

French election debate: Macron, Le Pen promote militarism, attacks on immigrants

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Wednesday night's debate between the ex-banker Emmanuel Macron and National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen marked a new low in the French presidential elections. A former minister of France's discredited Socialist Party (PS) government and a neo-fascist shouted and traded insults in a raucous debate that left the moderators, journalists Nathalie Saint-Cricq and Christophe Jakubyszyn, looking on in stunned silence.

During the 150 minutes in which they called each other liars and criminals without revealing anything new about their political platforms, the candidates made clear that they are impervious and hostile to mounting social and political discontent in the population.

Macron insisted he would use the PS's labor law, passed last year in the face of mass protests, to work with the unions and rule by decree, tearing up contracts and imposing speed-ups to boost corporate competitiveness. Macron, who is calling for the return of the draft, boasted that he spoke for "a French spirit of conquest: France has always succeeded in the world, its language is spoken on every continent."

Le Pen, after briefly denouncing Macron as a representative of the PS and the ruling elite, turned to stoking xenophobia and nationalist hatred. She repeatedly denounced foreign workers and expressed hopes that by leaving the euro currency and re-establishing the French franc, France could seriously damage Germany's economy and European export markets.

This thoroughly debased TV debate is a symptom of the deep rot of the French political system. The candidates of the two parties that have ruled France over the last half-century, the PS and the Gaullist The Republicans (LR), were eliminated in the first round,

and both parties are deeply divided and discredited by decades of austerity and war policies.

As the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) has explained in its call for an active boycott of the second round, the fact that two candidates as reactionary as Macron and Le Pen advanced to the second round shows that a bitter conflict is being prepared between the next president and the working class. The essential task is to develop opposition among workers and youth to both candidates and mobilize it in struggle against whoever wins the elections on Sunday.

Macron and Le Pen are unanimous in supporting war and dictatorship. Neither candidate mentioned that France is under a state of emergency imposed by the PS that suspends basic democratic rights, or that NATO war threats against Syria or North Korea could escalate into wars with nuclear-armed Russia or China. The French ruling elite supports these policies, and neither Saint-Cricq nor Jakubyszyn saw fit to raise them.

Both candidates called for a massive state build-up and criticized each other for not fighting "terrorism" aggressively enough. When Le Pen attacked Macron for being "complicit with Islamic fundamentalism" and "lax" on law-and-order issues, Macron hit back at her by boasting: "Since 2015 we have reestablished the control of our borders and stopped 60,000 people."

Macron stressed that "more cooperation between EU member states" is needed to "control the terrorists who go from one country to another and cross borders" and accused Le Pen of not backing greater police powers for the EU.

On foreign policy, the two accused each other of subordinating France to other powers and called for a more independent strategy of French imperialism. Le Pen demanded that "France has to take back its independence" and should submit neither to Germany

nor to the United States. Macron for his part accused Le Pen of accepting “the diktat of Putin” and called for “a strong and credible France in Europe” able to fight wars in the Sahel, Syria and in Iraq.

The fact that this debate even took place itself points to a broad shift to the right in ruling circles over the last 15 years. In 2002, the first time that the PS presidential candidate was eliminated in the first round, setting up a second round between right-wing president Jacques Chirac and then-FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, it provoked not only mass protests by millions of people, but concern in the ruling class.

Based on fear of the popular reaction and the resulting desire to cultivate Gaullist references to the French Resistance to the Nazi occupation, Chirac refused to participate in the traditional TV debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen, on the grounds that he refused to debate with a fascist.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) issued a call for an active boycott of the 2002 elections to mobilize the working class and prepare it for a political struggle against the next government. That call was rejected by organizations—like the petty-bourgeois Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), Workers Struggle (LO), and Workers Party (PT)—that aligned themselves with the PS’ campaign for a Chirac vote to halt the FN’s rise.

Their alignment with the bourgeois parties completed their integration into the PS’ periphery and allowed the FN to pose as the sole oppositional party in France, with devastating consequences.

Since then, the political establishment has shifted so far to the right that it was not even a question of Macron refusing to debate Marine Le Pen. The French ruling class has repudiated any semblance of an attachment to democratic rights, as ever wider layers of the ruling class in France and across Europe have sought to re-evaluate and rehabilitate fascism.

Significantly, during the debate, Macron went so far as to claim that he was uninterested in the issue of the history of Le Pen’s FN, whose roots go back directly to collaborationist forces that ruled France during the Nazi Occupation. This reflects the deep economic and political crisis that has developed in Europe over the last decade and a half, and particularly since the 2008 Wall Street crash and economic collapse.

French governments of all stripes took over the political agenda traditionally associated with the far right in an earlier period: police-state rule, free-market austerity, and imperialist war. Since coming to power in 2012, outgoing PS President François Hollande relied on the FN’s far-right populist rhetoric as a mechanism to stabilize his deeply unpopular PS government. He invited Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace twice in 2015, taking over large portions of the FN’s program to legitimize the neo-fascists as part of the French political mainstream.

The experiences since the 2002 crisis, including of last night’s reactionary debate, underscore that the march towards dictatorship and neo-fascistic forms of rule cannot be stopped by offering support to any faction of the ruling class.



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