

France: Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement on verge of split

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The Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) moved toward a split last week when François Fillon, prime minister under former president Nicolas Sarkozy, formed a separate parliamentary group in the National Assembly. Fillon named his group Le Rassemblement UMP (UMP Rally). He established the rival group within the UMP, with himself as president, following a contested vote for the leadership of the party that resulted in an official victory for Jean-François Copé.

Fillon has said that his group will disband if Copé agrees to a revote.

The UMP is the main opposition party since its defeat in the presidential and legislative elections last May and June at the hands of newly elected President François Hollande and the Socialist Party (PS).

The UMP was formed in 2002 by then-President Jacques Chirac, bringing together Gaullist tendencies, centrists, free-marketers and conservatives. Now it is breaking up under the pressure of explosive economic, social and political pressures in France, Europe and internationally.

The party has been in the throes of a vicious struggle over the leadership vote since November 18. Recounts by supporters of the interested parties have given a narrow victory to both contenders, who see the post as the jumping-off point for becoming the UMP candidate in presidential elections in 2017.

Both sides have traded charges of vote-rigging and illegal practices.

Sarkozy came out of semi-retirement on Tuesday to forge an agreement between the two contenders for the UMP presidency to sanction a referendum among the party's 300,000 members on the question of a revote. However, both sides continue to wrangle over the conditions for carrying out such a referendum and any revote. As of this writing, Le Rassemblement UMP has

not disbanded.

Dominique Dord, UMP treasurer and a Fillon supporter, resigned last Monday, claiming that Copé had used his control of the UMP apparatus to manipulate the poll to his advantage. Fillon obtained a court order to have a bailiff seal the voting returns, but Copé's supporters refused him access to UMP headquarters and have appealed the order.

While personal rivalry and ambition are at work in the struggle between these two reactionary politicians, the conflict is being driven by the enormous political and social conflicts developing in the European Union and France as a result of the world capitalist crisis and class tensions arising from ever more draconian attacks on workers' rights and conditions.

The credit rating agency Moody's downgraded France last week because it deemed the PS government's program of €60 billion (US\$78 billion) in social spending cuts and the planned lifting of laws protecting jobs and working conditions insufficiently draconian.

President Hollande and his PS government are more than willing to respond to the demands of the financial markets. But their approval ratings have already fallen to the mid-30s. The ruling class is aware that it cannot rely forever on its "left" flank, represented by the Socialist Party, the trade unions and pseudo-left groups such as the New Anti-capitalist Party to suppress working class opposition.

Sections of the bourgeoisie are ever more openly looking to the neo-fascist National Front, whose leader, Marine Le Pen, won 17.9 percent in the first round of the 2012 presidential election. They are turning to authoritarian measures and fascist rhetoric to divide the working class and whip up backward and reactionary forces for use as a battering ram against

opposition from workers and youth.

In his presidential campaign, Sarkozy sought to overcome the unpopularity of his austerity policies by abandoning any pretence of “social Gaullism”. He increasingly made appeals to National Front voters with attacks on Roma, Muslims, immigrant youth and welfare recipients. In this, he had the support of both Copé and Fillon.

In the campaign for the party leadership, however, Copé most openly aligned himself with the UMP factions closest to the National Front—the so-called “Strong Right”, which won the largest vote in the contest between the UMP’s six internal currents.

The Strong Right program calls for “a legally binding republican charter for French Muslims”, including a ban on the building of minarets and proscriptions against street prayers and the burqa. It declares, “The Republic, secularism and our Christian roots should constitute the backbone of our identity.”

Fillon, on the other hand, does not want to make an open break with “social Gaullism”, even though he was the architect of an historic assault on pension rights as minister of labour under President Chirac in 2003, and a ruthless supporter of austerity under Sarkozy.

FN leader Le Pen hopes to profit from the disarray of the UMP, which she says “is finished”. She claims that there has been a surge of recruits to the National Front.



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