

French President Hollande promotes the neo-fascist National Front

By Stéphane Hugues
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Comments by French President François Hollande comparing the neo-fascist National Front (FN) to the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1970s are a reactionary attempt to give the FN a “left” populist cover. He made the remark on a special program of *Supplement*, a current affairs show on the Canal-plus network, where he appeared in an attempt to deflect growing anger about his austerity policies.

Presenter Maïtena Biraben showed Hollande film clips about austerity, unemployment, and French wars in the Middle East and Africa. There was a 10-minute report about Gennay, a devastated working-class town in northern France, which has a PCF mayor and voted 70 percent for Hollande in the 2012 presidential elections, but which voted for Marine Le Pen’s FN. Its inhabitants, many surviving on allowances of 200 to 300 euros a month, said they had always voted for Hollande’s Socialist Party (PS) or the PCF. Now, however, they vote for the FN.

After the report, Biraben observed: “Many think that Marine Le Pen is more to the left than [PS Economy Minister] Emanuel Macron. That’s the failure...”

Hollande responded: “It’s not a failure. It’s a mystification, an illusion. When Mrs. Le Pen speaks, it’s like a 1970s Communist Party leaflet. Because that’s the reality.... When she talks like that Party—that has influence in that region—because this region was and still is influenced by the Communist Party.”

Hollande’s ahistorical comparison of the FN to the PCF of the 1970s is as false as it is reactionary. It also has a broad and sinister political significance. As the head of the French state and leader of the ruling Socialist Party (PS), he is promoting Le Pen and her party.

The PCF of the 1970s was a bankrupt Stalinist party. It had betrayed the working class in countless

revolutionary opportunities, above all the general strike of May-June 1968. Nonetheless, it still based itself on its association with the Soviet government and had mass influence in the working class both electorally and through what were still at the time mass trade unions. It advanced a nationally-based, left-reformist program.

The FN is an entirely different party, which has been and remains firmly based in the far right. This party, forthrightly based on capitalism, defends austerity, war and imperialist conquest. Its roots are those of French fascism, in the Pétainist Vichy regime and the most ruthless defenders of French colonial rule in Algeria.

Hollande’s false comparison, dismissing the well-known fascist roots of the FN, testifies to the sharp rightward shift in French politics since the 2008 crisis. A central feature of this shift has been the promotion of neo-fascistic forces, including the FN, by the French media and political establishment. As FN leader Marine Le Pen seeks to “de-demonize” her party by downplaying its ties to Vichy and somewhat distancing herself from her father’s repeated statements trivializing the Holocaust, the French president himself is joining in promoting the FN’s “populist” credentials.

The bourgeoisie currently relies on Hollande’s PS government to impose austerity and wage imperialist wars in the face of overwhelming opposition among workers and youth in France. But they also rely on the FN to contain social anger in devastated industrial areas, formerly ruled by the PS and PCF, where workers now reject the old ruling parties. Neo-fascism channels explosive social discontent in reactionary directions: anti-Islam propaganda, scapegoating immigrants, and French nationalism. In that, it has emerged as an essential element of bourgeois rule.

The recent local and regional elections have seen the FN emerge as a third pole in French bourgeois politics. There are broad expectations that the old duopoly between the PS and the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) that has dominated French bourgeois politics since the 1980s will give way to a tripolarization between the PS, UMP, and FN.

Under these conditions, sections of the PS and its periphery are feeling out the FN and considering closer ties to the far right. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a former PS minister who founded the Left Party and the Left Front alliance with the PCF, has for some time been giving political cover to Eric Zemmour, a far-right journalist and author. He has also met with Marine Le Pen. (See: From pseudo-left to New Right: The trajectory of France's Jean-Luc Mélenchon).

In this context, whatever Hollande's tactical criticisms of the FN, his comparison of the FN to the PCF of the 1970s raises definite questions. It was during the 1970s that the PCF formed a lasting political alliance with the newly-formed PS, which had been assembled shortly after the 1968 general strike from the old social-democratic parties and layers of the post-1968 student movement. If Hollande believes that he is making a legitimate comparison by equating the FN with the PCF of the 1970s, is he seeking political collaboration with the FN?

Given expectations inside the PS that their deeply unpopular policies will suffer a devastating rejection at the polls at the end of Hollande's first term in 2017, putting the party's future in doubt, are sections of the PS hoping to survive through some sort of alliance with the neo-fascists?

As for the PCF, who predictably objected to Hollande's comparing them to the FN, its mild protestations against his remarks are false and hypocritical to the core.

"I'm scandalized," said PCF leader Pierre Laurent on France2 television. "I have asked the president to make a public apology for this sentence."

Laurent called Hollande's remark "lamentable" and said "it was the only thing" that Hollande "could find to respond to the distress of the electors." He continued: "I remember the 1970s, the Left had a program."

This promotion of hopes that the PCF will return to the rhetoric of the 1970s is utterly bankrupt and evokes

no response in broader layers of the working class. It is contradicted by the record of the PS and the PCF themselves. Having used "left" rhetoric and promises of a national reform program to get into power, with the election of Mitterrand as president in 1981, they turned to policies of austerity and war less than two years after Mitterrand took office.

Mitterrand's 1983 "austerity turn" and the Stalinist bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism in the USSR in 1991 expressed the violent hostility towards the working class of the layers of the affluent middle class for which the PCF bureaucracy spoke. The national program they advanced, which in the final analysis served always as a bulwark against an international revolutionary upsurge of the working class, was exposed as unviable in the face of globalization. They reacted by shifting into the camp of social reaction.

After decades during which the PCF endorsed reactionary policies of austerity and war and allied with the PS, workers find it increasingly difficult to distinguish today's PCF from a far-right party. As Biraben observed, Marine Le Pen's populist demagoguery strikes many people as "to the left" of PS governments and their allies.

This creates the debased political environment in which Hollande, Mélenchon and company, trying to deflect rising anger in the working class, send out political feelers in the direction of the FN.

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