

For a boycott of the French election

Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International

26 April 2002

The International Committee of the Fourth International calls upon French workers, youth and intellectuals to boycott the May 5 presidential runoff election that pits the neo-fascist National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen against France's right-wing President Jacques Chirac.

Le Pen's electoral breakthrough in the first round of voting has laid bare the deep-going crisis of France's Fifth Republic. A political order that produces a choice between two such candidates has lost all credibility. The working class must reject this undemocratic charade and prepare to mobilize its independent strength against whichever of these two reactionaries wins.

Why is a boycott the necessary and correct political response for the French working class to the May 5 runoff? It will deny legitimacy to the electoral fraud and provide a means for translating mass discontent into effective political action.

A review of the voting in the first round makes it clear that broad sections of French voters have been effectively disenfranchised in the runoff. One third of the total eligible voters stayed home out of disgust for all the candidates, while nearly 40 percent of those who voted chose parties describing themselves as part of the left. Among these voters, 11 percent cast ballots for parties identified with revolutionary socialist politics. Yet the electorate is left to decide between two extreme right-wing candidates, who together received the support of less than a quarter of those eligible to vote.

Hundreds of thousands of French workers and youth have taken to the streets to express their opposition to the anti-immigrant and anti-working class policies of Le Pen's National Front, as well as their hatred of the system of social inequality and political corruption that spawned this reactionary political movement.

Many hundreds of thousands more will march on May Day in Paris. This international day of working class unity should be utilized to launch a genuine campaign of class opposition against the two candidates of bourgeois reaction through a boycott of the polls. This is not a question of mere abstention, but of workers beginning to move as an independent force against those elements—fascist and Gaullist alike—that are attempting to scapegoat immigrants and the most oppressed layers of society.

The campaign mounted by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and other sections of the French left in support of Chirac in the second round is deserving only of contempt. A vote for Chirac in no way advances the struggle against Le Pen, but will only intensify the political disorientation that handed the neo-fascists their success at the polls in the first place.

The first round of the election saw the largest abstention rate since 1958, clearly revealing the alienation of broad masses

of the population from the two parties—Gaullist and Socialist—that have dominated political life for decades. These parties of the ruling elite have become virtually indistinguishable in their policies and increasingly incapable of responding to, or even apprehending the mood of the masses.

In the absence of any independent alternative from the parties that have historically drawn their votes from the working class, the National Front was able to wage a right-wing populist campaign, appealing to the "little man" against the monolithic political "establishment."

As a result, Le Pen garnered his support not merely from his traditional strongholds in the south of France, but from working class areas in the north that have traditionally provided the base of support for the Stalinist CP, which saw its vote collapse from 2.6 million in 1995 to just 960,000.

The dangers posed by the growth of support for a neo-fascist party in France must not be underestimated. In assessing the significance of Le Pen's vote, however, it is critical to grasp that the election results reveal a crisis of confidence in the bourgeois political setup as a whole.

"Forty percent of those voting have rejected the parties of the government, double the total in 1988 and 1995," noted *Le Monde*. "If one adds the abstentions, three in every five registered voters have rejected the candidates capable of leading a government today. This figure alone means that over and above the failure of the left, the success of the extreme right and the weakness of the right, there is a fundamental and disturbing rejection which is being expressed."

The political parties and public figures calling for a vote for Chirac in the name of a "referendum against Le Pen" or a "plebiscite for democracy" are attempting to revive popular confidence in a political system that broad sections of the French people are rejecting. For his part, Le Pen has welcomed the closing of ranks between the Socialists and the Gaullists as substantiating his reactionary demagoguery.

Chirac has wrapped himself in the tricolor, declaring that his victory is necessary to "save the honor of France." It is fitting that such a dubious goal should be identified with the election of a man whose name is synonymous with corruption and graft.

The incumbent president has refused to debate Le Pen. "Faced with intolerance and hatred, no debate is possible," Chirac declared at his first campaign rally since the April 21 vote. "Just as I did not accept any alliance in the past with the National Front ... I will not accept a debate with its leader in the future."

Le Pen has no difficulty exposing this hypocrisy. He has revealed that Chirac solicited just such an alliance in 1988, shortly after the National Front leader made his infamous remark about the Nazi gas chambers being "a detail of history." As a result of this deal, the National Front leader urged his voters to cast their second-round ballots for the Gaullist RPR.

Chirac has additional reasons to avoid a debate with Le Pen. He, like the rest of the French right, has his eyes focused on parliamentary elections set for June. His principal concern is not defeating Le Pen, but unifying the parties of the right to obtain a parliamentary majority. To that end, he has established a new political front, the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP), to ensure an alliance of the right and center right.

Chirac has no principled political differences with Le Pen. He is taking care to leave the door open for collaboration with the neo-fascists in the future.

The entire electoral setup has turned into a political stranglehold over the masses, offering no means for working people to express their social discontent. The so-called left parties—Socialist and Communist—bear the greatest responsibility for this state of affairs. Offering themselves as the best administrators of the capitalist state and capitalist economy, they have presided over the destruction of social services, the privatization of industry and attacks on democratic rights.

The sickening display of political cowardice by the Socialist Party prime minister and presidential candidate, Lionel Jospin, who announced his resignation within hours of his party's electoral debacle, exemplified the bankruptcy of the official "left." Jospin's prostration before Le Pen defined him as the political heir to French Radical Party leader Edouard Daladier, who resigned after a fascist riot in February 1934 and later paved the way for the fascist takeover in May-June 1940.

A boycott is necessary to begin the political clarification of the working class and counter the disorientation created by the treachery of the Socialist and Communist parties. Workers, students and intellectuals who are smoldering in anger over the results of the election must not be left in isolation, or even worse, corralled into helping elect a government committed to attacking the working class. An active policy is required, including the organization of meetings promoting a boycott, demonstrations and political strikes.

Those who claim that a vote for Chirac is the only means to defeat the National Front merely betray their own paralysis and pessimism. A political establishment that casts such a figure as the champion of democracy only exposes its own decrepitude.

A Chirac presidency, with a rightist majority in parliament,

is clearly the result preferred by the most influential sections of the French bourgeoisie. Such a government will carry out much of the political agenda advanced by the National Front, whose anti-immigrant, law-and-order electoral slogans were echoed to a large degree by the Gaullists in the election campaign.

A substantial section of the electorate, some 11 percent, cast votes for organizations that call themselves Trotskyist and claim to advance a revolutionary policy. These parties and their candidates—Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière, Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and Daniel Gluckstein of the Parti des Travailleurs—now have a responsibility to take up the demand and actively campaign for a boycott.

The initial response of Laguiller, however, has been entirely passive. In her most recent statement, she said she would "not call for abstention in the second round of the presidential election."

She added she would urge workers not to vote for Le Pen, while refusing to join the coalition backing a vote for Chirac.

This is an evasion, not a policy to fight the right wing. It leaves workers unclear as to what they should do next. Laguiller's formula leaves it to the individual voter to decide, and implicitly encourages a vote for Chirac.

An active policy, in the form of an organized boycott, is needed to unite the working class and open a new road of struggle that will contribute to the construction of a genuinely independent, mass socialist movement.

The French working class cannot find a way out of the political crisis by basing itself on a French national program. The alternative offered by the Socialist and Communist parties—a bureaucratized welfare state without welfare—represents no alternative at all.

Against the national chauvinism, xenophobia and protectionism promoted by Le Pen—and echoed by large sections of the so-called left—the working class must advance its own internationalist program to unite the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defense of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Single European Market of the transnational corporations is the struggle for a United Socialist States of Europe.

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