

FRENCH ELECTIONS: Conservative François Bayrou calls for Hollande vote in French elections

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On Thursday, defeated bourgeois “center” candidate François Bayrou called for a vote for Francois Hollande, the candidate of the Socialist Party (PS), in the second and decisive round of the French presidential elections on Sunday, May 6.

“I do not want to cast a blank vote. This would be indecision. In these circumstances, such indecision is impossible. It remains a vote for Francois Hollande, this is the choice I have made,” he said at a meeting.

Bayrou appealed to Hollande to form a national unity government, in which Bayrou’s right-wing Democratic Movement (MoDem) would presumably play a major role. Bayrou stated that Hollande had chosen “to make national unity possible, for the first time in a long time.”

Significantly, Bayrou’s decision was hailed by petty-bourgeois “left” forces in the PS’s periphery. Left Front leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon praised Bayrou’s support for Hollande as a “decision based on honest Republican sentiment.”

This is the latest in a series of endorsements of Hollande by conservative French politicians.

Last week Philippe Douste-Blazy, a former French foreign minister (2005 to 2007) and general secretary of Sarkozy’s centre-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), also came out for Hollande. He declared that “the role of President of the Republic” is to “gather people together and not to flatter the extremes.”

Previously Sarkozy’s predecessor, conservative President Jacques Chirac, also declared he would support Hollande, describing him as “a true statesman” able to cross party lines.

Bayrou’s endorsement of Hollande is a blow to Sarkozy and the UMP. Shortly before the

second round of the elections, Sarkozy is polling four points behind his rival, Hollande. To stay in power, Sarkozy has to win over a large portion of Bayrou’s (MoDem) and those of the neo-fascist Front National (FN) of Marine Le Pen. Bayrou received 9.1 percent of the votes in the first round of the elections and Le Pen 18 percent.

Explaining his decision Bayrou criticized Sarkozy’s right-wing campaign to win over Le Pen voters. “Nicolas Sarkozy, after a good first round score, has chased after the far right, where we do not find our values,” he said. “The line Nicolas Sarkozy has chosen is violent. It contradicts our values, not just mine, but also the values of Gaullism as much as those of the republican and social right.”

Bayrou pointed to “Sarkozy’s obsession” with immigration and with borders that should be restored, “as if they had completely disappeared and we had lost our soul.” He expressed the fear that Sarkozy’s policy “leads to the negation of the European project in which the center and right, and the moderate left, gave decades of action and conviction.”

Such comments doubtless reflect real concern in sections of the French ruling elite at the emergence of the FN as a major force in French politics. Nonetheless, Bayrou’s support for Hollande will prove no barrier to rising FN support in France.

Bayrou’s promotion of Hollande as a candidate opposed to attacks on democratic rights is a cynical lie. Both Sarkozy and Hollande have made clear their support for deeply anti-democratic measures intended to curry favor with anti-immigrant bigotry, particularly in the FN voter base. As the record of Sarkozy’s first presidential term shows, such concessions to anti-immigrant prejudice do not weaken, but rather strengthen the FN, by legitimizing its politics.

In the TV debate with Sarkozy on Wednesday, Hollande attacked Sarkozy from the right and launched an angry rant against immigrants and Muslims. He criticized Sarkozy for admitting too many immigrants, declaring that under Sarkozy 50,000 more immigrants entered France each year than under the last PS government.

Hollande also declared his support for the burqa ban and a previous ban on Muslim veils in the schools. He vowed not to allow any women-only hours at swimming pools, nor to “tolerate” halal meat in French schools. His statements, which contradict the principle of secularism (*laïcité*), or state neutrality on religious matters, show that under Hollande the racist treatment of immigrants will not improve, but rather worsen.

Bayrou’s decision to endorse Hollande also suggests that influential sections of the French ruling class are concluding that Hollande might be better able than Sarkozy to carry out planned social cuts and structural reforms. Hollande has described himself as the “candidate of national unity” in the election campaign, pledging to “mobilize all forces [...] to face the challenges of competitiveness.”

France currently has a budget deficit of 4.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), and its annual debt is approaching 90 per cent of GDP. The French economy is in deep crisis and has lost ground in the last decade. Both candidates have pledged to balance the budgets, reduce labor costs and make the French economy competitive.

In contrast to Sarkozy, the Hollande campaign has had the active support of the trade unions and an assortment of pseudo-left groups seeking to suppress any independent working class opposition to the cuts. The trade unions, Jean Luc Mélenchon’s Left Front, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), and Workers Struggle (LO) have lined up behind Hollande’s program of austerity, calling for a Hollande vote in the second round.

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