

No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election

An open letter to Lutte Ouvrière, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and Parti des Travailleurs

By the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
29 April 2002

For the leaders, members and political supporters of Lutte Ouvrière (LO), the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), the 2002 French presidential election poses a great political responsibility. More than three million people have given your candidates an unprecedented vote in the first round. But the first round also saw a breakthrough by the National Front, with the fascist candidate Le Pen finishing second and facing President Chirac in the May 5 runoff.

The millions who voted for your candidates look to you to speak clearly and forcefully about the political crisis. The question is posed, and must be answered: where do your organizations stand on the May 5 vote? How shall French workers and youth carry forward a struggle to defend their social interests and defeat the fascist danger?

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges every organization seeking to defend the working class to campaign actively for a boycott of the May 5 presidential vote. No political support to either Le Pen or Chirac! Mobilize French working people and youth against this false and anti-democratic “choice.”

Despite the well-known historical and political differences between your three parties and the International Committee of the Fourth International, which we do not seek to conceal, we feel it is essential to propose this campaign and explain the political basis for it.

Why a boycott? Because it is necessary to deny any legitimacy to this fraudulent election; because it is necessary to establish an independent political line for the working class; because an active and aggressive boycott would create the best conditions for the political struggles that will arise in the aftermath of the elections.

A boycott, called for and campaigned for aggressively by your three parties, would have a far different character than individual abstention. It would serve to politically educate the masses, and especially the young people who have been set into motion by the shock of Le Pen’s success in the first round.

These new forces must learn important political lessons. They must learn to see through the lies of the whole bourgeois political establishment—the governmental right and governmental left, as well as the media—who claim that a vote for Chirac represents the defense of democracy, the salvation of France’s “honor,” the creation of an “anti-fascist front,” and so on.

The working class cannot rely on the corrupt and reactionary French bourgeoisie to defend democratic rights or oppose fascism. Chirac’s own campaign, which adopted wholesale the law-and-order rhetoric of Le Pen, is a clear demonstration of this fact.

Some may argue that boycotting the May 5 vote will strengthen

Le Pen and his fascist movement. We reject such claims entirely. Politics is not arithmetic, and opposition to Le Pen does not require support for Chirac. On the contrary, it is the official campaign for Chirac, uniting the governmental right and governmental left, which reinforces Le Pen’s entirely false and demagogic claim that he alone gives voice to popular opposition to the political establishment.

A widespread campaign of boycott and opposition to May 5, spearheaded by the socialist left and mobilizing workers and youth against both Le Pen and Chirac, would puncture Le Pen’s false pretenses and demonstrate to the broad masses that there is a progressive social force which challenges the existing social and political order.

We must state frankly that to this point the position of the representatives of the LO and the LCR amounts to tacit acceptance of a vote for Chirac. The LO is “not calling on workers to abstain in the second round,” says LO presidential candidate Laguiller. An LCR Political Bureau statement declares: “The LCR campaigns for Le Pen to have the smallest possible vote on Sunday, May 5. We understand those voters who vote for Chirac to oppose Le Pen, but we do not think that Chirac can be the rampart against a new rise of the extreme right.”

In the course of the campaign in the first round, your parties aggressively denounced the right-wing character of the Chirac presidency, and portrayed Chirac—correctly—as the personification of corrupt bourgeois reaction. How can you now suggest that a vote for Chirac is either permissible, understandable or defensible? Should your past statements and warnings be taken seriously?

The language of the LCR statement suggests that the arguments for a vote for Chirac in the second round are somehow unanswerable, or that to come out openly for boycotting the choice of Chirac and Le Pen will not be understood by the masses. This grossly underestimates the political possibilities in the current situation.

Who is responsible for Le Pen’s success?

Without minimizing the danger of the National Front, the vote for Le Pen does not represent mass support for a fascist program in France, still less the emergence of a mass fascist movement on the model of Mussolini or Hitler. Even among Le Pen’s own voters, only a small fraction actually supports his social program and the establishment of a right-wing authoritarian regime.

Should Le Pen, against expectation, win the presidential vote, he would not be able to subjugate the French people to a totalitarian dictatorship. In the campaign for Chirac by the media and the political establishment, there is an element of grotesque exaggeration of the immediate threat posed by Le Pen, the purpose of which is to terrorize the working class into supporting a policy

of class collaboration. In order to fight Le Pen, we must correctly diagnose the cause of the political disease he personifies. The cause of this malaise is the closing off of any socialist alternative to capitalist politics.

Le Pen has profited politically and ideologically from the abandonment of the working class and its interests by the parties that claimed to represent it. As Jospin admitted in his campaign, his party may call itself "Socialist," but his program is "not socialist." The Socialist Party seeks to administer, on behalf of the capitalists, a welfare state that no longer provides welfare, but on the contrary, continuously reduces the standard of living and social conditions of the workers. The Jospin government took responsibility for imposing all the sacrifices in jobs and social programs required as a condition of the establishment of the European monetary system and the launching of the euro.

As for the Communist Party, it was for many decades the principal pillar of French capitalism within the working class. In the most recent period, this Stalinist organization has had the main responsibility for introducing the poison of anti-immigrant chauvinism into the working class. Communist Party leader and presidential candidate Robert Hue first came to prominence 20 years ago as the mayor of a Paris suburb who whipped up hatred and fear of immigrant workers. In this he paved the way for Le Pen in the working-class suburbs and the former Communist Party strongholds of the north.

Le Pen has gained in strength largely because of the right-wing policies pursued by so-called left parties over the last 20 years. This has created the mood of alienation and discouragement exploited by the National Front. Yet the solution to the fascist challenge—according to these same bankrupt social democratic politicians—is a further move to the right and the embrace of Chirac on May 5.

It is natural for Jospin, Hollande, Chevenement, etc. to call for a vote for Chirac. For them it requires no major reorientation, because they share the same political framework. They have worked closely with Chirac through five years of cohabitation, supporting not only a reactionary domestic policy, but also the involvement of France in a series of imperialist military interventions from Bosnia and Kosovo to Afghanistan.

The claim by Jospin & Co. that a "divided left" caused Le Pen's victory is an argument, not merely against the presidential campaigns of the LO, LCR and PT, but against the existence of any political organizations of the working class independent of the bourgeoisie. Its logic is the liquidation of all political tendencies claiming to be socialist into a broad current where the political line is set by the most right-wing forces—something like the Democratic Party in the United States, whose end result has been to put George W. Bush in the White House.

We reject with contempt the self-serving claims of Jospin and the Socialist Party—and his apologists like Daniel Cohn-Bendit—that the socialist left is to blame for Le Pen's breakthrough. The fact that a sizeable proportion of workers voted for their bitterest enemy is of great concern to all genuine socialists. But the responsibility for this dangerous development lies with those who have systematically betrayed the working class over many decades.

The international dimension

The election campaign in the first round largely ignored the international dimensions of the crisis facing the working class. But there is no question that Le Pen and Megret profited by presenting themselves as opponents of Brussels, blaming the growth of unemployment and the decay in working class living standards on European integration and the introduction of the euro, and by

scapegoating immigrant workers.

The working class must provide a forward-looking rather than a backward-looking alternative to capitalist globalization. It must counter chauvinist and anti-immigrant demagoguery with a program based on socialist internationalism. Capitalist globalization means a "Europe without borders" only for the corporate bosses, while the workers remain straitjacketed within national boundaries. We reject the reactionary utopia of returning to a French national project—unviable even under Mitterrand 20 years ago—and fight for a socialist United States of Europe, with complete freedom for workers of every race and nationality to travel, work and live where they wish.

The essence of socialism is internationalism. The struggle to defend the interests of French workers and youth is inseparable from the struggle against imperialism—and not only of the American variety, but French, British, German, and Japanese. The greatest crime of the Socialist Party-led coalition was its support for French imperialism in Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and most recently Afghanistan. Jospin thus placed himself on the same side of the barricades as Le Pen, the former Algerian paratrooper and torturer.

Those who call for a vote for Chirac in the name of defending democracy within France turn their backs on these crucial international questions. To vote for Chirac is to take political responsibility for a government already committed to participating in an American war on Iraq, an imperialist intervention that could destabilize the entire Middle East and lead to a more general inter-imperialist war.

The lessons of history

If it is legitimate for the left to call for a vote for the reactionary Chirac in the name of "defending democracy," then it is legitimate to vote for the program of his government, once it takes office, and even to join his government as a legislator or cabinet minister. Such opportunist politics has a long and tragic history in the French workers' movement, going back to the notorious Alexandre Millerrand, the first socialist politician to join a bourgeois government a century ago.

Millerrand also claimed to be motivated by the need to defend democracy, against the ultra-right threat of the anti-Dreyfusards. The government that he joined ultimately engaged in bloody massacres of striking workers.

The same claims were made for the formation of the Popular Front in France in 1936, an alliance of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the bourgeois Radical Socialists. The Popular Front government, brought to power through the support of the working class, worked assiduously to diffuse the revolutionary movement that erupted in a massive general strike and to save French capitalism. Once its job of restraining, betraying and demoralizing the working class was completed, it turned over power to the right wing, setting the stage for the collapse of 1940 and the establishment of the pro-fascist Vichy regime.

In some quarters there have been cynical and false attempts to justify a vote for Chirac by citing the example of Leon Trotsky's struggle against the ultra-left policies of the Stalinist "third period", particularly in Germany in the years of Hitler's rise to power. Trotsky opposed the policy then pursued by the Stalinist leadership of the German Communist Party of identifying social democracy with fascism and rejecting any alliance of the working class organizations to defeat the Nazi menace.

Trotsky's campaign for a fighting united front of the working class, however, had nothing in common with the subsequent rightward turn of the Stalinists to the Popular Front, which

subordinated the working class to the bourgeois parties in the name of “defending democracy.” It is this policy, which destroyed the Spanish Revolution and led to disaster in France, Chile and dozens of other countries, that is being revived in the campaign for Chirac.

It would be wrong to mechanically identify France in 2002 with Germany in 1932, or Le Pen with Hitler. Whatever the ideological and political similarities between the National Front and the Nazis, Le Pen’s movement is at this point far weaker. Its gains are not the result of a massive radicalization of ruined sections of the petty bourgeoisie, under the impact of a global collapse of capitalism. Rather they stem largely from the disorientation in the working class produced by the protracted decay and bankruptcy of its old parties.

Nonetheless, the historical parallel does contain lessons. Those who argue for a vote for Chirac to “stop Le Pen” follow in the footsteps of the German Social Democrats, who in 1932, in the German presidential elections, supported the reactionary militarist Hindenburg in order to “stop Hitler.” In January 1933, it was Hindenburg, as president, who called Hitler to power as the Chancellor of Germany. Throughout the German catastrophe, social democracy remained prostrate before the bourgeois parties and the bourgeois state, opposing any effort to mobilize the working class independently against fascism.

Chirac has no principled political differences with Le Pen. In the future, should he find it politically expedient, he could very well call on Le Pen to bolster or even join his government in order to strengthen his hand against the working class.

The central historical issue is the necessity for the working class to adopt an independent political standpoint and develop its independent strength, on every political issue, including the burning question of the struggle against fascism. In the final analysis, it is only the independent political strength of the working class—not the institutions and parties of the bourgeois state—that can defend democratic rights.

The road forward today

An aggressive campaign for a boycott of the second round will be the best preparation for the working class to mount a struggle against whichever candidate wins the presidency. Those who call for a vote for Chirac act as though politics begins and ends on May 5, ignoring the implications of the pro-Chirac campaign even for the parliamentary elections the following month, let alone the class and social battles which must inevitably develop in the aftermath of the voting.

Let us recall what happened the last time Jacques Chirac was elected president of France. Within six months of his entry into Elysée Palace, France was convulsed by the most powerful wave of strikes and student protests since May-June 1968. The struggles of November-December 1995, provoked by the Juppé government’s

attack on pensions and other social benefits, staggered the French bourgeoisie, undermined the Juppé government, and created the conditions for the defeat of the Gaullists and the election of a Socialist-led government—to the complete surprise of Jospin himself and other leaders of the official left.

With that history in mind, the current campaign for a “100 percent vote for Chirac” represents an attempt to straitjacket the French working class politically in advance of struggles that must assume dimensions far beyond those of 1995. The result of a massive vote for Chirac would be to greatly enhance his political authority, as a quasi-Bonapartist figure. He would use this authority ruthlessly against the interests of the working class.

There are many signs that leaders of the Socialist Party and the other organizations of the “governmental left” are fully conscious of this purpose. Thus they urge an end to the mass demonstrations against Le Pen, concerned that the protests might create more difficult conditions for pursuing the right-wing program of privatization, destruction of working conditions, and cutting jobs and wages in the post-election period.

The great lesson of the last quarter century is the necessity to combat the reactionary political influence of the old, outlived, fossilized organizations that once spoke for the working class. These organizations are today little more than empty shells, held together by bureaucratic self-interest and state subsidies.

In Jospin’s own political trajectory can be seen the pernicious consequences of decades of adaptation to these old organizations. He provides a textbook example of one who sought to utilize the political principles and historical stature of Leon Trotsky as a cover for opportunism. He has ended his political career with an ignominious resignation, literally abandoning political responsibility at the point where grave dangers confront the French working class.

French politics—and world politics—are at a historic turning point. Everything depends, as Trotsky explained long ago, on the “subjective factor,” i.e., revolutionary leadership and the political consciousness of the working class. Given a leadership not mesmerized by bourgeois public opinion, confident in the working class and its political strength, the debacle of Jospin and the Socialist Party will open the way for the development of a mass independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

The real sentiments of millions of workers and youth found only a pale reflection in the votes cast for the LO, the LCR and the PT on April 21. It is necessary to speak bluntly to the members and supporters of these parties: based on the statements and actions of your leaders, your organizations have to date demonstrated no understanding of the critical responsibility now placed upon them. You are called on to give a clear lead in the current crisis. This means concretely taking up the call for a boycott of the May 5 presidential vote. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all socialists in France to raise this demand and fight for it.

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To contact the World Socialist Web Site e-mail: editor@wsws.org