French Socialist Party candidate Hollande praises Left Front candidate Mélenchon

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French Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate François Hollande gave extensive interviews on Friday to major newspapers in which he praised Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon and sought to use him as a cover for his own pro-war, pro-austerity policies.

Hollande told *Libération*: “Jean-Luc Mélenchon is not my adversary, or even my competitor.” He noted that Mélenchon “was a Socialist for years, he led a current within it.”

Asked if a high vote for Mélenchon would help him, Hollande declined to answer. “What counts is a good score for François Hollande in the first round,” he said, adding, “Me, I am in a presidential campaign to win.”

Polls show Mélenchon’s vote increasing to 17 percent, placing him third after Hollande and incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy. This rise reflects support for the proposals he is advancing, such as an increase in the monthly minimum wage to €1,700 (US$2,223) and a tax on wealth.

These proposals are cynical, however, as Mélenchon—a supporter of the right-wing policies of the late President François Mitterrand and the Plural Left government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin—has no intention of carrying them out. (See: “What are the politics of French Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon?”)

Hollande’s signals to Mélenchon underscore the fact that he relies on Mélenchon to provide a left face for his own campaign, despite its right-wing program. This is an indictment of the politics of the entire bourgeois “left,” including the Left Front, and its promotion of Hollande as an alternative to Sarkozy.

Hollande relies on the Left Front, which consists mainly of the Stalinist Communist Party and Mélenchon’s Left Party and is promoted by the New Anti-Capitalist Party, to foster reformist illusions. Meanwhile, Hollande presents himself as the only “left” candidate who has a chance of winning.

This is only Hollande’s latest bad-faith manoeuvre to stimulate illusions in the working class about his campaign. In February, he delivered an empty promise to tax income above €1 million a year at 75 percent. Earlier the same day, however, he issued a promise to continue France’s participation in NATO, deepen attacks on immigrants, and maintain the length of the pay-in period for a full pension imposed by Sarkozy.

While sending signals to Mélenchon, Hollande is giving ambiguous but unmistakeable assurances to investors that he will pursue austerity measures and cut wages to restore France’s international competitiveness. He boasted at a recent meeting in Rennes: “People say to us, ‘Watch out, the left is back, it’s going to empty the (state) coffers.’ It’s already happened! ‘Watch out, if the left is back, it’ll raise the debt’. It’s already happened! ‘The Left will hurt competitiveness’. It’s already happened …Well, we’ll do the opposite.”

Hollande made clear that he would slash public spending to restore France’s deficit to zero by 2017, though he absurdly claimed that such deep austerity measures would be compatible with continued economic growth.

He also indicated that he would pursue French military intervention wherever French imperialist interests were at stake. Having promised to keep France in the NATO command structure and having backed NATO’s military intervention in Libya, he promised to continue to pressure Syria.

He said Syria “will be an extremely disturbing subject, I will do everything—and I have no criticisms to make of French diplomacy—so that the Security Council can finally decide on a level of sanctions and intervention capable of halting the massacres."

If Hollande is elected, his policy will be determined not by his campaign promises, but by the demands of the financial markets for deep cuts and attacks on the working class. He has already made veiled comments suggesting that he will dump his program if he comes under pressure from the markets.

In another interview Friday, the French business daily *Les Echos* asked Hollande: "You want a growth initiative. But will the markets wait?" The PS candidate replied that his "responsibility as a candidate is to send a coherent message about our choices and confidence in our promises." However, as Hollande has promised to slash budget deficits, the only "coherent" policy is to press for deeper cuts.

The *Guardian* noted, "As markets get jittery over Spain and Italy, economists have warned that France could be the next economic basket case to shake the euro." France has the highest level of public spending in Europe—more than 55 percent of gross domestic product. The financial press reports that France has not gone far enough with social cuts to reduce public debt, while big business criticizes wage levels that undermine French competitiveness, in particular against Germany.

Financial markets are aware of working class resistance to the cuts, despite the betrayal of strikes against social cuts by the trade union bureaucracy. The *Financial Times* quoted one of France's leading bankers as saying: "More should have been done, but when you undertake these reforms in France you have to overcome very strong resistance."

On April 11, the *Financial Times* published an article entitled "French election: A tale of two presidencies," which pointed out the failure of the incumbent right-wing president, Nicolas Sarkozy, to carry out major social cuts since his election in 2007. According to the *Financial Times*, "Mr. Sarkozy has not proposed a radical reshaping of France's welfare model."

Despite the unpopular 2010 pension cut, which the trade unions negotiated with Sarkozy after betraying mass working class protests against it, the *Financial Times* complained that under Sarkozy "fundamental reforms, including the scrapping of the 35-hour week and opening up of closed shops such as the taxi business, were never enacted, to the frustration of many who expected more." The newspaper quoted Vincent Beaufils, editor-in-chief of the business magazine *Challenges*, criticizing "Nicolas Sarkozy's incapacity to move France into another era."

The *Guardian* reported that France, "the euro zone's second-largest economy, with generous welfare and one of the highest levels of public spending in western Europe, has been told by its national auditor it risks an unsustainable debt spiral." The newspaper continued: "Unemployment is at a 12-year high of almost 10 percent, growth is stalling, the triple-A credit rating has been downgraded and the country owes so much that interest repayments are the second biggest item of state expenditure after education."