

# Sarkozy reshuffles French cabinet

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A new government was formed in France late Sunday, after President Nicolas Sarkozy asked his cabinet for its resignation Saturday. Even compared to the previous conservative government, the new ministerial team marks a shift to the right, eliminating figures who sought to hide Sarkozy's austerity policies behind a pseudo-left façade of racial equality or urban renewal.

The cabinet reshuffle is Sarkozy's first major political move after defeating a weeks-long port and oil strike last month against his pension cuts, passed by Parliament on October 27. The strikes were highly popular, garnering 65 to 70 percent support in opinion polls, and were accompanied by protests involving over three million marchers nationwide. The new government is Sarkozy's signal that, having succeeded in running roughshod over popular opposition, he intends to continue with his anti-worker policies.

Prime Minister François Fillon kept his post, despite speculation that he might be replaced by former Ecology, Energy, and Sustainable Development Minister Jean-Louis Borloo. The architect of a major public-sector pension cut in 2003, Fillon is highly regarded in business circles as a consistent advocate of social cuts.

Laurence Parisot, head of the Medef (Movement of French Enterprises) business federation, praised Fillon as a "man of great austerity," adding: "The government that resigned [Saturday] has put its imprint on our country in a positive way, carrying out major reforms that will help us get out of the economic crisis."

A former mayor of the hard-hit northern industrial town of Valenciennes, Borloo fashioned a media image as a social compromiser, holding a series of minor ministerial portfolios associated with ecology or urban renewal under successive right-wing governments since 2002. After being passed up for the position of prime minister, he decided not to participate in the current government.

Borloo was apparently sidelined for refusing to publicly denounce port and oil workers, whose strikes led to a gasoline shortage last month that fell under his portfolio as energy minister. An anonymous minister told

*L'Express*: "He did not want to get publicly involved because the subject was not popular. And energy issues have never been his passion." Another minister told *L'Express* that Borloo "hides as soon as there is a bit of rough weather."

*Le Nouvel Observateur* cited Borloo as claiming he "represents the values of the socially-minded right wing and the center." Marc-Philippe Daubresse, a political associate of Borloo, told *Libération* that Borloo might be able to "produce a confederation of the center." Such a grouping, which might possibly include ex-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, would be a collection of right-wing, pro-business politicians reluctant to publicly back Sarkozy's chauvinistic appeals and austerity policies.

Ex-Prime Minister Alain Juppé returned to national politics, taking the defense portfolio from Hervé Morin. The architect of a major pension cut that provoked a weeks-long rail strike in 1995, Juppé left national politics after being found guilty of high-level corruption in the funding of the conservative RPR (Rally for the Republic) party in 2004. He has, however, been the mayor of Bordeaux since October 2006.

Juppé is a prominent associate of former President Jacques Chirac, once Sarkozy's main rival inside the French right.

Pierre Lellouche was named Junior Minister for Foreign Trade. He explained that his policy was to boost France's competitiveness, as "the differential with Germany" on export performance is becoming "a concern." He noted upcoming talks with the Mercosur trade bloc in Latin America and with countries in the Balkans, as well as an upcoming trip to Vietnam, a former French colony.

Most of the top ministers remained, however. Brice Hortefeux is keeping the portfolio of interior minister, though his additional designation as minister of immigration and national identity has been eliminated. Christine Lagarde is staying on as economy minister. Michèle Alliot-Marie moved from the justice ministry to the ministry of foreign affairs, where she replaced

Bernard Kouchner, the former member of the opposition Socialist Party (PS) and leader of Doctors without Borders.

Together with Borloo and Kouchner, other figures who gave a pseudo-left gloss to the previous government were replaced. This included another member of the PS who left her party to join Sarkozy's government, former Junior Minister for Urban Policy Fadela Amara. Former Junior Minister for Sports Rama Yade left the government amid criticism of her opposition to Sarkozy's 2007 speech in Dakar, part of Sarkozy's campaign to re-legitimize French colonialism.

The government's right-wing shift is further confirmation, if any was needed, that the government intends to trample popular sentiment and move ahead with bitter attacks on the working class. It also underscores how the recent defeat of the oil strike, which was isolated and betrayed by the unions, has given Sarkozy more political room to maneuver.

In *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, Alain Duhamel noted that Sarkozy's plans for a ministerial shift were bound up with the anticipation of massive social conflict, along the lines of the May-June 1968 general strike. Sections of the ruling class saw this possibility as serious enough to threaten the survival of the government.

Duhamel wrote: "After his heavy defeat in [this March's] regional elections, Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to first attend to the dangerous issue of the pension cuts. He could not reshuffle the government before, because if the conflict got out of hand, as in 1968, in 1984 (over public schooling), or in 1995 (also over pensions), changing Prime Ministers would be the only way out. So the reshuffle had to come after the pension cuts, not before."

It now appears that Sarkozy feels so confident in the unions' and "left" parties' ability to strangle strikes that he no longer feels obligated to make any concessions to the working class, even of the most superficial character. The fact that the ruling class previously thought the survival of the government at stake underscores the magnitude of the defeat inflicted on the working class by the unions.

The main debate inside the government appears to be how to control mounting public opposition to Sarkozy's ultra-right nationalistic policies and position Sarkozy in the upcoming campaign for the 2012 presidential elections.

Fillon has previously said he would not have given Sarkozy's July 30 law-and-order speech in Grenoble, given after the police killings of two men. In this speech,

Sarkozy backed the ethnically-based deportation of the Roma and removal of citizenship for naturalized citizens. Such measures had not been publicly acknowledged or encouraged in France since the fascist Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

It appears that the removal of Hortefeux's designation as minister of immigration and national identity is also part of an attempt to defuse public anger over Sarkozy's anti-democratic police measures. However, there are no indications that Sarkozy will change his broader policy of making an appeal to the extreme right. Indeed, under conditions where the government is mounting massive social attacks on the workers, it will seek to divide the working class and incite racism to poison the political atmosphere.

Academic Olivier Le Cour-Grandmaison told *Le Figaro*: "The [neo-fascist] National Front's rise in the polls has shown that the operation was a failure, and Nicolas Sarkozy concluded that there had to be a better way of drawing off support from the far right."

Business daily *Les Echos* concluded that the government's policies would concentrate on "competitiveness and security"—that is, social cuts and right-wing nationalism. It wrote that Sarkozy would campaign on the basis of a shift to the right: "Nicolas Sarkozy is preparing a new political period designed to reassure the right-wing electorate and give him the highest possible score on the first round of the 2012 presidential elections."



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