

France

Regional elections show growing alienation from official parties

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17 March 1998

In regional elections held March 15, the governing coalition of Lionel Jospin presented joint lists of candidates in more than half the French *Départments* (administrative areas) under the label “Plural Left.” These lists, comprising the Socialist Party (SP), the Communist Party (PCF), the Greens, the Left Radicals and the Citizens Movement, polled 41.6 percent of the overall vote, giving the Plural Left control of an expected 12 to 15 out of 22 regions, including the Central Paris district.

The victory of the SP-led coalition was, however, more an expression of the voters’ hostility towards the Gaullist and Liberal opposition parties than an endorsement of Jospin’s own record in government.

The right-wing daily *Le Figaro* called the election “a Waterloo” for the conservative opposition. The Rally for the Republic (RPR) and the Union for French Democracy (UDF) received just 35.1 percent of the vote and will most likely control only eight regions, compared with the 20 they won in the 1992 election.

Their mounting problems were also seen in the large number of alternative candidates fielded against the national leadership’s list. This had earlier forced RPR chief Philippe Seguin to expel 31 of his leading members. In its coverage of the election, France’s leading newspaper, *Le Monde*, highlighted departments where the RPR is in a state of virtual collapse.

The Plural Left victory gives a highly distorted picture of the true feelings of French workers towards the Jospin government. The election was characterised by a growing alienation from all the mainstream parties. Abstentions reached a record 41.6 percent, compared to 32 percent in 1992.

The radical left parties—led by Lutte Ouvrière

(Workers Fight) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League)—stood their own lists against the Plural Left. The collective vote for the independent left candidates was 4.38 percent, more than double their normal 2 percent, and came from workers and youth looking for a socialist alternative to the SP.

The main political beneficiary of the growing hostility towards the political establishment was the fascist National Front (FN). It won 15.9 percent of the vote, up from 13.9 percent in 1992, and did particularly well in the Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur region in southern France.

Party leader Jean Marie Le Pen hopes to become the president of the region. The FN had already received over 50 percent of the votes in a by-election in the old industrial center of Mulhouse (Alsace). They have carried out openly racist policies of expelling immigrant workers from housing estates, coupled with cash grants to white families as an inducement to have more children.

Commenting on the elections, the left-wing newspaper *Liberation*, which supported the SP list, warned, “If one counts the votes ‘outside the system’—those lost through abstention or cast for the National Front and the extreme left—one reaches a total of almost 60 percent. The real political basis of these ‘government parties’ only covers a minority of the voters...Of course, last June’s mandate has been confirmed, which is a source of satisfaction for the Prime Minister. But it is a very conditional confirmation.”

Last June the SP took over from the RPR/UDF government of President Chirac and Prime Minister

Juppé. This was in the aftermath of the two-million-strong general strike of November/December 1995, provoked by Juppe's attempt to implement drastic social cuts.

Jospin pledged to promote social justice, but in the last nine months he has demonstrated agreement with the Gaullists on all fundamental questions of policy. His government has carried out attacks on social services that Juppé could not fully implement. In this way he has put the country on course for entry into the European Monetary Union, which is due to create a single currency in 1999. The main qualification for entry into the EMU is a major reduction in public spending to reduce the national budget deficit, thus ensuring a strong European currency that can challenge the Japanese yen and the US dollar.

But this austerity policy has exacerbated a social situation already deteriorating for the past decade. In recent months there have been frequent clashes between youth and the police in deprived urban areas, expressing mounting social tensions and polarisation throughout the country.

A survey by a Christian charity, the Abbé Pierre Foundation, based on figures drawn up in 1990, found that 6 million people (10 percent of the population) depend on social benefits and nearly 3 million more earn less than 4,800 FF a month. There are 200,000 homeless people and 1.5 million who are badly housed.

The fascists have blamed the growth of unemployment, poverty and homelessness on the support of the government and the Gaullists for the European Monetary Union, together with immigration. The Stalinists of the French Communist Party, which is in coalition with Jospin's Socialist Party, have, for their part, echoed such nationalist propaganda, thereby lending credence to the demagogy of Le Pen. As for the radical left groups, they buttress the fascists' pretense of being the only "popular" opposition to the government by supporting Jospin, claiming his regime to be the only alternative to the right.

The last week of the campaign was dominated by talk of a possible deal between the RPR, UDF and the FN, for the purpose of keeping the presidency of the Regional Councils in right-wing hands. On February 15, FN second-in-command Bruno Mégret made a public offer of collaboration, and the number of RPR and UDF politicians supporting a deal with the FN

increased dramatically towards the end of the campaign. Among those prepared to strike a deal with the fascists was the former general secretary of the RPR, Jean François Mancel; the former Minister of the Interior, Charles Pasqua (RPR); and Philippe Vasseur, the leader of the UDF in Nord Pas de Calais.



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