

French President Sarkozy outlines right-wing agenda in TV interview

Pierre Mabut

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A week after the enactment of his regressive pension reform, imposed in the face of mass strikes and protests, President Nicolas Sarkozy went on TV to lay out his program for the rest of his term. The next presidential election is scheduled for 2012.

In an interview Tuesday, Sarkozy made clear that having inflicted a defeat on the working class, he intends to carry out draconian attacks on social programs while giving tax breaks to the rich and continuing France's participation in imperialist wars.

A Harris opinion poll found that 64 percent of viewers considered Sarkozy's remarks "unconvincing."

In reply to questions about his unpopularity with the electorate, Sarkozy said he was obliged to listen, but would not change course. He explained: "I must recognize that on the big issues I am becoming harder to influence, because I see, I believe there are things that France must do."

He paid homage to the trade unions for allowing the pension cuts to pass. "Credit must be paid to the trade union forces," he said, adding, "We made a substantial reform of pensions without violence." He said this was remarkable in a country where social relations are "never easy."

His claim that there was no violence is false. Police repeatedly used violence to break up strikers' picket lines at ports and oil installations. They also infiltrated and attacked student protests across the country.

But he was correct in giving credit to the unions for containing and betraying the mass movement against the pension cuts. Without the collaboration of the union leadership, Sarkozy could not have imposed such unprecedented cuts.

One of his key announcements was a proposed cut in taxes for the wealthy. The ISF (Tax On Fortunes) is to be abolished and replaced with a tax on revenues and added value gained from property. This will save the wealthy €

4.1 billion yearly. Sarkozy claimed he was counterbalancing this by reducing tax breaks under the so-called "fiscal shield," but these total only €679 million per year.

The president said he planned to align French tax rates with those of Germany by the autumn of 2011. "I cannot accept deficits in competitiveness with our main partner, Germany," he declared.

He announced plans for draconian attacks on workers' social rights. These include cuts in benefits for the unemployed, which he cynically presented as measures to boost employment. Saying "we have not tried everything against unemployment," he announced negotiations with the unions for a "new unemployment benefit regime."

He suggested this would include scrapping long-term unemployment insurance, declaring: "When there is a mass layoff, it's not the workers' fault! We will guarantee them one year's salary, and then they will have to accept a job."

Sarkozy's proposed measures against youth unemployment have a similarly cynical character. With his move to cut public sector employment by replacing only half of retiring state employees, he is helping drive ever larger sections of the work force into temporary or low-wage jobs. Such measures particularly impact young workers entering the job market.

Unemployment is running at 23 percent for those between 18 and 24. Sarkozy claimed he had plans to reduce youth unemployment by doubling to one million the number of youth forced to participate in employer-sponsored training programs. By Sarkozy's own admission, however, such youth have only a 70 percent chance of finding a job.

On care for the aged, he said decisions would be made next summer after discussions in the spring with the unions and employers' groups. He suggested the final package might offer the choice of forcing people into

private insurance or increasing taxes on workers' salaries to cover the costs of care.

Sarkozy signaled that he would not retreat from his promotion of French chauvinism. His measures against immigrants, particularly Roma and Muslims, have provoked comparisons to the policies of the Vichy regime of Nazi-occupied France. He dismissed criticisms of his agitation on national identity and his witch-hunt of Roma, saying these were the result of "a misunderstanding."

There was to be no retreat on the hounding of immigrants. "On the basic issues, I renounce nothing," he declared. "If we don't control immigration flow," he continued, "we allow the collapse of our integration system."

Sarkozy reaffirmed his commitment to French troop deployments abroad, including in the bitterly unpopular Afghan war. Invoking the "war on terror," he claimed that all of the world's democracies are threatened and that the situation in France is "worrying."

"We will not change our [foreign] policy one iota," he said, "for the simple reason that we are threatened." He listed various countries where French nationals are supposedly held hostage, such as Mali, Somalia, the Gulf of Guinea and Afghanistan.

On the release of US-aligned Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, Sarkozy said he was cooperating closely with China. He threatened to withdraw French firms from Burma if Aung was not accorded better treatment.

Sarkozy seems to be positioning himself for potential regime change in Burma, as French firms have invested for years in the Burmese military junta.

Referring to France's upcoming presidency of the G20, Sarkozy said he had the support of China for a discussion next spring on the question of currencies. Saying, "We can no longer remain in this mess," he asserted that a new international monetary system was needed, though he did not spell out its substance.



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