

Socialist Party candidate Hollande, Sarkozy advance in French presidential elections

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Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande and incumbent president Nicolas Sarkozy received the highest vote totals in Sunday's first round of the French presidential elections, advancing to the second round to be held on May 6.

Hollande won an estimated 28 percent of the vote, with Sarkozy following at 27 percent. Neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen's score of 19 percent surpassed poll estimates, as well as the 16.8 percent score of her father Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 2002 elections. Two other candidates won significant scores: Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon at 11 percent—down from previous estimates of 14 to 15 percent—and the Democratic Movement's (MoDem) François Bayrou, a right-wing "centrist" candidate, at 9 percent.

Europe-Ecology-the Greens (EELV) candidate Eva Joly won 2 percent, New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) candidate Philippe Poutou won 1 percent and Workers Struggle (LO) candidate Nathalie Arthaud won 0.6 percent of the vote.

Hollande is currently expected to win handily in a match-up with Sarkozy, with polls showing him winning at least 56 percent of the vote. Sarkozy emerges weakened from the vote, as the first incumbent president of France's Fifth Republic not to win the first round of the presidential elections.

At 80 percent, voter participation was larger than expected. This reflected broad popular hostility to Sarkozy's policies of social austerity and war in the Middle East, and the sense that the French population faces a deep social and international crisis. This drove voters to the polls despite what was widely described as a lackluster campaign, where voters could not clearly distinguish between the candidates. Some 38 percent of voters indicated before the elections that they did not firmly support any candidate, and many voters cast ballots by default.

Yesterday's result sets the stage for a race between two pro-war, pro-austerity candidates preparing deep attacks on the working class and for explosive class struggles in the coming presidential term. Hollande is committed to slashing over €115 billion (\$US152 billion) in budget deficits and has supported French imperialism's wars in Libya and Syria.

The relatively low vote for Mélenchon and the collapse of the NPA and LO vote reflect the broad popular sense that all these forces are essentially in the camp of the Socialist Party and would back the PS. The petty-bourgeois "left" is predictably throwing its full support behind the PS, despite Hollande's deeply reactionary program.

The first public statement following the election came from Mélenchon, a former PS minister and the candidate of the Left Front—a coalition between the French Communist Party (PCF), split-offs from the PS such as Mélenchon's Left Party (PG) and a section of the NPA led by Christian Picquet.

At an election rally in Paris, Mélenchon called for voters to “beat Sarkozy” on May 6, even telling his voters “not to drag your feet” on the way to the polls. He also called for his voters to participate in large numbers in a May 1 demonstration organized by the union bureaucracy, which has backed Mélenchon and Hollande in the election.

Mélenchon's call to “beat Sarkozy” in a two-man race is a cynical attempt to back Hollande without taking full political responsibility for Hollande's program. However, PCF chairman Pierre Laurent told the press he was calling “without ambiguity” for a Hollande vote. Asked by BFM-TV if there were any difference between his endorsement and the position of Mélenchon, Laurent said there was not.

Significantly, neither Mélenchon nor Laurent asked for any policy guarantees or influence over the policies of a future government, in exchange for their endorsement—effectively issuing Hollande a blank check to carry out the banks' policies. EELV candidate Joly also called for a Hollande vote.

The other petty-bourgeois “left” parties echoed Mélenchon's call for a Hollande vote. On France2 television, NPA candidate Philippe Poutou said: “On May 6, the election must serve a purpose: to throw out Nicolas Sarkozy.”

LO candidate Nathalie Arthaud issued a communiqué declaring, “Obviously no class-conscious worker can vote for Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of the rich.” She added that her voters would probably either cast a blank ballot or vote for Hollande.

The ex-left parties' endorsement of Hollande is a warning to the working class: as popular opposition develops to Hollande's right-wing policies, it will face not only the hostility of the PS, but also of the Left Front and other such parties.

In his brief speech last night, Hollande explicitly praised the role of the petty-bourgeois “left” parties in supporting his campaign. After describing the result of his campaign as “punishment” for Sarkozy's term, he said he “saluted” Mélenchon and Joly, “who are calling clearly and without any negotiations for voters to support me in the second round.”

Under conditions of a vacuum on the left, where the vast majority of the population considers the pseudo-left to be the political adjunct of the PS, one of the main beneficiaries of social anger is paradoxically Le Pen's far-right National Front (FN). Marine Le Pen has worked to change the FN's image, to hide the pro-Nazi and anti-Algerian independence views, and to pose as a party that supports social spending for French workers, even if it is violently hostile to immigrants.

Le Pen's campaign manager, Interior Ministry official Florian Philippot, said that Le Pen's score made her “the leader of the opposition” to Hollande.

Le Pen gave a brief speech, calling her vote the “beginning of a vast coming together of all the patriots of the right and of the left,” claiming that the FN had destroyed “the monopoly of the two parties of the banks.” She denounced the “ultra-free-market left” and claimed that her score made it possible to “restore purchasing power and jobs.”

Le Pen and her appeals to social discontent underline the reactionary political role played by the union bureaucracy and the official “left” parties. To the extent that they use neo-Marxist rhetoric and occasional trade union protest marches as a cover for support for the policies of the banks, they suppress genuine popular opposition to austerity policies and leave the political field open to the neo-fascists.

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