

Socialist Party candidate Hollande wins French presidential elections

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Region: [Europe](#)

Global Research, May 07, 2012

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 7 May 2012

Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande won the second round of the French presidential election yesterday, taking 51 percent of the vote against incumbent right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy. Approximately 81 percent of France's 46 million voters participated in the elections.

Shortly after the 8 p.m. announcement of the election results, Sarkozy gave a brief concession speech before assembled members of his Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party. He said he bore "full responsibility" for the defeat and wished "good luck" to Hollande. He added, "I will remain on your [the UMP's] side, and you can rely on me to defend our ideas and convictions, but my role cannot remain the same."

Press sources cited expectations that Sarkozy will, publicly at least, retire from politics. Last year he became the most unpopular president since France's Fifth Republic began, in 1958, as his approval rating fell to 29 percent. He is widely resented for his ostentatious ties to the rich, and for having carried out repeated cuts in pension and labor rights, unpopular wars and attacks on democratic rights.

Hollande's victory reflected this sentiment against Sarkozy—despite a sense in the working class that the two candidates had few differences in terms of concrete policies—as voters looked for change. What they will find with a Hollande government is, however, not change, but an intensification of the attacks on the working class.

Hollande gave his victory speech from Tulle, a small town in southern France where he was the mayor from 2001 to 2008, during which time he was simultaneously the PS's first secretary.

Hollande gave a "Republican greeting" to Sarkozy and proclaimed he would be the "president of everyone." Claiming that "divisions" between French citizens were "finished," he demanded national unity to "increase production, reduce deficits, and preserve our social model." He outlined a "French dream" of "progress" and a "long march" towards a better life.

Addressing "our European partners and first of all Germany," he said that "austerity can no longer be an inevitable destiny" and called for "giving European construction a dimension of growth, jobs, prosperity, and future."

These banal phrases aim to hide the political reality widely felt by masses of working people in France during the election campaign: Hollande and Sarkozy were two virtually

indistinguishable candidates.

Hollande ran on a right-wing program of slashing budgets to respect the pro-austerity European Union fiscal pact, while calling for an unspecified “growth component” of handouts to banks and strategic enterprises. He stated that he had no criticisms of Sarkozy’s foreign policy—which included wars in Afghanistan, Libya, Ivory Coast, and now Syria. He praised the “German model” of structural reforms to slash labor costs and improve French firms’ competitiveness on international markets at the expense of the workers.

For its part, Berlin made clear that it viewed Hollande’s calls for “growth” as part of a drive to impose more austerity measures on the European working class. German Foreign Secretary Guido Westerwelle declared, “We will work together for a European growth pact on Sunday, during a brief visit to the French embassy in Berlin after François Hollande’s victory... We must add a new impulsion for growth, which requires structural reforms.”

Hollande’s narrow win over Sarkozy underscores the fact that his campaign found no enthusiasm among the working class. Particularly given Sarkozy’s deep unpopularity, it is all the more revealing that Hollande was barely able to defeat him.

At the time of his nomination for the PS presidential candidacy in October, Hollande had a record mainly as an official inside the PS bureaucracy. His views were relatively unknown to voters. After at first polling 62 percent, versus 38 percent for Sarkozy, he progressively lost this 24-point advantage. His poll ratings fell to 54 percent at the time of the first round, whereas Sarkozy’s ratings rose.

After the May 2 TV debate—during which Hollande struck a very right-wing position, pledging to respect the fiscal pact, maintain Sarkozy’s burqa ban, and ban *halal* meat—his support fell to 52.5 percent.

Hollande’s support apparently continued to fall until Election Day. On Saturday Hollande confessed to being concerned, saying: “If I were not concerned about defeat, I would not be in the state of apprehension that I feel.”

Hollande campaign spokeswoman Najat Vallaud-Belkacem commented, “Thank God the campaign did not last one week longer.”

The substantial movement in poll numbers highlights the political uncertainty facing France’s bourgeois parties, as they prepare deep attacks on the working class and set about forming a government under Hollande. Legislative elections will be held on June 10 and June 17.

Hollande will rely on the continuing support of petty-bourgeois “left” parties, including the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party, which called for a Hollande vote in this election and have tried to conceal Hollande’s plans for austerity policies.

Left Front leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who received 11 percent of the vote in the first round of the elections, hailed Hollande’s victory. “Finally Sarkozy is over! Thus we have dealt with the gravedigger of our social rights and of the public services of our Republic. His defeat is that of his project of appealing to the far right... Everything now is beginning for France and for our left.”

Mélenchon indicated that members of his Left Front would consider taking ministerial office

under the PS, should the PS win a majority in the legislative elections and form a government.

The result of the petty-bourgeois “left” parties’ support for Hollande is that neo-fascist National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen, who received some 18 percent of the vote in the first round, is able to present herself as the candidate of opposition to austerity and the widely hated political establishment.

She spoke to journalists in Hénin-Beaumont, one of the FN’s new strongholds in de-industrialized northern France. She said, “I clearly said that I would vote blank, I am not in the habit of changing my mind. The two surviving candidates are political Siamese twins, so I do not hope for much from the result.”

The FN hopes to win a significant number of seats in the National Assembly in the legislative elections, campaigning on a reactionary anti-immigrant platform and aiming to obtain the 15 seats required to form a parliamentary group.

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