

French prime minister beaten into second place in Socialist Party presidential primary

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French President François Hollande's government suffered another humiliating setback last night in the presidential primary of his Socialist Party (PS), as former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who resigned his position to run for president, was beaten into second place by Benoît Hamon.

Hamon, a former education minister, took 36.21 percent of the vote, Valls 31.19 percent, former Economy Minister Arnaud Montebourg 17.62 percent, and Vincent Peillon 6.48 percent. The remaining candidates each won less than 5 percent.

The primary took place amid a general atmosphere of popular indifference. Some two million voters participated in the PS primary, after over 4 million voters participated in the primary elections that selected François Fillon as the right-wing The Republicans' (LR) candidate. While Fillon was broadly expected to win the presidency after the LR primary, neither Hamon nor Valls is currently expected to survive to the second round of the presidential elections.

The latest Ipsos poll showed that they would receive 8 and 9 percent of the vote, respectively, setting up a second round between Fillon and Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN).

The vote is set to intensify the deep crisis in the PS, one of the French bourgeoisie's two major parties of government, whose survival itself is at stake. After five years of a deeply unpopular presidency, the PS is deeply divided and threatened with a split as it faces a wipe-out in the April-May 2017 elections. Now, however, broad sections of the PS closer to the government may back investment banker and former Hollande advisor Emmanuel Macron rather than backing Hamon, should Hamon beat Valls in the run-off and become the PS candidate.

Hamon, who ran based on appeals to discontent with

Hollande's austerity policies and a demagogic promise to institute a minimum universal income for everyone in France, called for his voters to again vote in the second round of the PS primary this coming Sunday. "Left-wing voters, this is my conviction, voted by conviction and not by resignation," he said in a press conference after the vote. He added, "Now we must broaden the mobilization in the first round, to give it more strength."

Hamon also thanked Montebourg, who left the race with an appeal to his voters to vote for Hamon in the second round of the primaries.

Valls, who in the days preceding the vote had been expected to take first place but then lose in the second round to Hamon, tried to put the best face on his surprise second-place finish and claimed to be the only viable candidate to oppose Donald Trump, Russia, and the National Front. "A new campaign is starting from this evening," he said. "A very clear choice is presenting itself to us now, and to you. The choice between certain defeat and possible victory, the choice between unrealizable and unaffordable promises and a credible left wing that takes responsibility for our country."

He continued, "I refuse to abandon the French people to its fate in the face with the far right that would destroy our country, or the right wing led by François Fillon, hard and free-market as never before, and conservative in its policy faced with Donald Trump's America and Vladimir Putin's Russia."

PS First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis hailed the vote as "successful" and proof that the PS and its voters could "resist the spirit of the times" and avoid a complete collapse of his party. Nonetheless, he could not avoid striking a pessimistic tone as he described the PS' future prospects.

“I am convinced that this democratic exercise will hold the left together,” Cambadélis declared. “I am persuaded that a new alliance is being born, forged by today’s vote. ... I am persuaded that the presidential election is not yet over.”

The crisis that is engulfing the PS points to the broad, international character of the collapse and discrediting of the political institutions of the post-World War II period. The PS played a central role in pressing for the construction of the European Union (EU) and the euro under President François Mitterrand in the 1980s and 1990s. Compared to Le Pen’s party and LR, it still takes the least hostile stance towards the EU of any major party in the French presidential elections.

However, after the Socialist Party disappointed expectations of the population in successive governments—Mitterrand’s presidency, the 1997-2002 Plural Left government led by Mitterrand’s top aide Lionel Jospin, and now with Hollande’s presidency—it is politically disintegrating. Hollande is currently at 4 percent in polls.

Like other European social-democratic parties that have imposed a ruthless austerity diktat since the 2008 Wall Street crash, like Greece’s Pasok or the Spanish Socialist Party, the PS now faces the prospect of collapse or even electoral annihilation. The geo-strategic stakes of such a collapse are all the greater, in that a dissolution of the PS would deal a further blow to the EU, which is already reeling from Brexit and from Trump’s expression of overt hostility to the EU and Germany before his inauguration.

In this context, the emergence of Valls and Hamon as the PS’ two main candidates points to the bankruptcy of the PS and the EU more broadly.

Valls personifies like no one else the socially regressive character of the PS. A politician who has called for the PS to simply abandon the name “socialist,” he is directly associated with the most reactionary policies of Hollande’s presidency. He defends the state of emergency, austerity measures like the labor law and the Responsibility Pact, and the ever-closer integration of the PS and the police and intelligence apparatus, based on law-and-order and anti-Muslim appeals.

Should Valls fail to defeat Hamon, powerful sections of the bourgeoisie will intensify pressure on his allies within PS to rally behind Macron, effectively

liquidating itself into the personal electoral movement of an investment banker with close ties to the nationalist far right, such as Philippe de Villiers. In other words, Valls’ posturing as an anti-FN force is a hypocritical and empty fraud.

The decision to run Hamon as a candidate points to broad awareness in sections of the ruling class and the media of the deep social opposition and anger over economic inequality developing in the working class in France and internationally.

Nonetheless, Hamon’s proposals offer little to workers and, above all, are not seriously intended. His plans for a €600 [\$US645]-800 [\$US859] per month universal wage would barely lift the unemployed out of poverty, but would cost hundreds of billions of euros, under conditions where the bourgeoisie itself is hostile to any new social spending.

And, as the Hollande presidency has made very clear, not only will the PS implement the bourgeoisie’s austerity diktat, but its so-called “rebel” faction, from which Hamon hails, will not mount any effective opposition—citing the need to keep the right wing out of power.

Under these conditions, Hamon’s plans are simply dust which he hopes to throw into the eyes of those remaining sections of the electorate still willing to vote for the PS.



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