

Sarkozy, Hollande outline right-wing policies in French presidential debate

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Conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Party (PS) challenger François Hollande faced off last night in the lone TV debate before the May 6 run-off election. Some 20 million people reportedly watched the event.

In a confused and argumentative debate, Hollande and Sarkozy both sought to win support from the financial elite on a program of social cuts, anti-immigrant racism, and continuing imperialist wars. Hollande in particular delivered a right-wing, anti-Muslim rant, apparently aiming to appeal to voters for the neo-fascist National Front (FN)—which received 18 percent of the vote in the April 22 first round.

This followed FN leader Marine Le Pen's decision yesterday not to endorse Sarkozy, announcing that she would cast a blank ballot on Sunday. Le Pen's call weakened Sarkozy, who trails Hollande with roughly 45 percent of the vote in most polls.

Hollande stressed his commitment to repaying France's debts to the banks and respecting the European stability pact, which imposes strict limits on European countries' budget deficits. He called for €90 billion (US\$118 billion) in yearly budget cuts, and indexing wage increases not on inflation but on France's very low economic growth—a policy that would eat away workers' purchasing power through inflation.

He also proposed various investment and subsidy measures for businesses, claiming that “things were changing” thanks to growing agreement on economic policies with European Central Bank (ECB) chief Mario Monti, and Spain's right-wing government.

Sarkozy could not defend the deeply unpopular austerity policies of his first five-year term. Instead, he attacked Hollande by warning that social-democratic governments in other European countries had

drastically increased unemployment. He cited Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero and Greek Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou—who devastated Greek living standards with deep cuts demanded by the banks and the European Union (EU).

Remarkably, Hollande responded by defending Papandreou, blaming his Greece's crisis on Papandreou's conservative predecessor, Costas Karamanlis. In fact, the cuts Papandreou approved pushed unemployment up to 22 percent (over 50 percent for youth), slashed wages by 30 percent or more, and led to a wave of suicides throughout Greece.

Hollande's defense of Papandreou's record shows that, in his place, Hollande would have carried out a similar, anti-working class policy.

Both candidates praised the union bureaucracy's role in negotiating social cuts with the government. Sarkozy said that during his term he “had one main idea in mind,” which was to avoid “violence.” Hollande praised the union bureaucracy for keeping demonstrations from “overflowing,” adding: “Thank goodness there are the social partners”—that is, negotiations between the union bureaucracy and business groups.

On social questions, the debate was largely devoted to immigration, as both candidates vowed to carry out reactionary attacks on immigrants' democratic rights. Hollande began by attacking conservative governments for admitting too many immigrants, saying that under the last PS government only 150,000 immigrants per year had entered France, as opposed to 200,000 per year under Sarkozy.

Sarkozy responded by pledging to halve the number of immigrants entering France, and accusing the PS of not supporting Sarkozy's ban on the burqa. Hollande responded with an angry rant, saying that if elected, he

would uphold the burqa ban and a previous ban on Muslim veils in the schools, not allow any women-only hours at swimming pools, and not “tolerate” halal meat in French schools.

This remarkable statement, which completely tramples the principle of state neutrality on religious matters, implies that observant Muslim students would not have the right to eat meat at school. It shows that the election of a PS government would not improve, but worsen the racist treatment of immigrants in France.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the whole debate was the virtual absence of foreign policy issues, which received only 10 minutes’ attention during the two-and-a-half hour debate. There was no mention of last year’s war against Libya, nor of the Western powers’ current preparations for war against Syria and Iran.

After Sarkozy’s election in 2007, he immediately sought to align France more closely with US militarism, rejoining NATO in 2009. He helped lead the diplomatic push for a NATO war to oust and murder Libyan head of state Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi, who was replaced with a Western client regime; French fighter-bombers played a major role in prosecuting the conflict. The NATO war killed tens of thousands of Libyans and laid whole cities to waste.

With the war threats against Syria and threats against Iran, France is now involved in the preparation of an even bigger crime. A war against Syria would threaten the lives of millions and could trigger a larger conflict throughout the Middle East and even a conflict between the major world powers.

Both Sarkozy and Hollande support the French wars, and the fact that these issues were not even mentioned in the debate underline its fraudulent character. Though the French ruling class’s wars are opposed by the population, fundamental issues of foreign policy were off the agenda during the entire election campaign.

The candidates’ few comments on foreign policy nevertheless revealed their pro-militarist policy. Both praised the French army’s role in the war in Afghanistan. Hollande pledged to withdraw French troops in 2012 if elected, while Sarkozy stressed the fact that French soldiers have not finished their job yet and should stay until 2013.

Regarding what Hollande called the “unstable

situation” in Sub-Saharan Africa, the candidates made clear that France has to play a major role in the region. Sarkozy stated that “France, as the old colonial power cannot intervene directly but must work together with regional powers” to intervene by proxy.

The TV debate underscored that the working class is politically disenfranchised by a reactionary and sclerotic political establishment, which can only put forth candidates of austerity and war who defend the interests of the ruling class. Workers must prepare for bitter struggles against the incoming government and the class interests it represents.



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