

Gaullist French presidential candidate endorses far-right “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory

Samuel Tissot, Alex Lantier
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Valerie Pécresse, the presidential candidate for the Gaullist Republican Party (*Les Républicains*, LR) in the April 2022 French presidential election, has become embroiled in controversy after she opened her campaign by invoking violent neo-fascist conspiracy theories.

At a public appearance on February 13 at the Zenith stadium to launch her campaign, she said: “In ten years’ time, will we still be the seventh power in the world? Will we still be a sovereign nation or an auxiliary of the United States, a pawn of China? Will we be a nation united, or torn apart? Faced with these vital questions, we do not give up to blind fate. Neither to a great replacement nor a great loss of our rank. I am calling you to urgent action.”

Amid mounting controversy over her remarks, Pécresse has unconvincingly claimed her reference to the theory had been misconstrued. However, other parts of her speech also contained unambiguous appeals to the traditions of collaboration with Nazism. She said: “I want French people from the heart, and not just paper Frenchmen.” Pécresse also took aim at France’s multi-million Muslim minority, provocatively stating: “Marianne [the personification of France] is not a veiled woman.”

These are unambiguous appeals to political racism. The “great replacement” theory is championed by the far-right in Europe and internationally. It falsely asserts that the majority white population is the victim of “genocide” due to immigration from African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries.

Most infamously, before he murdered 49 Muslims in the Christchurch terror attacks in 2019 in New Zealand, white supremacist Brendon Tarrant published a white supremacist manifesto, which he titled “The Great Replacement.”

The origin of the term “great replacement” is attributed to French author Renaud Camus. Camus is now a supporter of far-right presidential candidate Eric Zemmour, who was convicted of inciting racial hatred in 2011 and 2022, and of inciting hatred against Muslims in 2018. Camus’ theory

asserts that “replacist elites,” who are often implied to be Jewish, aim to replace the white population with African and Arab immigrants, a process Camus calls “genocide by substitution.”

Pécresse’s attacks on “paper Frenchmen” also place her campaign speech unmistakably in the traditions of fascistic appeals to political racism. This term is forever associated in its use by anti-Semites, from those who supported the false conviction of Jewish officer Captain Alfred Dreyfus in 1894 to defenders of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy French regime in World War II.

In 1894, far-right writer Charles Maurras, convicted of treason in 1944 for supporting Vichy French dictator Philippe Pétain, denounced naturalization papers as the “prey of any barbarian.”

The term “paper Frenchmen” became more widely used after the infamous Holy Union between Maurrassian far-right nationalists and social democrats to support World War I. After the October 1917 proletarian revolution in Russia and amid the French takeover of Alsace after the Allied victory over Germany, the term was associated with attempts to stir up French nationalism and divide the working class. In 1922, the nationalist newspaper *Le Journal* denounced naturalized Alsatians as “paper Frenchmen” with a “heart that remained German.”

Jean-Marie Le Pen, the father of National Rally (RN) candidate Marine Le Pen and founder of the modern French far-right movement, often counterposed the “real French” to those who received “naturalization of convenience.”

It will come as no surprise to workers and youth in France that Pécresse is a reactionary servant of the ruling class. Before being nominated as the Gaullist presidential candidate in December, she was known mainly for the mass student protests and staff strikes she provoked as education minister between 2007 and 2009, with her deep cuts in the universities. Her election programme calls to cut public spending by €45 billion by slashing unemployment

insurance, pensions and at least 200,000 public sector jobs.

Even as the pandemic still claims over 200 lives every day in France, Péresse—like the other leading candidates—has barely mentioned it during her campaign. She combines disregard for the millions of dead in the pandemic with calls for an aggressive foreign policy. Discussing her foreign policy in an interview with France-Culture, she promised to “give France back its influence in the world,” criticizing “setbacks” such as France’s recent withdrawal from Mali, and the role of Russia.

Nonetheless, Péresse’s unabashed reference to the “great replacement” and the traditions of French far-right nationalism of the 20th century is not a purely personal decision, but marks a new watershed in the rightward movement of the European bourgeoisie. Indeed, this was acknowledged widely in the media; the ex-Maoist daily *Libération* wrote that after Péresse’s speech, France now had a “third far-right candidate” after Le Pen and Zemmour.

The appearance of fascist slogans in the presidential campaign of France’s traditional right-wing party of government is part of an explosive movement of the entire European bourgeoisie towards the far right in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Last May, thousands of active military personnel and 23 retired French generals hostile to COVID-19 vaccines signed a letter published in the far-right magazine *Current Values*. In their letter, they stated their plans for a far-right putsch and subsequent civil war which will lead to deaths “in the thousands.”

The NATO powers’ escalating war drive against Russia goes hand-in-hand with a further turn to the far right. While the German ruling class has decided to triple its military budget and publicly repudiate the policy of military restraint it adopted after the Soviet Union’s defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, the French bourgeoisie is intensifying its turn to political racism.

This underscores the lasting significance of the positions advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), notably during the 2002 French election crisis. At that point, the discrediting of the social democrats led to a presidential run-off between the Gaullist incumbent Jacques Chirac and the neo-fascist Jean Marie Le Pen. When petty-bourgeois groups like the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) called to vote Chirac as a barrier against the growth of neo-fascism, the ICFI opposed them.

Calling for an active boycott campaign, mobilizing the working class to prepare it to oppose whichever of the two candidates won, the ICFI insisted that fighting war and authoritarian rule depended on the independent mobilization of the working class against capitalism.

The ICFI’s warnings on the bankruptcy of Gaullism were fully confirmed by the subsequent course of events. In an

obituary published after Chirac’s death in 2019, the WSWs wrote:

Chirac’s record in his second term vindicated the ICFI’s opposition to the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties’ claims that a Chirac vote was the best way to block the rise of neo-fascism and war. ... Chirac’s response to the rise of the class struggle in his second term was an accelerating turn towards fascist and militarist policies. Faced with the teachers strike, he tried to demoralize it with appeals to anti-Muslim racism to divide the workers—discussing and passing in 2004 a law banning the Muslim veil in public schools. His response to the 2005 riots was to impose a three-month state of emergency that suspended basic democratic rights.

The normalization of appeals to anti-Muslim sentiment, the obituary continued, “paved the way for the ruling elite to integrate the FN [now Marine Le Pen’s National Rally] into mainstream bourgeois politics” as “part of a universal drive by the European bourgeoisie to legitimize fascist politics.”

Péresse’s nod to the writings of Renaud Camus, Zemmour and Tarrant today constitutes a further political warning. As the bourgeoisie pursues policies of mass COVID-19 infections and a rapidly-escalating war drive against Russia posing the danger of nuclear war, opposition to far-right authoritarianism cannot take the form of support for capitalist parties. Against the danger of war and neo-fascism, the decisive question is building an international movement in the working class fighting against imperialist war and for socialism.



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