

Hollande names right-wing interior minister as new premier after defeat in French municipal elections

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After the defeat of his Socialist Party (PS) in Sunday's municipal elections and the record victory of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), French President François Hollande reshuffled his cabinet, naming Interior Minister Manuel Valls as prime minister to replace Jean-Marc Ayrault.

The municipal elections, the first nationwide poll since Hollande's election in 2012, were a broad rejection of Hollande's record of social austerity policies and imperialist wars. The nomination of Valls is a signal that the PS will step up its attacks on the working class, while trying to maintain a limited political base on a law-and-order platform, implementing many of the FN's racist, anti-immigrant policies.

As interior minister, Valls has spearheaded mass deportations of Roma and undocumented immigrants and stated that, in his opinion, the Roma as an ethnic group should collectively leave France. He has on this basis been promoted and featured by the media.

Speaking on television last night, Hollande said he had "personally" received the message sent by the electorate. He added, "It is time to pass today to a new stage. I have thus given Manuel Valls the mission of leading the government of France." Hollande said that Valls would lead "a small team, a government of combat."

Hollande also praised Ayrault for carrying out "reforms"—i.e., the tens of billions in business tax and social spending cuts that have helped make Hollande's presidency the most unpopular since the office was created in 1958. He pledged further tax cuts and "a program of budget cuts."

With a record-high abstention of 37.3 percent, the PS

lost control of 155 city councils in towns of over 9,000 inhabitants, including many that had voted for social democrats for decades or even over a century. These included Toulouse, both Tourcoing and Roubaix in the Lille metropolitan area, Angers, Tours, Reims, Grenoble, and Limoges, which had had "left" mayors since 1912. The PS retained Paris and Lyon, but failed to retake either Marseille or Bordeaux.

"This first test for François Hollande was a first-rate catastrophe, the victory [of the PS in the last municipal elections] of 2008 has been completely erased," commented Frédéric Dabi of the Ifop polling agency.

While Jean-François Copé of the right-wing Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) saluted a "first great victory" of his party in local elections, the greatest victor in the election was Marine Le Pen's FN. After a straight first-round win in the former PS stronghold of Hénin-Beaumont, with 50.3 percent of the vote, the FN ended up controlling 15 of the 259 towns of over 9,000 inhabitants in which it qualified for the second round—where previously it had none.

Having gone into the elections with only 80 municipal councilors, the FN now has over 1,200. FN mayors now run cities including Fréjus, Villers-Cotterêts, and the 7th sector of Marseille.

"We are clearly passing into a new stage," said Marine Le Pen. "There is now a third great political force to be reckoned with in our country."

The press has hailed the FN as having ended the "bipolarization" of French bourgeois politics between the Gaullists and the PS that emerged after the 1968 general strike. It is now widely expected that the FN will win a substantial victory in the upcoming European elections in May, possibly receiving the most

votes of any party.

An Ipsos-Steria poll of voting intentions for the European elections gave the FN 22 percent, in front of the PS at 19 percent, and just 2 points behind the UMP. Previous polls put the FN ahead of the UMP, however.

Hollande's nomination of Valls shows the utter bankruptcy of claims that voters can rely on supporting the PS or other bourgeois parties to halt the rise of the FN and the steady drift of French and European politics toward the far right. It can safely be predicted that Valls' nomination, like the decision of Hollande's right-wing predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, to make chauvinist and law-and-order appeals to the FN's voting base, will only strengthen the FN.

Pseudo-left tendencies such as the New Anti-capitalist Party and the Left Front—which called for a Hollande vote in 2012, claiming this would defeat the right wing—bear political responsibility for the reactionary policies Valls and Hollande will now carry out.

One indication of the character of the policies Valls will pursue is the collection of reactionary views he put forward as a candidate in the PS' primary campaign prior to the 2012 presidential elections, which Hollande ultimately won.

A figure often compared to Britain's free-market Prime Minister Tony Blair, Valls denounced social programs, calling for the PS to oppose what he called "a society of state handouts." Underscoring his attempts to burnish his right-wing credentials, he said his focus was "the means we should give to the judiciary, the struggle against crime, and, again, the immigration issue." He has also called for lengthening the work week.

Significantly, Valls proposed that the PS abandon the fiction that it has any connection to socialism and cease calling itself "socialist." He explained, "We must transform from top to bottom the PS' functioning ... [and] change the name, because the word socialism is itself obsolete; it refers to nineteenth century conceptions."

These comments vindicate the positions of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has insisted that the working class in France can defend its class interests and advance towards socialism only in struggle against the PS reactionaries and their pseudo-left supporters.

The right-wing policies of Valls aim to impose the

type of devastating austerity measures the European Union (EU) has imposed on Ireland, Spain and Greece.

In the run-up to the elections, there were widespread discussions of dissatisfaction in financial circles with Hollande for failing to quickly spell out his plans for tens of billions of euros in tax and spending cuts under the so-called Responsibility Pact he announced this winter.

Now, the *Financial Times* noted, Hollande is "under severe pressure from Brussels [the EU] to maintain pressure on public finances, having already been given two years' grace to 2015 to meet the EU's designated target of reducing the budget deficit to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP)." France's budget deficit is still substantially over this target, at 4.3 percent, and its debt burden is already 93.5 percent of GDP.

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