

Socialist Party leads in French parliamentary elections

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After the defeat of incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy by Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande on May 6, the French legislative elections will be taking place on June 10 and 17. Some 577 seats in the National Assembly are being contested by 6,603 candidates.

The election of Hollande on a far smaller majority than expected, 51.67 percent, despite the mass rejection of Sarkozy, reflected doubts in the population that Hollande would reverse the austerity programmes imposed by Sarkozy at the behest of the banks and Brussels on the countries of the EU. The population is aware of the disastrous social and economic consequences already in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy.

Hollande is seeking a parliament dominated by the PS, which would give long-term support to the present interim government he appointed after his election. If the PS wins, it will be in the unprecedented position of having a majority in the National Assembly and the Senate as well as running virtually all of France's regions.

Polls show a modest lead for the bourgeois "left" PS and its satellites in the first round. The PS itself has 31.5 percent of the vote, plus the combined scores of its allies: the Left Front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Party (PG) allied with the Stalinist Communist Party (PCF), with 7.5 percent; the Greens, 5 percent and the pseudo-left petty bourgeois parties 1.5 percent.

Any candidate polling over 12.5 percent of the registered voters will go through to the June 17 second round. Sarkozy's conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) is predicted to get 35.5 percent and the neo-fascist National Front (FN) 15 percent—down from 17.9 percent for its candidate Marine Le Pen in the first round of the presidential elections.

Current estimates, subject to a wide degree of error, give the Left Front alliance of the FG and the PCF 13 to 18 seats, the PS and its collaborators 280 to 310, the Greens 12 to 17, making a left total of 305 to 345. The UMP would get between 235 and 265, and the FN up to 5.

La Dépêche writes, "François Hollande expects a clear majority in order to be able to govern without being at the mercy of unreliable parliamentary combinations—above all if economic constraints were to lead him to take liberties with his programme to the annoyance of the left forces who are supporting him."

Such comments reflect widespread expectations in the ruling class that, after the legislative elections, Hollande will begin implementing sharp cuts against the working class. However, the PS's "left" allies are signaling that they will mount only *pro forma* criticisms of attacks on the working class—Mélenchon assured the PS that he would never vote for a censure motion against the government.

Hollande's hopes that he could convince German Chancellor Angela Merkel to add a "growth provision" to the Fiscal Contract seem increasingly forlorn, amid rising conflicts within Europe. (See: "Tensions mount as European leaders scramble to avert Spanish banking collapse".)

The fact that Hollande accepted this framework testifies to his anti-working class politics. The contract obliges the countries of the eurozone to impose massive austerity measures on the working class to cut budget deficits and repay debts to the banks. His proposals, while maintaining austerity and the imperative of reducing the budget deficit to zero by 2017, entail huge injections of cash into bailout and development funds for preferred industrial projects.

As the economic crisis intensifies, renewed class

struggles are on the agenda. France registered a record trade deficit of more than €70 billion in 2011. Hollande and the ruling class are seeking to boost France's competitiveness on the world market by attacking wages and working conditions, cutting jobs and living standards, in line with the benchmark set by President Obama's measures for the American auto industry. Obama's auto bailout featured a shutdown of large parts of the industry and 50 percent wage cuts for the working class.

Hollande has tried to ensure the PS' success in the legislative elections with a series of measures designed to make his régime appear to be a break with that of Sarkozy: he cut presidential and ministerial salaries by 30 percent; there was a 25 percent (about €70) rise in the grant for school equipment at the start of the new year; there was a less than 5 percent rise in the minimum wage.

He has also partially repealed Sarkozy's deeply unpopular pension reform, allowing workers who have a full 41 years paid in to the French national pension system to retire at age 60. Sarkozy had raised the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62. However, for this measure to apply, workers must have started working by age 19 and had virtually no periods of unemployment; as a result, it applies to only 110,000 retirees, 20 percent of the annual total.

Médiapart points out: "It's far from the return to retirement at 60 for all. Besides, as a supporter of a strict control on public expenditure, François Hollande, has never promised this. Nevertheless it was planned in the May 2011 PS presidential project and Ségolène Royal [the 2007 PS presidential candidate] and Arnaud Montebourg [the present Minister for boosting production] were proposing it in the Socialist Party primaries."

The €5 billion which was earmarked to fund the measure has now been reduced to €1.1 billion in 2013 and €3 billion in 2017. The Council for Pension Policy (COR), according to *Médiapart*, "is due to propose by the end of the year new financial estimates which are bound to be pessimistic because of the economic situation."

The alienation of much the population from the legislative elections expressed by an estimated record abstention rate of 40 percent of France's 46 million

registered voters. A May 5 Figaro poll showed that 51 percent of the population was very or quite interested in the election. By June 6 this had dwindled to 42 percent.

Forums presenting candidates to voters in working class districts of the Paris area in Seine-Saint-Denis reportedly did not attract any participants.

The position of the FN as France's third party is reinforced by the anti-working class policies of the PS. Its candidates are estimated to be in a position to go through to the second round in some 100 constituencies, creating a situation where many UMP candidates are looking to make electoral deals with them, nominally against the instructions of the UMP leadership.

Jérôme Sainte-Marie, director of the CSA opinion polling agency comments: "The aim is to prepare for the [regional elections in 2014], when the FN's pressure on the UMP to make joint lists will be very strong, and from now to provoke a strategic debate within the UMP between those who will want to make approaches to the FN and those who will refuse to do so."



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