

Benoît Hamon wins Socialist Party presidential primary in France

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In a landslide victory, Benoît Hamon won yesterday's second round of the ruling Socialist Party's (PS) primary contest and became the party's presidential candidate. According to initial figures yesterday evening, Hamon, the former education minister under President François Hollande, received 59 percent of the vote, eliminating former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who won only 41 percent.

Two million voters cast their ballots, as opposed to the 4 million voters who participated in the primary contest for the right-wing Republicans (LR) in November, in a campaign marked primarily by vast popular disaffection with the PS government.

Hamon hailed his victory as the day “the left lifted its head once again”, declaring the vote to be “a sign of a living and vibrant left”. He pledged “to start, tomorrow, by uniting the left”, and stated his intention to “propose to [the Green Party presidential candidate] Yannick Jadot and to [former Left Party leader] Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in particular, that we create a social, economic and democratic governmental majority”.

The vote represents nothing of the sort. The result of the primary is a rejection by the electorate of the hated policies of the Hollande administration, represented most clearly in Valls' candidacy. His defeat is a further humiliation for the government, and the PS is widely anticipated to face a debacle in the presidential contest in April-May of this year. The party is profoundly discredited after years of austerity and war; President Hollande has approval ratings of around 4 percent.

Although posing as a critic of Hollande, Hamon does not in any way represent a shift in the PS' right-wing programme, or a reorientation to the left, let alone the working class.

Hamon is a resolute advocate of war and a law-and-order policy oriented to the security forces, and has

stated his approval for Hollande's programme of extra-judicial killings. In response to the growing danger of a large-scale war between the major powers in the wake of Donald Trump's inauguration in the USA, Hamon has called for an offensive of French imperialism and indicated his sharp hostility towards Russia.

Calling for the creation of a universal basic income, Hamon has made certain gestures towards the pseudo-left parties linked to the PS, including his calls for discussions with Mélenchon. His proposal for a universal basic income of €600-800 a month is reactionary, however. It would not lift the unemployed out of poverty, and is intended as a substitute for a secure and well-paying job under conditions of mass unemployment and deindustrialisation, which Hamon treats as inevitable.

His programme would, however, cost hundreds of billions of euros, an expenditure that Hamon's backers inside the bourgeoisie would not tolerate. The reactionary character of his proposal is not lost on the French population, two-thirds of whom are hostile to his universal income scheme.

Recent polls show that with Hamon as candidate, the PS will still come in fifth place in the first round of the presidential elections, with 8 percent. This puts him behind the National Front's (FN) Marine Le Pen, LR's François Fillon, PS-linked banker Emmanuel Macron and the former leader of the Left Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon. He would be eliminated after the first round, in a humiliating defeat for the PS.

Hamon's victory will only exacerbate the crisis of the PS, which has been the major pillar of bourgeois rule in France for half a century. The PS is deeply divided, and large sections of the party have already expressed their opposition to aligning with Hamon's positions. Many PS officials have pledged their support for Emmanuel

Macron, rather than backing the PS candidate.

Speaking to BFMTV two days before the second round, Valls also made clear that he would not back Hamon. While stating that he would remain “loyal” to the PS if Hamon won, he also declared that he “would not defend [Hamon’s] programme” but would “move aside” during Hamon’s campaign.

Other PS officials have also already stated that they would oppose Hamon’s campaign. Pro-Valls MPs, including Christophe Caresche, Gilles Savary and François Loncle, circulated a letter last week stating that if Hamon won, they would assert their “right to withdraw from Hamon’s campaign”, and call for a Macron vote.

The calls to oppose Hamon demonstrate the depth of crisis within the PS. With support for the party haemorrhaging towards Macron, its very survival is at stake; it is deeply divided and threatened with a split after the April-May elections, if not before.

The turn of large sections of the PS to Macron, whose programme is even more explicitly right-wing than Hamon, underscores the reactionary and pro-capitalist character of European social democracy. Such parties across Europe, including Pasok in Greece and the Socialist Party in Spain, have also seen their vote collapse after decades of supporting the European Union’s (EU) austerity diktat.

François Fillon, the right-wing ‘The Republicans’ (LR) candidate, also appears increasingly fragile. Although initially expected to win in a second round of the presidential election against neo-fascist FN candidate Marine Le Pen, Fillon was seriously damaged last week by corruption allegations.

Last Wednesday, the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* published claims that Fillon paid his wife Penelope hundreds of thousands of euros in tax-payers’ money over eight years for a job as his “parliamentary assistant” in which she did no identifiable work. Fillon is now in serious legal jeopardy, with French financial authorities announcing an investigation into the issue.

Between November, when he became LR’s presidential candidate, and last week, his approval ratings have dropped by 16 points, from 54 to 38 percent. The French bourgeoisie now faces a severe crisis, with both its traditional parties of government, LR and the PS, threatened with electoral collapse.

The FN is attempting to emerge as the main

beneficiary of this collapse. Le Pen is expected to easily make it through to the second round of the presidential contest, according to the polls.

The prospect of the collapse of the two major parties of bourgeois rule in France is causing increasing unease within the European ruling class. Already reeling from the Brexit vote and from Trump’s denunciations of the EU as a tool of Germany, the crises in the PS and LR are further undermining Europe’s political order.

In a statement to the German parliament last week, recently appointed German Deputy Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel expressed Berlin’s concern over the consequences of the FN’s rise for the EU’s future. “After Brexit, if enemies of Europe manage again in the Netherlands or in France to get results”, he warned, “then we face the threat that the largest civilisation project of the 20th century, namely the European Union, could fall apart”.

The Trump administration has made it clear that it intends to exploit Brexit to use Britain as a political weapon against the EU, and particularly Germany, which it regards as a major economic competitor. France is also emerging as a battleground as Berlin and the Trump administration vie for influence, with the Trump administration rapidly building ties with the FN and Berlin seeking to keep pro-EU forces such as the PS and LR in power.

The breakdown of PS is thus a symptom of the deep factional conflicts within the European ruling elite and the growing international tensions and threat of war.



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