

Neo-fascist Marine Le Pen launches 2017 French presidential election bid

Kumaran Ira
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On September 17-18, France's neo-fascist National Front (FN) held an annual conference in the Mediterranean city of Fréjus to launch its leader Marine Le Pen's 2017 presidential bid. In her opening remarks, greeted by thousands of supporters waving French flags and shouting, "We're in our country," Le Pen said she would be the "candidate of the people" and made populist, nationalist and anti-European Union (EU) appeals.

Le Pen announced that she was launching a pre-campaign, as her "presidential campaign properly speaking [will begin] in mid-February with a presidential convention ... [and] will only proceed once we know the identity of all the candidates who are running." Until then, she said her team had put in place all the necessary conditions to start her campaign, seven months before the first round of the election in April 2017. "I am extremely serene and impatient to start," she said.

Polls currently show Le Pen will easily qualify for the final round run-off in May but would be beaten in the second round, except possibly if she faced the deeply unpopular sitting president, François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS). In recent elections, the FN has made significant gains, obtaining seats in both the National Assembly and the Senate, as well as hundreds of positions as mayors and local councillors. Under Hollande, the FN also extended its voter base into new areas including schools, hospitals, and above all broad layers of the police.

In her remarks, Le Pen made a chauvinist appeal denouncing immigration and multiculturalism. She said, "There will be no more France without identity, and there will be no identity without sovereignty."

Lamenting that France is no longer "in the hands of the French," she also denounced "orders" that she said

France receives from "Berlin, [EU capital] Brussels, and Washington."

In her remarks on foreign policy, Le Pen concentrated her fire on the euro currency shared by 19 countries in Europe and the EU, which has pushed for austerity policies across the continent that have decimated living standards and slashed tens of millions of jobs.

She praised the British vote to leave the EU in a referendum in June and reiterated that she would call for France to leave the EU and return to its national currency, the franc, if she comes to power next year. "We want a free France, which is the master of its laws and its currency, and the guardian of its borders," said Le Pen.

The FN's emergence as a serious contender for power is bound up not with an attempt to restore prosperity and freedom to the people, but the drive of the French capitalist class to violently assert its interests abroad and at home, above all against the working class.

A decade of global economic crisis, EU austerity, and imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East have shaken European capitalism to its foundations. With Brexit, the EU has begun to disintegrate. Like the EU, France's two traditional ruling parties, the PS and the right-wing The Republicans (LR), are deeply discredited, and the bourgeoisie is seeking new foundations for its rule.

Powerful sections of the ruling class have come to see the FN as the only way out of a hopeless situation. Abandoning the euro and devaluing a French national currency would impoverish workers and cut labor costs, so the ruling class could attempt to restore its international competitiveness and pursue trade war policies, particularly against Germany.

At home, the FN would aim to complete France's transformation into a police state, already well-

advanced due to the PS' perpetual extensions of its state of emergency. It would also accelerate the PS' anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant measures to divide the working class and cultivate a more militaristic atmosphere, positioning French imperialism to assert itself more strongly in the war drive of all the imperialist powers.

The FN and Marine Le Pen personally are still unpopular among a majority of French people. This is due principally to the role of FN founder, Marine's father Jean-Marie, as an apologist for France's Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime and as the leader of a paratroop unit that tortured independence fighters during Algeria's 1954-1962 war against France.

The decisive factor in the election outcome will not be the opinions of working people, however, but the interests of the ruling class amid a deep international crisis. It would be a disastrous error to write off Le Pen's chances. There is explosive social anger, but it finds no mass political outlet; what predominates is deep disillusionment with the reactionary policies of so-called “left” parties like the PS.

As the entire spectrum of bourgeois politics moves far to the right, the FN no longer appears very different from the PS or LR. Its anti-immigrant chauvinism, law-and-order hysteria, pro-business policies and militarism are well within the mainstream of French bourgeois politics, and the FN alone among the major parties makes demagogic appeals to the social distress facing broad masses of people. On this basis, it paradoxically finds support even among layers of immigrants.

Particularly if this is required by the intensifying war crisis, the French media and ruling elite may swing the election to the FN. While an FN government would soon face deep opposition in the working class, the FN knows it can rely on the support of a broad layer of reactionary social democratic and pseudo-left forces.

After the Fréjus conference, Le Pen explained how she could come to power. On Tuesday, she told RTL radio, “We will win because the choices we have made are those of the majority of this country.”

She said she would form a government “with people from the National Front, but also from people who will have joined us based on defending the nation and the fatherland. ... I believe there are patriots on the right and on the left. Our goal is to bring people together.”

Le Pen's strategy relies above all on the reactionary

character of the PS and its pseudo-left political satellites. She doubtless observed carefully how large numbers of PS officials joined a right-wing government under Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007. Since taking over leadership of the FN in 2011, she has worked to normalize or “de-demonise” the FN with the support of the media and the corrupt forces that for decades have passed themselves off as the French “left.”

The PS' policies played a key role in normalising the FN, as it sought to fashion a political base for wars and austerity. After last year's Charlie Hebdo and November 13 terror attacks, Hollande repeatedly invited Marine Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace to establish “national unity.”

At the same time, it imposed a state of emergency based on Algerian war-era legislation that scraps basic democratic rights, and sought to rehabilitate fascist legal principles. It advocated inscribing in the French constitution the principle of deprivation of nationality—a policy applied by the Vichy regime to Resistance leaders and, most infamously, to thousands of French Jews whom Vichy deported to Nazi death camps across Europe.

Pseudo-left forces like Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the petty-bourgeois Left Front also bear critical responsibility in the FN's rise. Mélenchon in particular led manoeuvres to de-demonise the FN, publicly appearing with Le Pen and repeatedly accepting to debate with her starting in 2011.



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