

Fillon survives challenge as French right's presidential candidate

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In an emergency meeting of Les Républicains' (LR) Political Bureau Monday night, LR candidate François Fillon received a unanimous vote of confidence to continue his presidential campaign. Nonetheless, the vote, coming after a virtual disintegration of his campaign staff and the eruption of bitter recriminations among LR's central leadership, has exposed the deep divisions provoked inside LR by its rapid shift far to the right.

Fillon's campaign has been badly damaged since January when reports emerged, in retaliation for his proposal of a French-German-Russian alliance against the Trump administration in Washington, apparently showing that he organized no-show jobs for his wife Penelope, worth €900,000. Some 71 percent of French voters want Fillon, who has advanced an unpopular program of deep social austerity, to withdraw.

Before the Monday LR political bureau meeting, significant sections of LR rallied behind calls for Alain Juppé, Fillon's main rival for the LR presidential nomination, to run as an emergency replacement for Fillon. Polls currently show that if Juppé ran, he would reach the second round of the elections, where he would face neo-fascist National Front (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen and beat her, winning the presidency. Fillon, on the other hand, would be eliminated in the first round.

Starting late last week, virtually the entire top leadership of Fillon's campaign staff resigned, more or less openly attacking Fillon. Last Thursday, assistant campaign director Sébastien Lecornu and campaign treasurer Gilles Boyer resigned, with Boyer denouncing Fillon for adopting neo-fascistic positions: "You don't fight the FN by trying to be further to its right." On Friday it was the turn of Fillon's campaign spokesman Thierry Solère to leave, and on Sunday campaign

director Patrick Stefanini sent his resignation letter to Fillon.

If Fillon ran and LR were defeated, Stefanini wrote, this "would place center-right voters before an unbearable dilemma," namely, of voting for the FN or for candidates close to the unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government. "I cannot accept to work on such a perspective," he added.

Fillon responded by organizing a right-wing protest in defense of his campaign on Sunday afternoon at the Trocadéro palace, in a wealthy neighborhood of Paris. It gathered several thousand protesters and mobilized a large cadre of operatives close to the far right, including the Common Sense movement of anti-gay marriage activists.

He also went on France2 television that night and stressed that, as the winner of the LR primary, he was the only legitimate LR candidate and that LR's Political Bureau could not remove him. "It is not the party that will decide. We will not choose in backstage maneuvers. ... If voters had wanted Alain Juppé, they would have voted for him in the primaries."

In the event, Fillon received a unanimous vote of support from LR's political bureau, apparently after Fillon received the support of Nicolas Sarkozy—who, as president from 2007 to 2012, also pursued a strategy of appealing to FN voters on a nationalistic and far-right basis.

Juppé issued a statement Tuesday morning definitively declaring that he would not run. He attacked his own party's membership, stating that "the hard core of LR members has become radicalized" and blamed their shift towards far-right positions for his inability to rally the party. "I am not in a position to carry out the necessary unification of the party around a common platform," he said, "and this is why I am

confirming—once and for all—that I will not run for the presidency of the Republic.”

Juppé’s supporters within LR denounced Sarkozy’s role in the internal LR discussions, with one telling *Le Monde*: “Sarkozy prefers to lose with Fillon than to win with Juppé. It’s irresponsible.”

The eruption of a political crisis that threatens to split LR apart is a product of the broad shift to the right of the European Union (EU) since the 2008 economic crisis and, in France, of the rapid turn far to the right of President François Hollande’s PS government. As he sought to cultivate a far-right constituency for policies of austerity and war, particularly within the police and security forces, Hollande adopted ever larger portions of the FN’s program.

He imposed a state of emergency in response to attacks carried out by terror networks used by the NATO powers for their war in Syria; closed down refugee camps; rounded up and deported Roma families; and formed a paramilitary national guard. Hollande repeatedly invited FN presidential candidate Marine Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace to legitimize her party.

LR was trapped between the PS’ hysterical drive towards the far right, and the rising influence of the FN. While Juppé tried to pose as a moderate, Sarkozy and Fillon spoke for those sections of LR that sought to push it further to the right. They tried to attack both the FN and the PS from the right, to win support of Catholic fundamentalist circles as well as sections of big business looking to carry out slashing attacks on basic social programs, such as Social Security.

They are also apparently trying to stop a rapid shift towards the FN of much of the LR voting base and political periphery, by taking over much of the FN’s program.

Philippe de Villiers, a right-wing nationalist traditionally close to LR forces but who was also courted by PS-backed candidate Emmanuel Macron, is now backing Le Pen. He declared that he supports her because “her hand will not tremble when she needs to take painful decisions,” and because he said she had absorbed the conceptions put forward by himself, fascist former Sarkozy advisor Patrick Buisson, and pro-Vichy journalist Eric Zemmour.

De Villiers wrote, “Marine has read our books [of Villiers, Buisson and Zemmour] and has understood

where we’re going. The result is that our readership is ditching Fillon. The right will vote for Marine Le Pen in the second round, she can win.”

At the same time, the record of the PS government and of Fillon underscores that large sections of the political establishment are now adopting political positions very close to those of the FN. This underscores the bankruptcy of any attempt to halt the attacks on basic social and democratic rights in France by voting for candidates closer to LR or the PS. Fillon’s survival and the evolution of the LR campaign underscores that these fundamental rights can only be defended by the working class, in opposition to the shift of the French and European ruling class far to the right.



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