

French Socialist Party presidential contenders embrace right-wing policies

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On October 9 the French Socialist Party (PS) held the first round of primary elections to select its candidate in next year's presidential elections. The two contenders receiving the most votes, François Hollande and Martine Aubry, advanced to the run-off to be held next Sunday.

Voters had to pay one euro to vote in the primary, and last Sunday 2.6 million people voted in the first round. Hollande got 39.2 percent of the vote and Aubry 30.4 percent. Arnaud Montebourg, who ran on a protectionist platform and postured as a "left" candidate, received a surprise 17.2 percent.

This pushed the defeated PS candidate in the 2007 presidential elections, Ségolène Royal, into fourth place with 7 percent. Manuel Valls, of the PS's openly free-market wing, polled 5.6 percent. Valls and Royal both called on their supporters to vote for Hollande in the run-off.

An opinion poll of PS primary voters after Wednesday's televised debate gave Hollande 54 percent and Aubry 46 percent.

There is little to choose between Hollande and Aubry, two colorless bureaucrats with long records in the service of France's financial aristocracy. Hollande served as PS first secretary for 11 years before being replaced by Aubry in 2008. Both support attacks on workers' social rights and imperialist war, and are former aides of PS President François Mitterrand in the 1980s.

Aubry was number two in the 1997-2002 PS-led government of Lionel Jospin, which privatized more public firms than any other since World War II, and launched the ongoing French participation in the occupation of Afghanistan. Hollande was at the time first secretary and a close ally of Jospin. They both support France's war against Libya, initiated by conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Aubry has tried to present herself as the "hard left" and Hollande as the "soft left," more favorable to major financial interests. As their debate Wednesday made clear, however, there are no real differences between the two candidates, who argued mostly over abstruse points of fiscal policy. Significantly, the unpopular Libyan and Afghan wars were not even discussed.

Both candidates ruled out nationalizing the banks, even though French banks have received billions in state credits and guarantees since the outbreak of the global economic crisis. Both also demanded that France reduce its budget deficit to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), in line with the regulations of the Maastricht treaty, which would require tens of billions of euros in social cuts.

They both supported forcing Greece into a partial default and made minor, technocratic criticisms of the austerity measures forced on that country, which have devastated the Greek working class.

They also both supported Sarkozy's main social cut—the increase to 41 years of the pay-in period for a full pension—while cynically covering themselves by promising to bring the retirement age back to 60 from the present 62.5. Even if a PS president honored such a promise, it would still have a devastating effect on workers' pensions: at that age, most retirees would not have completed their pay-in period and would face punitive reductions in their pensions (*décote*).

The PS candidates postured as better guarantors of law and order than Sarkozy, seeking to outflank him on the right. A *Nouvel Observateur*–Terra Nova survey of the candidates' positions noted that Aubry and Hollande both call for the recruitment of 10,000 more police officers.

The absence of political differences between Hollande and Aubry underscore the fraudulent character of the Socialist

Party primary, which was proposed in 2009, largely to secure media publicity for the PS campaign. (See “France: What is behind the Socialist Party’s plans for a presidential primary?”)

At the time, the Terra Nova foundation published a note comparing the proposed PS primary to the Italian primary that selected the Italian bourgeois “left’s” candidate in the 2008 elections. It wrote, “There is also a democratic dynamic: such a primary corresponds to citizens’ desire for political participation. The example of the ‘[Walter] Veltroni primary’ in Italy—3.5 million voters for an election without any real content—testifies to this participatory jubilation.”

Now it is voters in France who are being told to pay one euro for the privilege of voting in another election “without any real content,” choosing between Hollande and Aubry. Significantly, though Walter Veltroni of the Democratic Party carried the October 2007 primaries, his party was defeated—largely because it had carried out major budget cuts and continued unpopular military operations in Lebanon and Afghanistan. Similarly, the PS is preparing to carry out reactionary policies in defiance of public opinion.

In this regard, Montebourg plays a special role: helping ensure that political opposition to the PS’s right-wing program is diverted into the blind alley of a vote for the French Communist Party (PCF) or the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), and then ultimately back to the PS itself. His policy proposals have no real influence on the plans of PS candidates, like Hollande or Aubry, whom the bourgeoisie might consider placing in power. However, he echoes certain proposals of the PCF or NPA, encouraging illusions that a PCF or NPA vote might influence a PS government’s policies.

Montebourg, the spokesman for Ségolène Royal’s right-wing 2007 presidential campaign, has launched chauvinist demands for protectionist policies and empty calls for financial regulation, echoing the rhetoric of PCF presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. (See “Jean-Luc Mélenchon selected as the French Communist Party’s presidential candidate”)

Montebourg has close relations with the NPA, the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the PCF who, along with the Stalinist-dominated CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union, are strong supporters of protectionism. NPA leader Olivier Besancenot, Mélenchon and the PCF leadership all attended Montebourg’s annual *Fête de la Rose*

rally last year. The PS knows these forces can be counted upon to endorse its candidate in the second round of the presidential elections.

Montebourg proposed that the banks should be placed “under supervision” and that “banks making profits should use them to bail out banks in difficulty through interbank solidarity.”

He also sent a letter to Hollande and Aubry after the first round of the primaries, demanding that they endorse his protectionist policies if they wanted his support in the runoff. He called for “European social and ecological protectionism,” demanding “measures at a European and national level.” He proposed Air France should only buy Airbus planes, largely produced by France and Germany—thus ruling out purchases of American Boeing aircraft.

Aubry and Hollande vied with each other to accommodate him. Aubry called for “regulating globalisation ... We need a Europe which innovates and protects.”

Hollande added, “We can be for an open economy, but not for an economy up for grabs.” He explicitly attacked China: “The first principle is reciprocity ... China. Can we accept that China does not respect environmental norms? No.”

Such threats are utterly reckless moves towards trade wars, and will do nothing to improve workers’ living standards in Europe or China. Should it be elected, a PS government in 2012 would be—like the Mitterrand government after its “austerity turn” in 1982-83, the Plural Left government, or the social-democratic regime now imposing austerity in Greece—a reactionary agency of finance capital.



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