French president and Socialist Party candidate hold Paris rallies

Antoine Lerougetel, Johannes Stern
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At dueling open-air rallies in Paris on Sunday, incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande tried to boost their campaigns in the run-up to the first round of the presidential elections on April 22. Sarkozy spoke in the Place de la Concorde, while Hollande's rally was at the Château de Vincennes.

Both sides made exaggerated claims of 100,000 participants at their rallies.

Polls now place Hollande neck-and-neck with Sarkozy at 27 percent in the first round. However, Hollande continues to be well ahead of the incumbent in a possible run-off, at 56 percent to 44 percent.

The two main candidates repeatedly make clear that they intend to implement the austerity measures demanded by the financial markets and the European Union (EU) after the election. They both have vowed to reduce France's deficit to zero and to restructure the economy in ways that can only mean the further impoverishment of the working class.

In his speech on Saturday, Hollande tried to hide his pro-austerity agenda behind some populist phrases. "I hear anger against growing injustice, the disorders of the world, the pillage of our planet and the cynicism of the market" he said. He also claimed that he would be "the president of the end of privileges."

With less than a week to go before the first round, Hollande is adapting to the rhetoric of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the candidate of the Left Front, an alliance of the Left Party and the Stalinist Communist Party. Mélenchon is receiving increasing support for his proposals, such as a higher minimum wage and a tax on wealth, and currently polling at around 15 percent of the vote.

Hollande's aim is to win over voters of the Left Front, presenting himself as the only realistic "left" alternative to Sarkozy. He called on voters who are considering Mélenchon in the first round "not to take refuge in votes which have no future." He argued: "I am the only candidate of the left who can lead France and translate popular anger into acts of the government."

The fact that Hollande can appeal on the basis of his pro-austerity program to Mélenchon voters is an indictment of the latter's politics and those of the entire bourgeois "left." These forces promote illusions that, working with the unions, they can pressure Hollande to implement social reforms.

These claims are cynical and false. Like Sarkozy, Hollande is a candidate of the French bourgeoisie and the banks. Mélenchon himself is a supporter of the right-wing policies of the late President François Mitterrand and the Plural Left government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, and has no intention of carrying out any of his proposed measures. By creating illusions in Hollande, Mélenchon and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) make clear that they in fact support the anti-working class program of the Socialist Party.

Last Wednesday, Sarkozy attacked Hollande's proposed partial reversal of elements of his austerity measures, largely by transferring funds from other social budgets: "If we start hiring civil servants, if we will start spending again, if we throw the pension reform into question, it's not a risk that interest rates will rise, it's a certainty. It would immediately set off a crisis of confidence."

On Sunday, Sarkozy also tried to pose as a critic of the European Central Banks and the politics of the EU, falling somewhat into line with the rhetoric of his socialist rival. He told his supporters in the Place de la Concorde: "If the Central Bank does not support growth, we will not get enough growth." He called for

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a devaluation of the euro, or “the possibility of a more attractive exchange rate for the euro to boost European exports.” Sarkozy said that if Europe instead chooses deflation, “it will disappear; we must remember the ’30s.”

Le Monde commented: “Nicolas Sarkozy has broken the pact of silence sealed with [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel at the Strasbourg summit on November 24, in the presence of [the EU-imposed Italian “technocratic” premier] Mario Monti: Never to mention the ECB, but to let it get on with its work.”

An economist interviewed on France Info radio on Monday said that such a policy was tantamount to a “declaration of war on northern Europe,” which wants above all to avoid hyperinflation that ECB money-printing threatens to cause.

Sarkozy sought to divert attention from the social crisis he is instigating on behalf of the bourgeoisie with appeals to French chauvinism. He told his supporters that he would not allow the Socialist Party to squander the heritage of “Eternal France.”

“Not to be outdone, but with less blatant appeals to chauvinism,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* commented, Hollande also paid tribute to the flag.

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