

France's conservative UMP faces split after leadership race

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The Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), France's main right-wing party, faces a possible split after a contested vote Sunday for the party presidency. Supporters of former Prime Minister François Fillon and UMP party secretary Jean-François Copé, the two candidates, exchanged accusations of ballot fraud.

Copé ran a campaign appealing openly to the rising neo-fascist National Front (FN), and relying more on ex-FN personnel inside the UMP. Advocating an “unabashed right,” he attacked alleged “anti-white racism” and measures proposed by the ruling Socialist Party (PS) and President François Hollande, such as allowing homosexual marriage and giving foreigners the vote in local elections.

While in office, Fillon supported former President Nicolas Sarkozy's appeals to far-right sentiment—such as the ban on the burqa, the “national identity” debate and mass expulsions of the Roma—that boosted the FN. However, he based his campaign on sections of the UMP closer to right-wing parties like Jean-Louis Borloo's Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI), who would prefer making deals with the PS. The lack of substantive political differences between Fillon and Copé only made the resulting confrontation more explosive and bitter.

The election was timed to coincide with nationwide demonstrations, called over the weekend by Catholic and neo-fascist organizations, against homosexual marriage. Those were attended by tens of thousands of protesters.

On Monday Fillon supporters sent a letter to the COCOE (Commission d'organisation et de contrôle des opérations électorales), the UMP election control and organization commission, making detailed allegations of

ballot fraud in 15 separate French departments.

On Monday night Copé was declared the winner, by a margin of 98 votes out of 174,678 ballots cast by UMP members. Fillon initially admitted defeat in an open letter to his supporters, writing: “I did not want to launch a formal complaint, because I respect party members and I do not want to destroy their faith and their engagement in political life.”

Former Justice Minister Pierre Méhaignerie resigned from the UMP on Tuesday, denouncing “temptations of populism, of demagoguery.” He joined the UDI, which claimed to be recruiting UMP members jumping ship after the Copé victory.

Yesterday afternoon, Fillon's supporters launched a formal complaint, alleging that their leader had won the election and demanding that former Prime Minister Alain Juppé provisionally take over the UMP. They claimed to have suddenly discovered that UMP officials had ignored all 1,304 votes cast in overseas departments in New Caledonia, Mayotte (in the Indian Ocean) and Wallis and Futuna (in the South Pacific).

Fillon's campaign manager Eric Ciotti, the UMP's former spokesman on security and police affairs, said: “The COCOE's president himself admitted this error in a telephone conversation with François Fillon in the late morning. It is a clear and grave error.”

Copé's supporters opposed plans to promote Juppé. Henri Guaino, a speechwriter for Sarkozy, said: “The election results have been announced, there is a president. For those who do not want to respect them, the door to leave is open.”

Fillon went on national television yesterday evening, saying that he was renouncing the UMP presidency but that he did not rule out challenging Copé's victory in court. Copé, whose supporters reportedly control the UMP commission that oversees challenged elections, had asked Fillon to appeal to the commission, stressing his "availability" to meet with Fillon.

This debate highlights the shift to the right in French bourgeois politics since the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2008. This intensified after Hollande's election as president in May, with the support of the PS's allies in the union bureaucracy and the petty-bourgeois "left," such as the French Communist Party (PCF) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

Hollande is slashing jobs and social spending in talks with the union bureaucracy, while continuing to prosecute wars in Syria and Afghanistan and law-and-order policies, like the ethnic targeting of the Roma.

The relentless pursuit of similar pro-war and pro-austerity policies throughout Europe is driving a major shift in class relations. As in Greece—where the fascist Golden Dawn group has grown after years of devastating austerity policies carried out by social-democratic regimes working with the European Union—the French ruling class is turning to fascists as leading figures in political life.

It is increasingly difficult for the UMP to outflank the PS on the right without making neo-fascistic appeals. On the other hand, the ruling class no longer believes that the unions and the petty-bourgeois "left" will be able to politically control working class struggles, and are considering promoting rightist movements.

Columnist Ivan Rioufol wrote in the right-wing daily *Le Figaro* that the French people "no longer recognizes itself in this newly-elected 'socialist' president [Hollande], who speaks better to credit rating agencies than to the middle class. A subterranean fury is fermenting. It goes well beyond trade union marches. Reactions are unpredictable, but the terrain is ready for a 'French spring' that would overthrow the taboos that bridle thought, muzzle speech, and blind sight."

That is, were there to be an upsurge of mass struggles against the Hollande administration, like the revolutionary

mass strikes last year in Tunisia and Egypt that began the so-called "Arab Spring," Rioufol would anticipate strengthening and promoting neo-fascist forces. The "taboos" Rioufol wants to eliminate include hostility to Islam, to immigration, and to "welfare dependency." That is, they are in line with fascist support for the pro-war and anti-social policies of the bourgeoisie and violent hostility to the working class.

These developments vindicate the *World Socialist Web Site's* principled opposition to the PS and its bankrupt petty-bourgeois "left" satellites, and its call for the revolutionary mobilization of the working class against these forces and the entire European bourgeois establishment.

The UMP, for its part, faces the question of how to manage its political ties to the FN. It has moved to integrate a layer of hard-right or ex-FN officials into its leading bodies, though Copé reportedly supports this policy more aggressively.

Political commentator Thomas Guénolé told *Le Monde* that Copé would be more likely to tolerate significant cooperation between UMP and FN officials in local and regional positions: "Of course Jean-François Copé has already excluded an agreement with the FN, but what will he do when local UMP officials—and there will be some—ignore this guideline?"

Significantly, the "Strong Right" grouping won the largest vote (28 percent) in the contest between the UMP's six internal currents, which took place concurrently with the UMP leadership contest. Backed by more right-leaning Sarkozy administration officials, it is officially led by two men in their 30s—Geoffroy Didier, an aide of former Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux, and former FN member Guillaume Peltier.



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