

PS candidates signal continuity with French President Hollande's policies

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On Thursday night, seven Socialist Party (PS) and allied presidential candidates participated in the first nationally televised debate in the run-up to the PS presidential primary on January 22 and 29.

The debate takes place amid a historic collapse of the PS—one of the French bourgeoisie's main ruling parties since its foundation in 1969—which has been deeply discredited by President François Hollande's agenda of austerity, police-state rule and war. At 4 percent approval ratings, Hollande is France's most unpopular president since the creation of the office in 1958. Hollande himself has declined to stand again, and there are rising fears in ruling circles that the PS could disintegrate and collapse, like its social-democratic sister party, Pasok, in Greece.

This underscores the extraordinary character of Thursday's debate. The fears of the imminent annihilation of the PS notwithstanding, not a single candidate could make a forthright criticism of Hollande or call for a shift in policy in the interests of working people. The seven presidential candidates all signaled, in their own fashion, that they would continue the basic thrust of Hollande's despised agenda.

The first speaker was Hollande's former prime minister, Manuel Valls, the candidate most directly representing Hollande's legacy. He issued a bald defense of Hollande's policies of austerity, police-state build-up, and appeals to far-right sentiment, while cynically presenting his candidacy as a barrier to those of the conservative François Fillon and the neo-fascist Marine Le Pen.

"According to every prediction," Valls said, "the left will be eliminated from the second round of the presidential election. Our country would only have two options: the far right or the hard right. I refuse to accept that. I love France, she gave me everything."

Having admitted that the French people despise the Hollande administration's record, Valls went on to defend its most draconian policies, including the imposition of a regressive labor law without a parliamentary vote, as well as of an indefinitely extended state of emergency.

Valls, backed by the other candidates, insisted that France was "at war" with terrorism and defended Hollande's targeted extrajudicial murders: "What must be done must be done, what should be kept secret should be kept secret."

Valls thrust aside criticisms of the PS's failed attempt earlier this year to inscribe in the French constitution the policy of deprivation of nationality. This was an appeal to the far right, as the policy was used in the Nazi Occupation to justify the initial deportation of Jews, particularly children, to death camps and to outlaw the French Resistance. "But come on, who did this law target? It did not target the children of the Republic due to their origins. It targeted terrorists," Valls said.

The other candidates—PS ex-ministers Arnaud Montebourg, Benoît Hamon, and Vincent Peillon, former Green deputy François de Rugy, Democratic Front leader and ex-Green Jean-Luc Bennahmias, and Radical Left Party (PRG) candidate Sylvia Pinel—either endorsed or made perfunctory criticisms of Hollande's record.

While Peillon said it provoked "incomprehension" and de Rugy called it "mixed," Montebourg said it was "hard to defend but contains some improvements." Hamon declared that it gave off an "unfinished feeling, as if we abandoned a lot of things in midstream."

The debate featured a long discussion of Hamon's plans for a universal guaranteed revenue, which he presented as a way of addressing the lack of jobs in

France, by allowing people to survive based on long-term unemployment. Insofar as the monthly revenue Hamon wants to guarantee would be somewhere between €600 and €800, this simply underscores that his plan is to legislate generalized poverty and joblessness—and then try to pass this program off as progressive.

One measure of the discrediting of the PS was that the moderators raised the possibility that the PS candidate would be eliminated and would have to back either Hollande's former economy minister, investment banker Emmanuel Macron, or possibly former PS minister and former Left Party leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the second round of the elections.

Business circles are promoting Macron, a pro-austerity and pro-European Union (EU) candidate who has met during the campaign with right-wing nationalists like Philippe de Villiers, and was in Berlin this week to pledge more austerity. It appears that their concern is not only to ensure a safe pair of hands to continue Hollande's policies, but also to try to find a leader around which the French ruling elite can rebrand the PS machine and prevent the collapse of the EU.

Financial magazine *Challenges* wrote, "if Macron is ahead, the PS candidate will have a choice of falling in line behind him or collapsing. If it falls in line, the PS survives. If it collapses, it dies."

The PS primary debate exemplifies the deep political crisis facing the French and indeed the entire European bourgeoisie. After nearly a decade of deep economic crisis and social austerity since the 2008 Wall Street crash, and escalating imperialist interventions from Mali and Libya to Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine, longstanding institutions of European bourgeois rule are deeply discredited. After the collapse of Pasok and of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), the PS is heading for a debacle of historic significance.

The PS was built after the May-June 1968 general strike as a bourgeois party designed to block a revolutionary struggle of the working class and stabilize bourgeois rule in Europe. It was always deeply hostile to the working class and to socialism. A party that regrouped ex-Vichy collaborators like François Mitterrand, former social democrats, and various ex-Trotskyist and ex-Stalinist forces, it was well to the right of the old social-democratic party.

It formed the Union of the Left alliance with the

Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), as well as with various renegades from Trotskyism, in order to associate itself falsely with the 1917 Revolution in Russia. At the same time, it supported the denunciations of Marxism and of proletarian revolution by postmodernists like Michel Foucault and his allies, anti-Communist New Philosophers like Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann. This paved the way for Mitterrand's election to the presidency in 1981 and a vast shift to the right in official politics in France.

After less than two years in office, Mitterrand had abandoned the social concessions he had pledged to make and was rapidly moving to implement a pro-business agenda. The PS justified its "austerity turn" with claims that they were necessary to continue European integration and align France with the most competitive European economies. Throughout the 1980s, it pushed for the formation of the EU, culminating in the 1992 Maastricht treaty and of the common euro currency, which it hoped to use to contain Germany.

The discrediting of the PS and the collapse of social-democratic parties across Europe is part of the broader discrediting of these institutions, set up by the European bourgeoisie twenty-five years ago at the time of the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR. With the EU a byword for austerity and war and the euro torn apart by tensions between the different countries in the euro zone, the PS has nothing to offer but even more attacks on the working class.



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