

Mass demonstrations in France against the fascist National Front

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In regional elections held March 15 in France, the neo-fascist Front National won 15.5 percent of the vote, giving it the balance of power between two roughly equal blocs, the ruling coalition of the Socialist Party, Communist Party and Greens, and the alliance of the Gaullist RPR and the conservative UDF. The neo-fascists have produced a political upheaval since then by throwing their support to the right-wing bloc in five of the regional assemblies and defeating the candidates of the social democratic-led coalition.

In accepting support from the FN, the regional UDF leaders have broken the ban on cooperation with the fascists which has been observed by both the official “left” and “right” in French bourgeois politics since the FN first gained significant electoral strength nearly two decades ago. This decision has sparked a wave of protests against the growing influence of the neo-fascist party. A further analysis of the political crisis in France will appear on the WSWS soon.

Some 50,000 people came to the Place de la République in Paris on March 28, to march via the Bastille to the Place de la Nation—one of many demonstrations throughout France on this day. They were protesting against the neo-fascist Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party which in the latest regional elections has emerged as the third strongest force increasingly influencing the policies and politicians of the traditional right-wing parties, the Gaullists and the UDF (Union Démocratique Française).

The election of five UDF politicians as regional presidents with the support of the FN has clearly electrified the entire country. Does France now stand before the creeping power of the neo-fascists? Can the rise of this party be stopped? Must history repeat itself? Does the example of Nazi Germany not show where it will end?

Many people are concerned by such questions, above all youth, school pupils and students, who want to demonstrate their disquiet and determination in opposition to the danger of fascism. For the most part they came spontaneously: “No, there wasn’t any party or organization which mobilized for this demonstration. The teachers didn’t discuss it either. Perhaps at the start there was a leaflet somewhere. Suddenly, word started to spread and we came here.”

Already a few days earlier, during the election of the regional presidents in Paris and Toulouse when electoral alliances between the UDF and FN looked possible, hundreds of youth left their schools and demonstrated for hours in front of the Regional Assembly buildings, until the UDF announced that it would not be seeking election with the support of the FN, in favor of candidates of the governing Socialist Party (PS). School pupils, young workers and students largely dominated the demonstration in Paris.

But who can show them the way? Which party opposes the neo-fascists with the same determination as the FN acts under its slogan:

“the party of government tomorrow”? Who is proposing a thought-out program with which to fundamentally overcome racism and fascism?

The demonstration in Paris gave no answer to these questions. The ranks of the demonstration marched endlessly through the streets, but there was not a single party that proclaimed its presence either through banners or by the slogans they employed. “Ensemble pour la liberté, l’égalité, la fraternité!” (“Together for freedom, equality and fraternity!”)—this slogan of the bourgeois revolution 200 years earlier was the main refrain, supplemented by slogans such as “Down with Le Pen,” “Throw Le Pen in the garbage can,” or “F’ like fascist and ‘N’ like Nazi.”

The big trade union federations whose national, regional or local branches and their banners usually dominate such demonstrations were not to be seen. But wait, right at the end on the Place de la Nation, when most of the demonstrators had dispersed and many of the youth were lying on the grass surrounding the statue symbolizing the French Revolution, a small cardboard tower with the letters CFDT moved falteringly onto the square, behind it a handful of representatives of this social democratic union from Ile de France, the region of Paris.

And then finally came the Greens and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and its leader Alain Krivine with their banners. The LCR had stood their own candidates or supported joint lists with others and gained 136,000 votes in the regional elections. Together with the Greens they were the original instigators of the demonstration. But now they marched at the rear so as to leave first place to the other parties in the government coalition, whose politicians and functionaries were also present but were only recognized by their own members or the television journalists. They even insisted on making the whole thing a “government cause” and put themselves at the head, like the general secretary of the PS, François Holland, or Robert Hue, chairman of the Stalinist Communist Party (PCF). Not even the march stewards were wearing armbands bearing the party emblem, as is usual; instead they sported the national colors of the Republic—red, white and blue.

The daily newspaper *Le Monde* reported that the demonstration organizers had striven hard not to frighten away the supporters of the right wing, the Gaullists and the UDF, but had invited them to participate. The slogans were also chosen with corresponding care. Typical were banners portraying the fascists as a threat to the nation and the “Republic,” not to the working class. For example: “Le Front National est un affront national—The National Front is a national affront”!

It must be said that this operation, along the lines of the “Popular Front” of the 1930s, was very effective. In the name of unity with the

right for the “values of the Republic” all criticism of the Jospin government from the left was kept off the demonstration. Almost all. Two groups of demonstrators broke ranks and found a hearing for their protests against the “government of the left,” as the media calls it.

One was a group of some 100 immigrants, who, accompanied by drums, loudly demanded Jospin provide their “papers,” i.e., legal residency and work permits. Instead of abolishing the immigration law enacted under right-wing Interior Ministers Pasqua and Debré, Jospin only granted further 3- or 12-month extensions to their stay, until each individual case can be processed.

Week after week—as under the Juppé government—immigrants are being deported from airports. Churches occupied by *sans papiers* in protest at their plight have been violently invaded by the police and dozens or even hundreds arrested. Approximately 75,000 of the 150,000 immigrants who have been living in France without any regular papers for decades with their families, and have now applied to legalize their situation, must reckon with deportation.

The second group were teachers from the Paris district of Seine-Saint-Denis. For two weeks they have been engaged in a strike, which is supported by both pupils and parents at 70 schools, because Education Minister Claude Allegre (PS) has refused to negotiate an improvement of the situation in their schools. This mainly working class district is lacking 186 teachers and several hundred support staff. Allegre claimed that by demonstrating the teachers were only playing into the hands of the FN, which ensured that the strike and school occupations only spread further. The teachers answered that cuts in schools, ignorance and social inequality provide fertile ground for the fascists, and put this on their banners.

However, these two protests were the exception. Unemployment, social cuts, poverty, the dreadful state of the schools, lack of job opportunities for young people, racist oppression—there could hardly be a single person among the demonstrators or the numerous onlookers who is not affected in one form or another. And yet the initiators and organizers of the demonstration failed to raise a single one of these social and political injustices. Those responsible in the present government were not named, nor was any program to overcome them presented.

This was certainly partly the reason why virtually no immigrant workers from the former French colonies or the children of immigrant families felt motivated to participate in the demonstration, even though they are the first targets of Le Pen and the FN. Doubts, concerns and the unsettling feeling that the danger from the right wing will grow further could also be found among many of the youth and workers who participated in the demonstration or watched it pass.

Asked if the demonstration showed the way in which the rise of the FN can be effectively opposed, Madamou Dante, who works for a television broadcaster and comes from one of the French overseas colonies, answered: “No, not really. There have always been racists in France. Now they are growing because they can use unemployment to fuel their demagoguery. We came here to demonstrate against them, but what will that do by itself?”

What did he think about pushing the government to the left, forcing them to undertake sharper and quicker measures against the employers—as the LCR proposes: “Oh yes, that’s a good idea. Only the government won’t do it in the slightest. What they have already done about unemployment is very friendly towards the employers.” His companion Catherine Blanchard, a dentist, said, “There should be more demonstrators, that is surely right. That is why we came here

with our child. But the Jospin government has not fundamentally resolved or even dealt with any of the social problems. We look into the future with concern. The same dangers can now be witnessed not only in France but also in Germany, for example. Aren’t foreigners and refugees there just as persecuted; even their houses burned down?”

Omar Bouzinab, from Morocco, was skeptical: “I have lived in France for many years. I work and pay taxes but have neither political rights, like being able to vote, nor am I permitted to express my opinions and organize politically. That’s why I am here as a human being, in order to demonstrate for my rights. We should all stand together as human beings and fight for the same rights. I don’t really expect very much from the present government in this regard.”

Nine months after the socialist-led government came into office, only very few think Jospin is any better than Juppé. For example, a group of young students said that at least Jospin’s jobs program had got things going. The expectations of these students were not all that high: a psychology student said that a one- or two-year job on the government scheme “is not very much, but it’s better than nothing isn’t it?”

School students from the Racine, Edgar Allan Poe and le Rebaud Lycées (high schools) expressed themselves much more critically. “Why did the FN get such a high vote, over 15 percent? So many people abstained because they reject the government parties just as much as those of the right-wing opposition,” said Laure Berteaux. “They think that the policies of the left were the same as the right.” “Yes, that’s right,” her school friend Raphael Kaufmann interrupted. “What difference is there? The Jospin government hasn’t changed anything or solved anything. Their policies are no worse, but are also no better than the right wing. That is why Le Pen and the FN can use the whole situation of social misery.”

Another friend interjected, “If Le Pen wasn’t there, then they would find another racist and fascist demagogue to use the situation for their own ends.” Raphael agreed, “Bruno Mégret, the number two in the FN and possible successor to Le Pen, is much more dangerous. He is much more clever and presents himself as a respectable politician.”

How could Le Pen and Mégret be stopped? Raphael thought about this: “What is simply lacking are people with a really strong program who oppose unemployment and poverty and will carry it out. That’s what is missing. If there were such people then Le Pen and his party would lose ground.”

The conversation clearly revealed the contradictory character of the demonstration. Among the young people on the demonstration one constantly confronted this search for an alternative to the governing “left” parties which was capable of solving the burning problems of society. But as far as the organizers of the demonstration were concerned, their political line and slogans were aimed at preventing broad layers of workers and youth from breaking with the “left parties” and the whole political establishment of the “Republic.”



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