

French presidential candidates feign opposition in 11-party debate

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On Tuesday night, all 11 French presidential candidates participated for over three hours in the first of two 11-party debates scheduled before the first round of the elections, on April 23. The unusual debate, which produced noisy and often fractious exchanges and a great deal of political posturing, reflected the deep and growing concerns of the French ruling class.

The financial aristocracy, facing a historic collapse in support for the candidates of its two traditional parties of rule, Benoît Hamon of the ruling Socialist Party (PS) and François Fillon of The Republicans (LR), is considering the deep crisis of the European Union (EU) and growing social anger. French and international banks are analyzing the possibility of a French exit from the EU and the euro, if Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) wins. And protests are erupting against police killings and sexual assaults that the PS, despite the state of emergency, no longer dares to ban.

Ruling circles, feeling increasingly at sea and concerned by polls showing that two-thirds of the French population believes the class struggle is a daily reality, want the political establishment to make a symbolic gesture, to appear to take popular sentiment into account.

Yesterday, in his editorial on the debate for *Libération* titled ‘Revolt,’ Laurent Joffrin complained of “hard times for financial capitalism.” France, he said, is “a worried country, on edge, explosive, that is getting tired of reasonable solutions.” He went on to welcome the fact that the less prominent candidates expressed “something profound: a revolt against injustice, the rejection of a ruling class that has let money be king.”

Expressions of opposition in the debate were hypocritical and empty, however, insofar as they came

primarily from long-time, trusted allies of the PS such as Philippe Poutou of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) or Nathalie Arthaud of Workers Struggle (LO). All the so-called “little candidates” cut their deals with the major parties to obtain the 500 signatures of elected officials required by anti-democratic electoral laws in order to present a presidential candidate.

Their positions offer nothing to the working class, and the debate moved within extremely narrow limits. No candidate in the debate, “little” or otherwise, raised the danger of a major war posed by NATO’s threats against Russia and Syria, and heightened by the recent propositions of candidates Emmanuel Macron and Jean-Luc Mélenchon to bring back the draft. No one proposed, either, to end the ongoing state of emergency imposed by the PS.

Nevertheless, Joffrin’s comments indicate why limited and hypocritical discussions of war and social inequality emerged in this tightly controlled debate.

Macron, the candidate supported by President François Hollande and his PS government, attacked Le Pen, declaring: “What you are proposing, with the exit from the euro, it’s cutting purchasing power, destroying jobs, and economic war! You are proposing nationalism, and nationalism, that means war!” Le Pen responded that Macron’s statements were just “tired old nonsense.”

Poutou, a union bureaucrat at the Ford factory in Blanquefort whose party emerged from the post-1968 student movement as a classic example of a petty-bourgeois organization, played the role of the “working class” candidate that has netted him media coverage. Wearing a T-shirt, he refused to be photographed with the other candidates and indicated his solidarity with LO’s Arthaud: “They try to limit us to the role of a little candidate who represents nothing and should not

be here, but we are the only ones to have real jobs...”

Similarly, Arthaud postured as a fighter for working people, calling for “consciousness, confrontation, combat and social struggle because nothing will ever be given to us. It’s a vote of conscience and militancy.” She later added, pessimistically, that things are getting “harder, but we will get nothing without that.”

The hypocrisy involved in these statements is staggering. Firstly, all of these candidates, the NPA and LO no less than Macron and Le Pen, are on record as supporting imperialist wars in Libya, Syria, and Eastern Europe. As Macron takes Le Pen to task for promoting nationalism and thus heightening the danger of war, he and Mélenchon are demanding a return of the draft, to prepare the French army for war. Macron justified his call for the draft by declaring that we are living in an “epoch in international relations in which war is again a possible outcome of politics.”

As for LO and the NPA, these are organizations that have endorsed every trade union sell-out of workers struggles in France, and whose co-thinkers in Greece, in the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government, are imposing deep EU austerity on the working class.

Asked about the significance of Europe and the euro, Arthaud light-mindedly and nationalistically dismissed the issue of Europe as a “diversion,” even as conflicts within Europe surge amid Brexit. “If you’re badly paid, be it in francs [the former French national currency] or in euros, you’re still badly paid,” she declared.

What came to predominate in the debate was nationalism and differences over foreign policy, as concern on the fate of the euro pushes Le Pen at least temporarily on the back foot, and candidates such as Mélenchon or Le Pen tack away from their previous anti-EU policies.

After Le Pen has backed away from pledges to take France out of the euro, instead proposing to hold a referendum on whether to leave the EU and the euro if she is elected, Fillon attacked her: “As we all know that an immense majority of French people does not want to abandon the European currency. This means in reality that Mrs. Le Pen has no economic policy, as her economic policy will collapse the minute that the French people take a position on the exit from the European currency.”

At the same time, there were growing xenophobic attacks from all sides of the debate. When right-wing nationalist candidate Nicolas Dupont-Aignan denounced workers posted in France from abroad for supposedly stealing French workers’ jobs, he obtained support from Mélenchon, who issued a nationalist rant against foreign workers. Having already accused them of “stealing French workers’ jobs” last year, Mélenchon accused them this year of “destroying our social legal system,” and added: “If I’m elected, there will be no more posted work.”

The outcome of this debate underscores the bankruptcy of the entire political establishment in France. Aware and afraid of a coming social explosion of the working class, they themselves are firmly committed to the drive to war and escalating attacks on democratic rights.



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