

French conservative leadership election signals move towards far right

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The victory of Laurent Wauquiez to become president of The Republicans (LR), after the humiliating defeat of LR presidential candidate François Fillon in May, signals a move by the descendants of Gaullism towards the far right. With 75 percent of the vote, the president of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region overwhelmingly defeated Florence Portelli (16 percent) and Maël de Calan (9 percent). Of LR's paper membership of 234,566, some 99,597 voted in the December 10 contest, a 42 percent voter turnout, which was higher than expected.

Wauquiez represents the wing of the party that seeks to continue former President Nicolas Sarkozy's strategy of taking over most of the neo-fascist National Front's (FN) program. His supporters include Geoffroy Didier, the cofounder of the Strong Right tendency inside the Gaullist party founded by former members of the far right, and also Guillaume Peltier, a former FN member.

During the campaign, Wauquiez called for a "fearless right" attacking Muslims and immigrants, insisting that foreign funding for mosques had no place in France. He also appealed to the anti-gay-marriage movement and criticized medically assisted reproduction.

Xavier Bertrand, the LR president of the Hauts-de-France region of northern France, reacted on December 11 by leaving LR. "This is not an easy decision but I must take it," he said on France2 television, before explaining his differences with Wauquiez: "I don't like his policy of aggressiveness and looking for scapegoats."

Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, the head of the far-right nationalist Arise France (DLF) party that proposes a common program for LR and the FN, wrote on Twitter: "In the coming weeks, Laurent Wauquiez will have two choices. Either to stay shut in political correctness, by

adopting the themes advanced by Arise France while arbitrarily ruling out any form of dialogue with our political family, or with the National Front. Or he can cross the Rubicon and turn his face towards the Gaullists and the patriots."

Faced with an LR leader that is adopting their program, after a presidential election where the FN largely defeated LR, the neo-fascists are stepping up calls for a regroupment of the two parties. On November 19, FN leader Marine Le Pen went on the RTL-*Le Figaro*-LCI "Grand Jury" show to tell Wauquiez to "abandon ambiguity" and to "propose a political alliance" with the FN.

"When I hear what Mr. Wauquiez is saying today, I tell myself: after all, if he is sincere, given the proposals he is making, he should go all the way and propose a political alliance with us," Le Pen declared. "Mr. Wauquiez cannot sincerely say the same things that we do, and sometimes with words that are even cruder than ours, and at the same time explain that we must be held apart from French political life. Be coherent, be logical."

Florian Philippot, the former top aide of Marine Le Pen in the FN, pressed Virginie Calmels, a Wauquiez supporter and future number two of the party, about the differences between her new party leader and Marine Le Pen Sunday on BFMTV. "You have the same proposals as the National Front," Philippot said. "Besides, you have seen that Marine Le Pen would like an alliance with Mr. Wauquiez."

"For the time being, we are refusing that," lamely replied Calmels, the top assistant of Bordeaux mayor and former Gaullist prime minister Alain Juppé.

LR's sharp turn towards the far right points to the explosive class tensions building up in France and the threat posed by the ruling class to fundamental social

and democratic rights. It also underscores the bankruptcy of those parties—like the New Anticapitalist Party, Workers Struggle (LO), or the Independent Workers Party—that claimed that voters could vote for right-wing or social-democratic candidates in order to erect a “democratic barrier” to the rise of the far right.

In 2002, Gaullist presidential candidate Jacques Chirac faced FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen in the presidential run-off after the collapse of Socialist Party (PS) candidate Lionel Jospin. Parties presented as “Trotskyist” by the media had won 3 million votes, and mass protests were erupting, but they supported Chirac. Refusing to call for a boycott of the elections to prepare the working class for a struggle against the wars and social cuts Chirac was preparing, they fell in line with the campaign of the PS for a vote for Chirac against Le Pen.

Having refused the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) call for a boycott in 2002, the pseudo-left again refused the active boycott called for by the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste*, the ICFI’s French section, in 2017. Like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, they supported calls for a vote against Marine Le Pen in the second round—implicitly supporting the reactionary campaign of former investment banker and PS Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron.

Their impotent appeals did not slow the capitalists’ rush towards the far right at all. The Gaullists under Chirac and particularly during the 2007-2012 presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, took over parts of the FN program to wage wars and impose deep social cuts—while dividing the working class and stirring up nationalist hatreds with attacks on Muslims like the burqa ban.

For 15 years, this strategy has continuously reinforced the FN; now, large sections of LR are moving rapidly towards joining it. LR is torn between a pro-Macron wing, the Constructive Opposition, and the wing led by Wauquiez. He is taking up Sarkozy’s strategy, but under conditions where the Gaullists are far weaker compared to the FN, which is emerging ever more directly as the main opposition to Macron inside the political establishment.

After 25 years of imperialist war, economic crisis and attacks on social rights since the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union, bourgeois democracy is collapsing across Europe. In

Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is entering the parliament for the first time since the end of World War II. In Spain, the Popular Party, the heirs of the Franco regime, mobilized the *Guardia Civil* to mount a vicious crackdown on peaceful voters during the Catalan independence referendum of October 1.

These events have vindicated the insistence of the PES that the only way forward is an independent struggle of the working class, opposed to the pseudo-left parties. The French political establishment as it emerged from 1968, which was dominated by the Gaullist-PS duopoly but in which the pseudo-left played the key role in suppressing working-class opposition, is collapsing. LR and the PS have only small groups in the National Assembly and are being pulled apart by Macron’s party and the FN.



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