Ten months of the Jospin government in France: Why are the fascists gaining influence?

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Over 50 per cent of voters abstain or spoil their ballots. On the left, a considerable vote for two organisations calling themselves Trotskyist. On the other side, a section of conservative bourgeois politicians decides to collaborate with the neo-fascist National Front (FN). Such is the striking balance sheet of last month's regional elections in France.

At the root of this political polarisation lies a sharpening of social tensions which some 30 months ago erupted in a mass strike movement. For weeks on end during the winter of 1995-96, millions struck, marched and rallied against harsh social cuts bound up with the introduction of the euro currency. Those on strike knew they had the entire working population behind them.

They confronted a government which in parliament had an overwhelming conservative majority supporting the cuts, but which was thoroughly isolated from the majority of society. Who in society should have the say? Which interests should dictate the policies of the government? The working population or the representatives of capital?

These questions were starkly posed, but workers lacked the political means—the leadership, organisation and consciousness—to resolve the issue to their advantage.

Not a single party or trade union was prepared to demand, let alone fight to establish, a government in the interests of the workers. The Socialist (PS) and Communist (PCF) parties platonically declared their solidarity with the strike movement, but took care not to call for the resignation of the government. From the outset the trade unions only consideration was to settle the conflict. And the petty-bourgeois radical organisations such as Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) did everything they could to maintain the influence of the French Communist Party and the trade union bureaucracy, and prevent an independent mobilisation of the working class.

The opponents of the workers profited from the political weakness of the revolt, and ultimately the trade unions were able to end the strikes and rescue the Juppé government.

The question of political power will, however, be posed once again. In France as in Europe as a whole, the bourgeoisie is being propelled by the pressure of global markets to carry through the destruction of the welfare state and impose ever-sharper attacks on wages and jobs. France is heading for new social explosions.

The Socialist Party-Communist Party coalition led by Jospin, which was elected last spring, is merely a transitional government. Its task is to postpone such explosions as long as possible. With a combination of empty reformist gestures and state regimentation—compulsory labour, low-wage jobs programmes, a build-up of the police—it attempts to keep the social tensions under control while it pursues essentially the same policies as Juppé.

One after another, the coalition has broken the election promises that secured its electoral victory 10 months ago. Can such political acrobatics continue for long? The answer, clearly, is "no." In the regional elections in March the governing parties lost a substantial percentage of their vote, as compared to last year's national election. Their losses, combined with the high abstention rate, indicate that the gulf between the majority of the population and the political ruling circles has increased since the days of Juppé.

Jospin's main role is to create for the bourgeoisie the necessary breathing space and the requisite political conditions to prepare a radically different form of government. Important representatives of the industrial and banking world in the right-centre parties, the UDF and the RPR, have decided, following the regional elections, to work towards government that will include the racist National Front. The installation of regional presidents by the grace of FN leader Le Pen, and the election of FN politicians to important regional posts with the votes of the UDF and RPR, mark the first steps in this direction.

Up to now the function of the FN was to channel the protests of dissatisfied voters. Now they are being groomed to join the government. But the responsibility for the rise in influence of Le Pen's neo-fascists rests above all with the PS, the PCF and the trade unions. Since they abandoned a policy of social reforms in favour of social cuts in the 1980s, Le Pen has won an audience in the industrial deserts created by the official left's austerity policies. The neo-fascists have with considerable success used racism and xenophobia to divert the desperation of impoverished layers and sections of the unemployed along reactionary paths.

Meanwhile the second-in-command of the FN, Mégret, recruits among the more respectable layers of the petty-bourgeoisie—the provincial notables and businessmen, the police and the military. The FN have been aided immeasurably by the political disorientation arising from the "France first" chauvinism of the Stalinist PCF.

The task of the FN in government will be to assemble behind it the forces from the lumpen proletariat and petty-bourgeois layers for an offensive against the working class, overcoming the fatal isolation that paralysed and finally brought down Juppé. Its racist demagogy is aimed at splitting the workers.

The working class can oppose this danger only to the extent that it breaks with Jospin, the PS and the PCF, and strives towards political

power with its own socialist programme. Nearly a million votes for LO and the LCR in last month's regional elections make clear that broader layers of youth and workers are turning to the left and moving in the direction of a political struggle against the bourgeoisie. At the same time those votes bring home the political danger facing the workers, because both of these organisations, far from opening the way to such an independent development of the working class, seek to block it.

For decades the perspective of a socialist reorganisation of society was discredited not only by the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, but also by the policies of the PS and PCF, carried out in the name of "socialism." LO and LCR both refer to Leon Trotsky and his struggle against social democracy and Stalinism, but only to more effectively undermine the growing opposition among workers and maintain the subordination of the working class to the PS and PCF and their government.

The LCR reacted to its best election result in some time by immediately accepting an offer from the PCF for closer collaboration. Worried over his own party's loss of votes and its ability to continue subordinating workers to the Jospin government, Robert Hue, the chairman of the PCF, "offered his hand" to the "radical left," i.e., LO and the LCR.

The LCR and its leader Alain Krivine are eager to serve as a left cover for the PCF and spread the illusion that the Stalinists' popular front policies can be effective in forcing the Jospin government to defend the interest of workers. In a commentary on their own results in the regional election, they write, "It is the responsibility of revolutionaries to build the fighting flank of the (social and political) mobilisation—as have the fighters of the LCR over the last months—in order to force the government to take quicker and broader measures against the employers."(*Rouge*, 26 March, p. 4)

Lutte Ouvrière has up to now recoiled from such open collaboration with the government. If they were a genuine revolutionary party, however, they would use their influence to systematically prepare workers and youth to intervene in the situation with their own socialist programme and the perspective of creating their own government. If LO demonstrated the same self-consciousness and determination as Le Pen's FN, the neo-fascists would rapidly lose much of their influence.

"Forty thousand members with a vacillating and indecisive leadership are only capable of splitting the proletariat and thereby opening the way to catastrophe. Ten thousand with a determined and far-sighted leadership can find their way to the masses, free them from the influence of the Stalinist and social democratic swindlers and windbags." So wrote Trotsky concerning the vacillating and cowardly politics of the POUM during the Spanish Civil War.

LO serve up the same arguments as the POUM, opposing a struggle to break workers from the influence of the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies. For decades LO have politically and financially made themselves at home in these apparatuses. Frightened by their own election results, they declared:

"First of all we want to repeat that we are the last to have any illusions about the significance of our result at the recent regional elections or about the weight of the total votes given to the partly reasonable, partly foolish lists of the extreme left. We assess our result with the same shaded caution as in the presidential elections." (*Lutte Ouvrière*, 17 April)

In those 1995 elections, LO leader Arlette Laguiller received over 1.6 million votes (5.3 per cent). A few months later, in October 1995, a party conference of LO declared that the organisation had "not the slightest intention" of founding a political party "which represents the political interests of the working class."

The "aim of building a mass party " was "a purely propagandist aim" for the presidential elections, and was obviously excluded "as a real perspective," because, LO declared, "for some time we have entered into a period of reaction" and "the workers are immersed in the ideas and slogans of Le Pen." Within a few weeks of these words France was shaken by the most massive wave of strikes and protests since May-June 1968.

In her more recent articles, Laguiller continues to insist that only in the distant future of big class struggles will things change: "The rage of the workers' world is broadly justified, but will take a long time before it forges ahead. When it does, the present actions of the Breton peasants will look like an exchange of sweet pleasantries." (*Lutte Ouvrière*, 17 April).

With what program and what political aims this "rage of the workers' world" is to forge ahead, and what political preparations must be undertaken today—of this Laguiller has nothing to say.

"In France," wrote Trotsky in *Whither France* in 1936, "there are quite a few ladies of both sexes, ex-Communists, ex-Socialists, ex-syndicalists, who carry on a group or clique existence, exchanging impressions of events inside four walls and who think that the time is not ripe for their enlightened intervention. 'It is still too soon.' When de la Roque [the Le Pen of the 30s] will have come, they will say, 'Now it is too late.'"

The pseudo-Trotskyists of the LO must be counted among the present-day "ladies of both sexes."

The subordination of Lutte Ouvrière and the LCR to the Jospin government has deep roots in the history of these organisations. Both of them broke with Trotskyism decades ago. Lutte Ouvrière emerged from an organisation that openly opposed the founding of the Fourth International in 1938.

The LCR is part of the political tendency which, at the beginning of the 50s, broke with Trotsky's assessment of Stalinism as the gravedigger of the revolution, imputed to the bureaucracy a progressive role, and, since then, has understood itself to be a "left adviser" to the bureaucratic apparatus.

Since its founding 45 years ago, the International Committee of the Fourth International has fought these enemies of Trotskyism, in political and theoretical struggles which superficial minds sneered at as "sectarian" and "distant from the masses." Today this defence of Trotskyism proves to be the only viable basis for a revolutionary party that can lead the masses out of the present political dead end and effectively fight the danger of fascism.