

French presidential elections too close to call after weekend campaign launch

By Alex Lantier
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After a weekend in which several leading candidates gave major speeches to launch their campaigns, there is enormous uncertainty over the outcome of the French presidential election.

The contest is shaped by the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the deep unpopularity of President François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS). France's traditional parties of government face a historic crisis. The PS is split over whether to back banker and independent candidate Emmanuel Macron or PS candidate Benoît Hamon, and right-wing The Republicans (LR) candidate François Fillon faces a scandal over charges that he had his wife paid vast sums of money for doing no work.

The field of candidates that has emerged testifies to the breakdown of French democracy and the bankruptcy of the ruling elite. Despite unprecedented economic suffering and social anger, no candidate is advancing a program representing the interests of working people. This produces an explosive and uncertain situation. With all the candidates committed to war and austerity, and the electorate disillusioned with the political establishment, there is no clear sense of who will become the undeserving beneficiary of popular anger and demands for change.

The latest *Les Echos* poll showed Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) leading on the first round with 26 percent of the vote. Macron would take 23 percent and Fillon 20 percent. Hamon has recently overtaken Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the Left Front leader who is running as the candidate of the Rebellious France movement; the two are at 14 and 11 percent, respectively.

Even though she is calling for an alliance with Trump in the face of his massive unpopularity in the French population, and faces sharp disapproval from two-thirds of the electorate, Le Pen could still win the election. This could lead to France's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) and the euro currency, the likely collapse of these basic institutions of European capitalism, and a sharp confrontation between Paris and Berlin.

Le Pen held her campaign launch on Sunday in Lyon,

France's third-largest city, a prosperous and traditionally right-wing metropolis near the Swiss border. Hailing Trump's election and Britain's exit from the EU, she issued a populist denunciation of globalization for creating a society where people "make slaves produce things to sell them to the unemployed."

She launched the FN's traditional appeal to nationalist and anti-Muslim sentiment, in language recycled from the PS and its allies—denouncing "two totalitarianisms," economic and religious, as dangers to France. After her niece, FN member Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, endorsed Trump's anti-Muslim immigrant ban, which has provoked mass protests in the United States and internationally, Le Pen attacked "Islamism" and "radicalized Islam" as dangers for France.

She announced plans for two referendums, the first on renegotiating France's independence ("monetary, legislative, territorial, and economic") with the European Union, in line with her previous calls to leave the EU and the euro. She also intends to hold a referendum on inscribing national preference, that is, ethnic discrimination in favor of French people, in the constitution.

Significantly, there are increasing signs that the financial markets are beginning to push down the value of French sovereign debt, possibly anticipating a Le Pen victory and conflict inside the EU over the euro. Rising yield on French debt is, the *Financial Times* of London wrote, "a sign of shifting investor preference, or even caution," under conditions where "many investors are understandably focused on the risks of a populist who has promised to take France out of the euro."

On the same day as Le Pen, Mélenchon launched his campaign in Lyon, appearing by hologram at a meeting in Paris. He had appealed for unity with Hamon, in an attempt to allow the official PS candidate, backed by the PS' traditional allies, the Greens and the Left Front, to reach the second round. At his meeting, he attacked the two current leading candidates, Le Pen and Macron, as "the ignoramus" and "the banker who has made life horrible for thousands of

people by participating in the El Khomri law,” the unpopular labor law imposed by the PS in the face of mass protests last year.

Last week, however, Hamon was visiting Hollande and Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve to obtain their support for his election bid and try to hold together the PS behind him. This underscores that Hamon—who has gained media traction by proposing to respond to the de-industrialization of France by replacing wages paid for labor with a miserly 600 to 800 euro universal monthly wage paid to all workers—is not an insurgent anti-government candidate. Rather, he is a candidate appealing to sections of the upper middle class discontented with the PS to return to the fold.

In Lyon, Mélenchon said nothing explicitly about Hamon, however, but concluded his speech by tacitly repeating his call for an alliance with Hamon, “Any time someone extends a hand to us instead of insulting us,” Mélenchon said, “we are always happy.”

Such positions underscore that, whatever the result of the election, it will produce a government that will face the working class as an enemy no less than did Hollande, amid the deepest crisis in world politics since the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR a quarter century ago.

The meetings of Le Pen and Mélenchon came the day after Macron launched his campaign, also in Lyon. Hollande’s former economy minister speaks for sections of the French bourgeoisie that want to react to Trump by building closer ties with Berlin and maintaining the NATO alliance with the United States, despite Trump’s hostility to it.

Macron also represents sections of the PS machine, notably its forces in Lyon, that are responding to the historic crisis of the PS that has emerged under Hollande by ditching any pretense of having a socialistic orientation, and backing Macron’s unabashedly capitalist agenda. He is proposing economic shock therapy at home against the workers, with deep cuts to social services to help fund an increase in military spending to 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

“I don’t say the right and the left don’t exist anymore,” Macron declared in his speech. “But in such historic times, can’t we get beyond such divisions?”

While Macron criticized Trump’s anti-immigrant policies—criticizing his plans to build a wall along the US-Mexico border by declaring “there will be no wall in my program”—he proposes an aggressive nationalist and militaristic policy. After having publicly met with right-wing nationalist politicians including Philippe de Villiers as he prepared his campaign bid, Macron in his speech branded several countries including Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia as dangerous authoritarian regimes.

Polls currently show that Macron would beat Le Pen overwhelmingly in the second round of voting. However, there is increasing fear in the media that the electorate—faced with a choice between an unpopular neo-fascist, and either Hamon or an unpopular banker tied to Hollande—might respond unpredictably, through a mixture of abstention and protest vote, thus bringing Le Pen to power.

In a piece titled “How Marine Le Pen can become president of France,” *Marianne* writes, “the situation should be very favorable to [Macron]. He should logically be well above 25 percent. But he seems stuck around 21-22 percent. A glass ceiling? His banker’s image, free-market globalism, and his very open position on immigration have clearly become weaknesses.”

On a Hamon-Le Pen run-off, the magazine wrote, “The right-wing vote would go massively to the FN candidate. Much of the center and center-right would abstain. Manual workers and employees would refuse to support a candidate who promotes the end of labor as a positive good (that is to say, jobs) and denounces the myth of economic growth. Then Marine Le Pen would have real chances.”

Such concerns reflect the collapse of votes for Fillon, who after his victory in LR’s autumn primary was projected to easily win, defeating Le Pen in the second round. However, his call for deep austerity, including cutting 500,000 jobs and undermining the Social Security system’s financing of health care, was highly unpopular. After he called for alliances with Germany and Russia against the United States, a scandal erupted over charges that his wife improperly received hundreds of thousands of euros from the National Assembly and private enterprises without doing any work.

As reports surfaced in *Le Monde* that Fillon and his wife contradicted each other in their testimony on the matter to state investigators, Fillon went on television yesterday afternoon in a desperate attempt to save his presidential bid. Nonetheless, he brazenly defended his record, insisting that he would not refund any of the money and defending his wife, while insisting—in a comment manifestly aimed at his big business backers—that he was the only candidate who could give France the social “shock” it needs.

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