

# Sarkozy vows to keep plant open in order to protect jobs

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Paris

PRESIDENT Nicolas Sarkozy kept up the role of defender of French industry yesterday, promising state investment in an idled ArcelorMittal plant as opposition Socialists rushed out rival plans to force firms to keep such plants open.

With industrial decline a major election issue, the Florange plant in northeastern France has become a battleground for the April-May ballot as both Mr Sarkozy and Socialist Francois Hollande, who is leading polls, vow to save the plant.

Florange's blast furnaces, the last functioning in France's former steel-making heartland along the German border, have stood idle for lack of orders since the second half of last year. Workers fear they may never be fired up again.

Mr Sarkozy — who launched his bid this month for a second term as president — said he wanted ArcelorMittal to make investments so that the furnaces could be started up again in the second half of the year when the economy would be stronger.

He said the state could help finance investments needed to get the plant functioning again, in addition to the €150m it has already said it will make if the European Commission chooses the site for a partially European Union-financed carbon-capture pilot programme.

"France will not abandon its steel industry," Mr Sarkozy told RTL radio.

"If the state has to invest through the FSI (strategic investment fund), then we are ready to do it."

Mr Hollande, who leads Mr Sarkozy by between one and six points in polls for the April 22 first round, and by 12 points for a May 6 run-off, told cheering workers during a visit to Florange on Friday that he would introduce a law to force companies to sell unused factories to buyers who would keep them in operation.

The Socialist Party was due to propose a bill yesterday calling for commercial courts to force such sales.

Mr Sarkozy hit back by saying that it made no sense to force companies to sell facilities that would only end up in the same predicament six months later in the hands of another firm.

The Socialist proposal has next to no chance of passing in the lower house of parliament, where Sarkozy's conservative UMP has a majority.

However, the party could revive the bill were Hollande to win the presidential election, whether or not the left also wins legislative elections in June.

The demise of plants like Florange has left France one of the least industrialised of some 40 advanced economies tracked by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

France has lost 355 000 jobs in industry over the five years that Mr Sarkozy has been office, a fact Mr Hollande rarely misses an opportunity to point out. *Reuters*