

Corruption allegations hit conservative French presidential candidate Fillon

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Two months after obtaining the presidential nomination of the right-wing The Republicans' (LR) party, and less than a week after calling for closer ties to Moscow prior to a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, François Fillon faces corruption charges that could undermine his campaign.

On Wednesday, the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* published allegations that Fillon's wife Penelope was paid €600,000 [US \$642,000] over eight years for two jobs in which she did no identifiable work. This allegation is particularly damaging since Fillon staked his presidential bid on claims that he was not as corrupt as his main LR rivals. Former Prime Minister Alain Juppé was convicted on corruption charges in 2004, and former President Nicolas Sarkozy still is in legal jeopardy in a series of cases arising from his term in office from 2007 to 2012.

Abandoning the traditional "truce of the Republic" during election periods, French financial authorities have announced they are opening an initial investigation into the issue.

Given the widespread corruption of the French political establishment, and the timing of the exposure—coming only days after Fillon's explosive call for an alliance with Germany and Russia against the new American administration—it appears this revelation is an element of the vicious faction fight now roiling ruling circles over how to react to Donald Trump's coming to power.

Fillon reacted rapidly to the allegations, appearing personally on the evening news on TF1 television on Thursday to defend himself and threaten journalists reporting on the matter with legal action. "I will bring suit against the newspapers that are stating that my wife had a fictitious job," he said, stating that he was the target of "calumny" and charges designed to "shoot

down" his candidacy. He added, "There is something rotten in our democracy."

Fillon did not deny that his wife had received the payments, however, but asserted that she had done work to justify her salary, such as looking at drafts of his speeches and receiving guests. He also repeated that he would step down if he were formally indicted on corruption charges—a statement he previously made to distinguish himself from Sarkozy.

Fillon's sudden decision to appear on prime-time television was an acknowledgment that the details and allegations assembled by *Le Canard Enchaîné* could potentially deal a fatal blow to his presidential ambitions.

Penelope Fillon, *Le Canard* writes, was "until recently known for her talents as a judge in contests for the best pear pie or Shetland ponies, regular attendance at mass at Solesmes Abbey [a Benedictine monastery], and home-making ... Surprise: the income of a woman who always presented herself as an exemplary stay-at-home mother sometimes totaled almost half the taxable income reported by the couple."

Her pay allegedly included nearly €500,000 from the National Assembly, where she worked as a "parliamentary attaché" for Marc Joulaud, a deputy who replaced Fillon in the Assembly while Fillon was working as a minister in successive right-wing governments. Penelope Fillon's pay, according to *Le Canard Enchaîné*'s sources, went up to €7,900 per month—almost the entire €9,561 monthly budget for Joulaud's parliamentary staff.

The weekly paper interviewed Jeanne Robinson-Behre, another one of Joulaud's attachés, who did not recall Penelope Fillon carrying out any work for Joulaud at all. "I never worked with her, I have no information on this subject," Robinson-Behre said. "I

only knew her as a minister's wife.”

Moreover, *Le Canard* adds, “In 2012 and 2013, [Penelope Fillon] was ‘literary advisor’ at *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, a monthly magazine owned by a family friend, businessman and man of influence Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière. In 20 months, she raked in €100,000 pre-tax, even though the director of the magazine had never met her.”

She was allegedly paid €5,000 per month, only €1,000 less than Michel Crépu, the magazine's director at the time. However, Crépu told *Le Canard*, “I never met Penelope Fillon and I never saw her in the magazine's offices. ... Marc de Lacharrière phoned me once to say, ‘Could you send me some books for review we could give to Mrs Fillon, who is feeling bored?’”

Given the elasticity of the laws against influence peddling and those requiring National Assembly attachés to actually work for the deputies they are supposedly assisting, it is unclear whether Penelope Fillon's pay packets were technically illegal. However, the affair points to the boundless class arrogance of the leading presidential candidates. They are demanding deep austerity from working people and financial sacrifices to pay for police-state and militarist policies, while living off vast payoffs, legal or otherwise, from major banks and businesses.

Fillon's ability to have his wife hired and paid for nominal work is hardly unusual among deputies at the National Assembly. In 2014, the first year that reporting was required, *Médiapart* reports, 52 wives, 28 sons and 32 daughters of legislators were employed using parliamentary funds.

Moreover, Fillon's financial arrangements were no doubt well-known in political and media circles long before *Le Canard Enchaîné* went into print. Those arrangements have been the subject of intense scrutiny since November, when numerous articles appeared on Fillon's consulting firm 2F Conseil, which earned a whopping €757,000 in three years despite having no employees. It appears that these sums of money came from lucrative speaking fees paid to Fillon by various business groups and think tanks.

The exposure of the potentially most damaging element of Fillon's finances was carefully timed. It came just after he issued a statement in *Le Monde* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* attacking NATO

interventions in Syria and Ukraine as costly errors and calling for the formation of a French-German-Russian alliance against Washington. Such a policy contradicts the views of candidates in or around the Socialist Party (PS)—including Emmanuel Macron and Benoît Hamon, who have insisted on maintaining ties with Washington—to which the *Canard* is generally sympathetic.

Under these circumstances, it appears that the allegation against Fillon is yet another indication of how international crises and conflicts are increasingly dominating the French presidential election campaign.



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