French President Sarkozy's re-election bid appeals to extreme right

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On February 15, right-wing French President Nicolas Sarkozy officially announced his intention to run for re-election in April.

The latest OpinionWay poll in February shows him creeping up on the Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande, who is leading with 29 percent to Sarkozy's 27 percent, with Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front third with 16.5 percent. Polls show that, in a second-round contest with Hollande, Sarkozy would lose by a sixteen-percent margin, 58 versus 42 percent, though this gap has narrowed two points over the last week.

Sarkozy has received support for his re-election from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with whom he has worked to force austerity policies and technocratic governments on European countries including Greece and Italy.

Merkel declared: "I support Nicolas Sarkozy on every level, because we belong to the same political family.... It's normal that we support our friends' parties." Britain's conservative Prime Minister David Cameron echoed this sentiment. Merkel is keen to keep the momentum built up with Sarkozy to impose social austerity on Europe, through the European Financial Stability Mechanism (ESM) treaty, and the 'Golden Rule' forbidding budget deficits that is to be voted into each country's constitution.

While Hollande and the PS support deep cuts in state budgets and workers' living standards, it is cynically trying to distance itself from Sarkozy's deeply unpopular record. In opposing the "Golden Rule," Hollande explained, "I want to believe that we are pursuing the same goal, that of mastering the public debt, but we don't propose the same path for achieving it."

Sarkozy has attempted to overcome his deep unpopularity with empty demagogy and appeals to far-right sentiment. On February 19, he announced at his first campaign rally in Marseille that he was "the people's candidate". In Lille he declared, "I want to be the spokesman of this France which wants to live from its labour".

Sarkozy's claim that he is the candidate of France's labourers will do little to rescue his candidacy, given how deeply it is at odds with his anti-worker record.

Sarkozy defended the ruling class from the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis by bailing out banks and industry at the expense of the workers. While pledging hundreds of billions to the banks and billions to a French auto bailout that led to the closure of dozens of plants, Sarkozy oversaw an offensive against workers' jobs and living conditions. During his term 1.33 million workers lost their jobs, including 500,000 jobs in industry, and pensions were repeatedly cut in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and mass demonstrations.

At the same time, Sarkozy reintegrated France into NATO's command structure and gave public support to US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, before playing a leading role in launching an imperialist war against Libya costing €300 million and 50,000 lives. At market exchange rates, the 2010 French military budget was $65 billion—the third highest in the world after the US and China.

Sarkozy spearheaded deep attacks on democratic rights. A record 33,000 immigrants were expelled from France in 2011, as Sarkozy carried out illegal measures such as banning the burqa and ethnically targeting the Roma for deportation.

This reflects Sarkozy's conscious strategy of trying to win over far-right National Front (FN) voters by appealing to neo-fascist sentiment—a strategy that he is

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now pursuing in his election campaign. This has disturbed some elements within his own camp. In one extraordinary remark, Corinne Lepage, his ex-environment minister, described Sarkozy's stance as "extremely serious ... this is how fascism began its rise in the 1930s".

Nonetheless, Sarkozy is pressing ahead with a series of calculated gestures to the FN. In setting out his agenda if re-elected, Sarkozy repeated the reactionary, paternalistic appeals to "work," "responsibility," and "authority" that were the basis of his 2007 campaign. In a February 10 *Figaro Magazine* interview, he said: "everything that can reduce labour costs, reward effort, merit, to make the difference with state charity, must therefore continue to be applied systematically."

In Marseille, Sarkozy announced that he intends, if re-elected, to more frequently use referendums on questions which he euphemistically refers to as "constitutional blockages". He cited two examples: the unemployed and immigrants—both of which would be used as targets to whip up far-right, anti-worker sentiment.

Sarkozy wants a referendum to force the unemployed to get some job training and accept the first offer of employment, or lose all welfare payments.

On a February 22 TV news interview, Sarkozy pressed home his attacks on the working population to mobilize right-wing prejudices against the long term unemployed people on minimum welfare payments (RSA—418 euros a month for an adult). He called for them to do compulsory community work seven hours a week, at the minimum wage of nine euros an hour. One million unemployed would be affected by the proposed measure. "Work must be rewarded more than state handouts," Sarkozy lectured.

Top Sarkozy administration officials are also making coded appeals to anti-immigrant sentiment, such as Interior Minister Claude Guéant's February 4 comment that "not all civilizations are of equal value." (See also: "French political establishment capitulates to government's appeals to racism")

Sarkozy also announced that he is trying to make it easier for the FN to win office in the legislative elections, which take place after the presidential election in June 2012. In his Marseille speech, he proposed a measure "on the margins" of proportional representation, "so that all the main political tendencies have deputies".

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