the installation of [2006 Italian Prime Minister Romano] Prodi by 4 million citizens, or of [US President Barack] Obama by 35 million, is far beyond the designation by 200,000 French Socialists.”

In short, it is designed to give the PS presidential candidate a big boost of attention in the press, and to give a semblance of political legitimacy to a PS candidate who will carry out right-wing measures against the working class.

Terra Nova continued: “There is also a democratic dynamic: such a primary corresponds to citizens’ desire for political participation. The example of the ‘Veltroni primary’ in Italy—3.5 million voters for an election without any real content—testifies to this participatory jubilation.”

This comment goes to the heart of the primary initiative’s anti-democratic content. The initiative seeks to cynically manipulate popular interest in politics, swaying voters into backing the pro-business candidate of the PS. The method is offering them an electoral spectacle similar to the Italian situation, that is, “without any real content.”

The foreign models which Terra Nova holds out for the PS primary are highly significant. In both cases—Prodi in Italy and Obama in the US—the candidates won the election because they were falsely promoted by the media and the political establishment as representing a break with their right-wing predecessors. This matches the situation in France, where the PS seeks to unseat conservative incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy.

In the Italian primary of 2005, a centre-left political party coalition (l’Unione) selected Romano Prodi as its candidate. Prodi would go on to defeat then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in the 2006 elections. The primary was used to create a political atmosphere in which Prodi—a big-business politician with plans for right-wing policies once in office—was presented as a legitimate representative of working class opinion in Italy.

In fact, Prodi’s government—with the collaboration of the entire official Italian left, including successor organisations of the Italian Communist Party such as Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation)—continued to carry out Berlusconi’s policies. While in power, the Prodi government oversaw Italian troop deployments in Afghanistan and Lebanon and plans to expand a US airbase in Italy. On domestic policy, he carried out the privatisation of public enterprises, pension cuts, and fiscal austerity

measures.

The attempt to set up Walter Veltroni as Prodi’s successor in the 2007 primaries—though praised by Terra Nova for its empty spectacle—was a failure. L’Unione was severely defeated in the 2008 polls, which were marked by large-scale abstention by working class voters. The result was the return to power of Berlusconi and a significant rise in the political fortunes of the ultra-right, notably the election of a neo-fascist mayor in Rome.

Terra Nova also repeatedly returns to the example of US President Barack Obama. It decries the fact that, given the current requirement that the PS presidential candidate receive the support of 15 percent of the PS national committee, “under current conditions, a ‘French Barack Obama’ would have no chance to emerge.”

Terra Nova reveals perhaps more than it intended in this comment. The Barack Obama campaign was itself largely a creation of the US political and media establishment, rapidly raising a previously unknown and relatively inexperienced candidate to the highest public office. Campaigning on the ambiguous slogan of “change,” Obama won elections that were broadly interpreted as a popular repudiation of the preceding Bush administration.

Since coming to power, however, Obama has continued and deepened the reactionary policies of his predecessor Bush. The US occupation of Iraq continues, and the number of US troops in Afghanistan has doubled. While handing over trillions to the banks and financial aristocracy, he has carried out a massive social austerity program—overseeing the bankruptcy of US auto companies, destroying education and social benefits by denying states necessary funding, and preparing a reactionary health “reform” whose effect will be to limit the health care available to working people.

The result has been a catastrophic collapse in the living standards of the American working class.

The fact that such precedents are cited as the standard to which the PS should aspire is yet another signal that in 2012 the PS and its allied parties will seek to continue the anti-working-class policies of Sarkozy.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact