

France: Fillon wins presidential primary of right-wing parties

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According to initial estimates, François Fillon has won 67 percent of the vote in the run-off presidential primary election of France's main right-wing parties, easily defeating Alain Juppé.

Fillon is a former prime minister under Nicolas Sarkozy and practicing Catholic who admires Margaret Thatcher and advances a violently right-wing program. He is likely to face off against neo-fascist Marine Le Pen in the final round of the presidential election next May.

Voter turnout was roughly 4 percent higher than in the first round of the primary a week ago, in which 4.2 million voters participated. Fillon won all of France's 100-plus departments and overseas territories with the exception of Juppé's home area, Gironde. Juppé, a former prime minister under Gaullist President Jacques Chirac, also won Corrèze and, overseas, French Polynesia, Wallis-and-Futuna and Guyana.

Juppé conceded defeat at his campaign headquarters, saying, "I congratulate François Fillon for his decisive victory... I wish him good luck for his upcoming presidential campaign."

Fillon hailed his "deep-going victory" and called for unity among supporters of all the right-wing candidates. He attacked the "pathetic" five-year term of Socialist Party (PS) President François Hollande, adding, "I know the gravity of the situation and what my fellow citizens expect. I will listen to them in the coming months. I will take up with them the main challenge in France: that of truth and totally changing the country's references. I will work with all those who know that happiness is something that is conquered."

Less than three weeks since Donald Trump's election in the United States, Fillon's emergence as the candidate of The Republicans (LR) signifies a major shift to the right, entailing an intensification of austerity

and efforts to promote nationalism. Fillon proposes €110 billion in social cuts, nearly half of which would come from the slashing of Social Security and elimination of health care for numerous illnesses, as well as the elimination of 500,000 public-sector jobs.

He has suggested that abortion is not a "fundamental" right and indicated that he would support stepped-up judicial persecution of religious minorities, including passage of a law against the burkini.

In foreign policy, Fillon proposes a massive escalation of wars in the Middle East directed against the Islamic State (IS), which he denounces as "Islamic totalitarianism." He has observed that this war threatens to set off World War III, while absurdly blaming this danger on IS, which controls only a limited amount of territory in Iraq and Syria, rather than on the policies of the major world powers.

Fillon's candidacy will intensify the economic and strategic rivalries that are tearing apart the European Union, which is already threatened by the British exit and a referendum next week in Italy that could lead to the installation of an anti-EU, anti-euro government. Fillon has indicated he wants better relations with Russia, while repeatedly declaring that his goal is to prepare France to become Europe's leading power. The target of such remarks is obviously Germany, the EU's dominant member-state.

Fillon's primary victory highlights the collapse of French democracy. The PS is hated for having assaulted the workers with austerity measures and waged unpopular wars. Yet the candidate that currently is presented as the likely winner of the election aims to impose a program of Thatcher-style economic shock therapy, using the PS' state of emergency and reactionary labor law to escalate France's military operations and destroy basic social rights won by the

French working class in the course of a century of struggle.

The deep economic and military tensions internationally, as well as the character of the leading French presidential candidates, rule out the coming to power of a candidate whose policy would be significantly different. Whether the election ultimately goes to Fillon, Le Pen or—as now seems highly unlikely—a candidate of the PS or allied political tendency, what is being prepared is more war overseas and social war against the workers at home.

Opposition by workers to this offensive will be victorious only if it is organized independently of the trade union bureaucracy and PS satellites such as the New Anti-capitalist Party. The leaders of these organizations, who drove opposition to the PS labor law into a dead end last summer, are already suggesting that Fillon has a legitimate right to seek to impose his program on the French people.

Asked on France Inter about the legitimacy of a Fillon administration, General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leader Philippe Martinez answered, “Of course it would be legitimate, as long as promises are kept... as long as there are no new laws that are proposed.”

Everything suggests that Fillon’s nomination as LR candidate will boost the vote for Le Pen’s National Front (FN) in the presidential and legislative elections. Nicolas Sarkozy won the presidency 10 years ago by appealing to anti-Muslim prejudice and to the FN voter base. Voters at that time preferred to vote for Sarkozy rather than FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine’s father, because Sarkozy presented himself as a “democratic” candidate, in contrast to Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was infamous for statements denying the Holocaust and trivializing the Nazi occupation of France.

Fillon seems to be using Sarkozy’s playbook. However, the record of Sarkozy and, even more, of Hollande over the last 10 years has eliminated many obstacles to a massive shift of votes from the more traditional right to the FN. The same period has also seen evolution toward the extreme right of social democratic and petty-bourgeois politics.

The PS government under Hollande, by legitimizing the legal arsenal of the Vichy regime and the Algerian war, proposing a policy to deprive alleged terrorists of nationality, and imposing a state of emergency, set up a

police state framework that blurs the distinction between traditional parties of government and the FN.

Marine Le Pen has taken over the FN, carefully avoiding any display of pro-Nazi sympathies and giving top party positions to individuals tied to ex-PS member Jean-Pierre Chevènement, such as FN Vice President Florian Philippot. These ex-Chevènement supporters seek to give the FN a populist and “social” façade. The nomination of a violently free-market LR candidate will assist them as they demagogically pose as the only alternative to the pillage of the people by the banks.

Already yesterday, Philippot was attacking Fillon, declaring, “Fillon is clearly a free-marketer, clearly for austerity.” Attacking Fillon’s “extraordinary violence,” he added, “Fillon’s program is harsh: 500,000 public-sector jobs cut, especially in rural areas, and a hike in the sales tax... If you examine what Fillon would do, it means 12,500 fewer police and paramilitary security forces and 700,000 more unemployed.”

Yesterday, the Canadian press warned that a possible Le Pen-Fillon run-off in May could prove very close. “It’s not clear that Fillon is an attractive character for the left in French society to rally around,” Paul Diggie of Aberdeen Asset Management in London told the *Globe and Mail*. “I wouldn’t be willing to give you any better odds than 50-50 on Le Pen versus Fillon.”



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