

# WSWS announces on-the-spot coverage of French presidential election

Alex Lantier in Paris  
9 April 2012

The *World Socialist Web Site* will be reporting from France in the run-up to the first round of the French presidential election, which will be held in two weeks.

In the fourth year of the greatest economic crisis of postwar Europe, the elections mark a turning point in France and the entire continent. Weighed down by rising living costs and high unemployment, working-class voters sense a vast gap between the candidates' scripted statements and the social reality facing masses of people.

In this most political of countries, there is a palpable lack of enthusiasm for the two leading contenders, incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande. Sarkozy has a deeply unpopular record of Middle East wars and social cuts. He has carried out cuts in France itself and, through his leading role in the European Union, in countries like Greece and Spain that have been devastated by EU austerity policies.

For his part, the undistinguished Hollande personifies the duplicitous character of the PS, whose 2002 presidential candidate, Lionel Jospin, famously declared that his program was "not socialist."

Describing Hollande as a bland bagman for French finance capital would be to pay him a compliment. Recently asked by the *New York Times* whether the rich should fear him, he replied: "Today there are no more communists in France. The left liberalized the economy and opened markets to finance and privatization. There is nothing to fear."

Aiming to exploit popular anger at the Sarkozy-PS duopoly, neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen is running on appeals to anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism—sentiments the main bourgeois parties have encouraged as they sought to legitimize wars overseas and law-and-order policies at home.

Injecting a note of social demagoguery into the campaign, the Left Front's Jean-Luc Mélenchon has appeared widely in the media and organized several marches, including a March 18 protest to "seize the Bastille." An ex-student radical who became a PS minister, Mélenchon is wrapping himself in the flag, denouncing the bankers and promising to fight for

increased wages and better social conditions.

Such promises are worthless coming from anyone who, like Mélenchon, declares his admiration for France's wily President François Mitterrand. The latter began his political career in the fascist Vichy regime, then repackaged himself as a social democrat in the 1950s, when he signed death warrants of Algerians fighting French imperialism in the war for Algerian independence. With the help of a coterie of petty-bourgeois "left" forces, he used the PS as an electoral vehicle in the 1970s to come to power and carry out attacks on the working class in the 1980s.

As France is swept into the political storms engulfing the world, however, it is still marked by the spirit and vocabulary of revolution embedded in its popular culture. As the *Economist* magazine recently noted with annoyance, France is one of the most hostile countries to free-market capitalism, which only 31 percent of Frenchmen consider the best social system.

As Karl Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels noted, "France is the land where, more than anywhere else, the historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision and where, consequently, the changing political forms within which they move and in which their results are summarized have been stamped in the sharpest outline... Marx not only studied the past history of France with particular predilection, but also followed her current history in every detail, stored up the material for future use and, consequently, events never took him by surprise."

France's modern history emerges from the colossal experience of the French Revolution of 1789-1815, the classic bourgeois revolution that overthrew the monarchy, abolished the privileges of the nobility and called for liberty, equality and fraternity. Its politics were shaped by the contradiction between the ideals the revolution proclaimed and the exploitative capitalist society it ultimately produced. Twice, in the 1848 revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune, the ruling class responded to popular uprisings with the mass slaughter of revolutionary workers.

The French workers movement grew amid a rich

revolutionary heritage and culture, with great orators such as Jean Jaurès and an artistic consciousness fed by realist painters like Courbet and novelists such as Zola, whose masterwork *Germinal* recounts a miners' strike. The radicalism of the working class clashed, however, with conservative elements in France's middle classes, the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, which had mobilized the Rurals to smash the Commune, continually set these social layers against the working class, producing political divisions within the working-class movement itself over the question of revolution or reform.

In the crucible of World War I, the split between these tendencies progressed to the emergence of a Communist Party (PCF) aligned with the Communist International led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The tragedy of the French working class was that France's powerful Communist Party, influenced by nationalist sentiments, sided with Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country" against Trotsky. As the Kremlin used the PCF as a tool in its great-power dealings with imperialism, the PCF abandoned the struggle for revolution, which fell to the Trotskyist movement, and promoted illusions about the viability of a strategy of pressuring the Republic for reforms.

The PCF long held up the 1936 general strike, and the concessions the Popular Front government granted to end that strike, as an example of what could be won through such struggles. In fact, the bourgeoisie's dismay at these concessions led it to turn to fascism. It capitulated to and collaborated with the Nazis in 1940—a policy the Communist Party initially did not oppose, in line with the Kremlin's agreement with Hitler sealed in the 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact.

French capitalism was rebuilt after World War II on the basis of US economic aid and the Stalinists' suppression of workers' struggles at the time of the liberation from Nazi occupation. Its rotten political foundation was the lie, advanced by both the bourgeoisie and the Stalinists, that all of France had resisted the Nazis, and that the Republic could prevent the reemergence of the "economic and financial aristocracies" of the pre-war period. In fact, France was soon engaged in unpopular imperialist wars in a failed attempt to crush independence movements in Indochina and Algeria.

The profound class tensions underlying the postwar economic boom exploded in the general strike of May-June 1968. A movement that began with student protests was transformed by the explosive intervention of the working class, as 10 million workers struck and red flags flew over factories throughout France. Under these conditions, the bourgeoisie created a new party, the PS, which served as an electoral vehicle for Mitterrand, supported by petty-bourgeois "left" parties claiming to be Trotskyist—the Revolutionary Communist League, the Internationalist

Communist Organization, and Workers Struggle.

Mitterrand, who came to power in 1981 on a left-reformist platform, played a key role in demoralizing working-class opposition, cynically junking his program and carrying out a wave of austerity measures starting in 1983. Nevertheless, all throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the French bourgeoisie faced continuing opposition, strikes and mass protests by the working class. It proved unable to carry out sufficiently deep social attacks to establish its competitiveness vis-à-vis its international competitors.

This situation has laid the basis for explosive revolutionary struggles. The French economy, like the economies of other European countries and the US, has been transformed, and working and social conditions slashed. As repeated social cuts have made clear, the collapse of the Soviet Union has eliminated the constituency for social reform in the ruling class, while shattering the old parties' hold over the working class. Amid an explosive global economic crisis, the political loyalties of workers are in flux.

On the basis of this history, the WSWS will examine the politics of the various candidates, the social conditions in France, and the views and problems of different layers of the population. We will address the question posed by Leon Trotsky in his writings on the Popular Front: whither France?



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