

After French regional election victory

Socialist Party leaders call for austerity policies

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The *Parti Socialiste* (PS) victory in the March regional elections is widely seen as a preparation for a potential return to national office, perhaps in the 2012 presidential election. According to an Ifop poll published on March 28, conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy's approval rating is 30 percent—the lowest since his election in 2007. A March 22 poll suggested that 58 percent of French people would rather not see Sarkozy run for a second term in 2012.

The difficulty facing the PS is that, while voters supported it principally to express their hostility to Sarkozy's austerity policies, the PS' program is not substantially different from Sarkozy's. This is shown not only by the well-known record of social austerity and industrial decay accumulated by the PS governments of President François Mitterrand (1981-1995) and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997-2002), but by the PS' current social-democratic counterparts in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. In response to the Greek debt crisis, they are slashing social spending to satisfy the banks and financial markets.

The cynical task of presenting this policy in the best possible light fell to Manuel Valls, a PS deputy and mayor of the Paris suburb of Evry, in a recent front-page interview in the pages of *Le Monde* titled "We must break with verbal lyricism."

Valls explained, "The left must propose another way of doing politics," calling for the PS to "give up verbal lyricism and prepare a credible alternative." That is, the PS must advocate social austerity politics, in order to avoid stimulating dangerous expectations in the

working class and upsetting the financial markets.

Valls called for pension cuts and hinted at a possible privatization of the pension system: "The role of the left is not to deny democratic changes, nor to hide the size of deficits ... The left can advocate an *à la carte* pension system and increasing the pay-in period."

This year, Sarkozy is negotiating pension cuts with the trade unions—including lengthening the pay-in period beyond 41 years and increasing the retirement age beyond 60. During the regional election campaign, leading PS figures including First Secretary Martine Aubry also called for increasing the pension age by 2 years, to 62.

In this context, Valls called for an immediate "national pact" on pensions, including with trade unions, employers' groups, "and also with the majority," that is, Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

In early February the Sarkozy government submitted its stability program for 2010-2013 to the European Commission. It foresees a reduction in the public deficit from 8.2 percent to 3 percent of GDP by 2013, entailing a cut in government spending on the order of €100 billion.

Valls unreservedly supported such policies. *Le Monde* asked: "Does the size of the deficits not deprive [the PS] of all room for maneuver?" Valls replied that deficits "will leave all upcoming governments with no options besides responsibility and austerity."

He also attacked the so-called 35-hour work week law—introduced by Aubry when she was a minister in the PS-led Plural Left government (1997-2002) and

now repealed by Sarkozy—for “damaging our competitiveness.” He called for a system of “flexicurity,” that is, a Danish-style social system where it is easier to fire workers and place them on unemployment benefits.

A politician of Spanish origin, Valls made a right-wing bow to patriotism: “Born a foreigner, I am proud of having become French and I am always moved when the Marseillaise [the French national anthem] is sung.” In line with UMP politicians—and, until recently, the line of the entire PS, who participated fully in the anti-burqa commission set up by Sarkozy last year—Valls favors a reactionary ban of the burqa in all public places.

Valls is known as a Blairite figure inside the PS, trying to fashion an openly free-market, right-wing justification for PS policies. During the 2007 presidential election, during which he was a close ally of PS candidate Ségolène Royal, Valls said: “We can go some way with the majority as long as they give us a hearing on subjects we agree on. I’m thinking of the means we should give to the judiciary, the struggle against crime, and, again, the immigration issue.” Echoing both Sarkozy and Royal, he said that the PS should express its opposition to “a society of state hand-outs.”

When he announced his candidacy for the PS 2012 presidential primary last June, Valls proposed the PS should cease calling itself “socialist.” He said, “We must transform from top to bottom the PS’ functioning ... [and] change the name, because the word socialism is itself obsolete; it refers to 19th-century conceptions.”

While such a name change would have been a frank acknowledgement of the PS’ right-wing, anti-working class character, it was not adopted largely for fear of exposing the PS before voters with socialist sympathies. Thus, in the recent interview, *Le Monde* fretted: “As a candidate in the primaries, do you not risk appearing as a marginal right-wing figure?”

Valls replied: “I do not need to prove that I am a man of the left. What is at stake is our credibility and our ability to govern in these difficult times. This is the purpose of my candidacy.”

Such a statement is a devastating exposure of the rotten state of what passes for the “left” or “far left” in France. Valls is correct in assuming that the PS will be

able to carry out various verbal shifts as it attempts to return to power, without the least challenge from the left by any established force in French politics.

Neither right-wing diatribes from top PS officials, nor the PS’ record will shake the insistence by forces like the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) and the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* that the PS is part of the “left.” Were they to speak frankly, they would say that they share Valls’ opinion that revolutionary socialism and political struggle by the working class are dangerous and must at all costs be relegated to the past.

Instead, Valls promotes petty-bourgeois individualism in his *Le Monde* interview: “The new hope that the left must express is that of individual self-realization, that is, to allow every person to become what he is.”

This is the deal offered by the existing French and indeed European “left”—in exchange for giving up pensions and jobs, each individual will receive the extraordinary privilege of becoming what he is. It is only one step to declaring that, whatever happens to workers, all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds!



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