

# International issues in the French elections

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Though the French presidency's most noted power is its control of foreign policy, international politics has been noticeably absent from this year's French presidential campaign. *Le Figaro's* Alexandre Adler, one of the few journalists to write on the subject, briefly noted in a recent column that it has "not been a big hit."

This is all the more remarkable as Europe is now engulfed in a four-year financial crisis and escalating wars. France is fighting wars in Afghanistan and Libya, backing mercenary guerrilla forces against Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, and is part of a US-led coalition threatening to attack Iran. Some 76 percent of the population opposes France's deployment in Afghanistan, and 51 percent of the population opposes the war in Libya.

Nonetheless, Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande, incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy's main bourgeois "left" challenger, stated last month that if elected he would not reverse Sarkozy's 2009 decision to reintegrate France into NATO's military command.

As Hollande's comments about France's reintegration into NATO and the absence of criticisms of Sarkozy's wars from any of the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois "left" parties make clear, the ruling elite intends to continue Sarkozy's policies in the face of mass opposition in the working class. It is thus tacitly signaling its support for the sea change in foreign policy Sarkozy carried out vis-à-vis the policies of his predecessor, conservative President Jacques Chirac.

Chirac's 1995-2007 presidency, the first French presidency to take place entirely after the 1991 fall of the USSR, was marked by the breakdown of France's Cold War policies. French calls for a "multi-polar" world order, reflected in Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine's 1998 criticism of the US as a "hyper-power," led to clashes with Washington—first over French firms' activities in Iran, and then, more

seriously, when France joined Germany and Russia in opposing the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Chirac's attempts to develop French policy in Europe foundered. Though it was one of the twelve countries that adopted the common euro currency at its launch in 2002, France also witnessed rising working class opposition to the European Union (EU). Chirac was staggered when opposition to a draft European Constitution, amid justified fears that it would lead to a downward leveling of wages and social rights across all of Europe, led to its defeat in a 2005 referendum in France.

The incoming Sarkozy administration quickly re-established relations with Washington, sending officials to visit US-occupied Iraq and threatening Iran with war in 2007 before fully rejoining NATO in 2009. However, it was re-establishing ties with Washington as the US itself entered a deep and intractable social crisis.

The 2008 US financial crash transformed relations within Europe. While Germany and France united to impose deep austerity measures on workers in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy, their relations became increasingly tense. In 2010, Sarkozy resorted to threatening to pull France out of the euro to force Germany to fund bailouts to pay off French banks that had loaned money to crisis-stricken Greece. France then set up a military alliance with Britain, excluding Germany.

Above all, France responded to the outbreak of revolutionary working class struggles last year in Egypt and Tunisia by embarking on a series of wars and interventions in Libya, Ivory Coast and now in Syria and perhaps Mali. Sarkozy made clear this would be a consistent policy of French imperialism. As he went to war with Libya—a war that ended with the murder of Libyan head of state Muammar Gaddafi—he bluntly said: "Every ruler should understand, and especially

every Arab ruler should understand, that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment each time be the same.”

The fact that fundamental aspects of international economic and military policy are off the agenda of the elections underlines their fraudulent character. The working class has been politically disenfranchised by the PS and the petty-bourgeois “left” candidates—of the Stalinist-led Left Front, the New Anti-Capitalist Party, and Workers Struggle—who support the wars.

The French bourgeoisie’s ever more aggressive foreign policy threatens not only the Middle Eastern people, but the French and European working class. As in the US, wars abroad will be used to attack democratic rights at home and enforce even sharper attacks on workers’ living standards, citing rising defense budgets. The costs for the US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are estimated at between \$3.7 and \$4.4 trillion dollars—more than the debts of Greece and Spain combined.

At an April 5 press conference in Paris, President Sarkozy declared that some countries are on “the edge of a precipice today... We cannot refuse to make the historic choice of competitiveness, innovation and reducing public spending. The situation which our Spanish friends are experiencing, after what our Greek friends experienced, remind us of the realities.”

Sarkozy’s statement, largely glossed over in the press, was a threat that if the incoming French president fails to carry out a sufficiently right-wing policy, France will suffer the treatment the banks imposed on Greece and Spain—where half the youth are unemployed, wages have fallen by 30 to 50 percent, and homelessness and lack of access to medical care are soaring.

The *Financial Times* quoted an economist at Bank of America Merrill Lynch: “I think the new French government will be given very little time to convince the markets about its plans.”

In the last ten years, the French economy lost ground against Germany, its main competitor in Europe. In 2000, French hourly labor costs were 8 percent lower than in Germany; in 2012, they are 10 percent higher. From 1999 to 2008, German unit labor costs were cut 20 to 30 percent compared to other euro zone countries, and German exports boomed.

Germany has achieved its superior economic position

through the harshest attacks on the working class since World War II. The Social Democratic (SPD)-Green government of Gerhard Schröder, working closely with the unions, slashed social spending and wages, liberalized labor markets, and cut taxes for corporations and the rich. As the French bourgeoisie casts envious eyes across the Rhine, they want to impose such cuts in France. The banks are pitting workers across Europe against each other in a race to the bottom in terms of wages and living standards.

The working class in France stands on the eve of enormous class battles, in which workers will have to fight to establish the political unity of the European and international working class in a struggle against war and social austerity.



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