

Le Pen at the Elysée Presidential Palace

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French President François Hollande's decision to invite Marine Le Pen, the leader of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), to the Elysée Presidential Palace to discuss the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* marks a turning point in French politics with far-reaching consequences.

A party closely associated since its foundation in 1972 with the worst crimes of European fascism in the 20th century is being elevated to the status of a legitimate, even indispensable component of French political life.

Leaving the Elysée yesterday morning, Le Pen said that Hollande had promised to launch a national "debate" on Islamic fundamentalism. This presages an escalation of the campaign to vilify France's five million Muslims. Already on Thursday, Le Pen called for reinstating the death penalty, which France abolished in 1981, in response to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

The right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) is also promoting the FN, pressing for it to join the "rally for national unity" called for Sunday by Hollande's Socialist Party (PS) and the UMP. After UMP leader and former president Nicolas Sarkozy met with Hollande on Thursday, the UMP's political committee echoed Le Pen's demands that the FN be allowed to participate.

"It is a unanimous decision: it is unacceptable for the National Front to be excluded from a march for national unity," declared Laurent Wauquiez, the general secretary of the UMP.

The implications of Wauquiez's statements are staggering. For decades, the FN was treated as a pariah on the national stage by both the UMP and the PS. It was understood to be the descendant of the fascist Vichy regime, which ruled France in collaboration with Nazi Germany during World War II, and of the Secret Armed Organization (OAS), the most fanatical

defenders of French colonial rule in Algeria. It was widely hated for its thuggish attacks on workers and students in France and its defense of criminal methods, including torture and terror bombings, in the 1954-1962 Algerian war.

The FN's founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, began his political career after World War II by selling the fascist Action Française's newspaper and overseeing the torture of Algerian independence fighters as a paratroop lieutenant. He relied on a broad cadre of former Nazi and Vichy collaborationists inside the FN, including figures such as Roland Gaucher, a convicted collaborationist who served during World War II as the youth leader of Vichy Labor Minister Marcel Déat's National Popular Rally.

Le Pen could always rely on financial support from a layer of wealthy patrons as well as limited support from figures such as President François Mitterrand. The Socialist Party leader Mitterrand, himself a former Vichy official, boosted the FN's media profile in the late 1980s in order to divide the right-wing vote and hold onto power despite his unpopular austerity policies.

Due to Le Pen's apologetics for fascism and mass murder, including his trivialization of the Holocaust as a "detail" of history, the ruling elite initially elected not to include the FN in mainstream politics. Instead, it relied on the PS and its pseudo-left satellites, some of which received substantial votes, to suppress strike movements and working-class protests against war and social austerity.

The current turn to promoting the FN is a sign of a deep crisis of capitalist rule in Europe. Beset by economic slump, international conflicts and rising class tensions for which it sees no solution, the European bourgeoisie is turning toward fascist methods of rule. It is seizing on the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* to legitimize the FN and fascism and proceed as far as

possible with the erection of a police state.

The FN's fortunes have skyrocketed particularly since the PS presidential election victory in 2012. In part, the FN benefited from the replacement of Jean-Marie Le Pen by his daughter Marine, whose studied silence on the crimes of fascism facilitated the media's attempts to market her to the public. Above all, it has relied on the discrediting of the PS, with Hollande becoming France's most unpopular president since World War II.

In a seamless transition from his conservative predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy, Hollande has adopted wholesale the austerity agenda of the European Union, devastating working-class living standards. He has also maintained Sarkozy's alignment with the reckless NATO war drive, led by Washington, against Muslim countries across the Middle East and Africa.

France's political equilibrium has been decisively shattered. The immigrant working class is totally alienated from the political establishment, opening the door for the most disoriented and backward sections of immigrant youth to be attracted to Al Qaeda.

On the other hand, broad sections of the French population and working class, enraged by the increasingly desperate social situation created by PS austerity measures, have concluded that Marine Le Pen is the best alternative available to them.

Under these conditions, the entire French ruling class has begun to play with Le Pen, much as the German bourgeoisie played with Adolf Hitler before Marshal Paul von Hindenburg handed power to Hitler in 1933. Leading strategists of the French bourgeoisie are coming to view violent conflict with France's Muslim population as inevitable.

Journalist Eric Zemmour, who has extensive ties to far-right and pseudo-left circles, told Italy's *Corriere della Sera* last month that a situation where there are "Muslims in the French people" will "lead us to chaos and civil war." Asked if he proposed to deport millions of Muslims from France, Zemmour replied that this was "unrealistic" for now, but added, "History is surprising."

Such remarks are a warning that the crisis of European capitalism and the crisis of political leadership in the working class are both extraordinarily acute. The appropriate conclusion must be drawn by the working class in France and around the world: The

critical political task is to mobilize the proletariat in a revolutionary struggle for socialism.



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