

On the eve of the French presidential elections

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Tomorrow's run-off between incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy of the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande sets the stage for escalating attacks on the working class in France.

Over his five-year term, Sarkozy has become the object of immense popular anger and derision. His efforts to maintain support despite his social austerity policies—with appeals to chauvinism based on foreign wars and anti-immigrant, law-and-order politics—have failed.

Despite this mass opposition, Sarkozy's policies will be continued, regardless of who wins the election, as Hollande in no way presents an alternative.

A cynical representative of French finance capital, Hollande campaigned on the slogan “Change is now,” while presenting policies indistinguishable from Sarkozy's. He has announced plans to slash France's budget deficit to zero by 2017 to respect the reactionary European fiscal pact, which would mean eliminating some 115 billion euros in spending. He also intends to make the French economy competitive with Germany by pushing for cost and efficiency savings—a move that he would carry out by negotiating wage and benefit cuts with the union bureaucracy.

He has said he has no criticisms of France's existing foreign policy, implicitly backing Sarkozy's 2011 war in Libya and France's ongoing war drive against Syria and Iran. He has also adopted Sarkozy's anti-immigrant policies, supporting the burqa ban and denouncing halal meat.

Nonetheless, Hollande enjoys the support of France's petty-bourgeois “left”—the Left Front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), and similar forces.

Despite Mélenchon's phrase-mongering about a “citizens' revolution,” to which the NPA has adapted itself, the petty-bourgeois parties lined up behind the

PS. They are calling for a Hollande vote, knowing full well that his policies will be as right-wing as Sarkozy's.

Their disclaimers that they would support trade-union protests against Hollande are cynical and politically empty, as the union bureaucracy is announcing its willingness to negotiate wage and benefits cuts with Hollande. Relying on unions and parties that support Hollande's reactionary agenda to “pressure” the next president simply blocks the emergence of working class opposition to his policies. This leaves the workers unprepared for the coming attacks.

Under these conditions, it is not difficult to foresee the consequences of such policies. The only political figure who is calculating in terms of how to utilize social opposition is Marine Le Pen, the leader of the neo-fascist National Front (FN). Due to the bankrupt policies of the petty-bourgeois “left,” she has been able to position herself as the sole representative of popular social discontent.

She ran as the “only anti-system candidate,” denouncing the “UMPS” and the “ultra-free-market, permissive, and anarchist left” and promising to halt immigration and cut off immigrants' access to social benefits. She has called for a blank vote tomorrow.

In the event of a Hollande victory, Le Pen vows to make the UMP “implode”, setting the stage for the FN ultimately emerging as France's leading right-wing party. It is well placed to win seats in next month's legislative elections. On April 22 it won in 23 of France's 577 legislative districts, came in second in 93, and received more than the 12.5 percent needed to survive to the second-round legislative races in 353.

The contrast between the petty-bourgeois “left” parties' endorsement of Hollande and Le Pen's denunciations of the “UMPS” could not be starker. If Hollande wins and carries out the attacks on workers and small businesses that he has described, the petty-

bourgeois “left” parties’ claims to oppose him will have no credibility with broad layers of the population.

After his recent TV debate with Sarkozy, Hollande has made the character of his agenda quite clear. There, he made the remarkable statement that he understood Greek Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou’s decision to react to poor economic conditions left by his predecessor by embarking on devastating social cuts demanded by the banks and the EU. The parties supporting Hollande are no different than petty-bourgeois “left” parties that supported the austerity policies of the PASOK social democrats in Greece, or the PSOE in Spain.

The pretense that these parties are of the left—while they line up with a bourgeois candidate supporting deep attacks on the working class, anti-Muslim chauvinism, and imperialist war—is increasingly reactionary and dangerous. If they succeed in blocking working class opposition to the coming attacks, they will have ceded the mantle of opposition to the most reactionary, anti-working class forces in the political establishment. These are the preconditions for the emergence of the FN as a major political force in France.

The political situation in France, as throughout the world, is characterized above all by the crisis of political leadership in the working class, and a political vacuum on the left. There will be great social struggles against the attacks of the ruling class, but these will ultimately end in defeat if the working class does not build a genuine, revolutionary and internationalist opposition to capitalism. This is the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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