

French fascists fall out

Le Pen's Front National splits

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After days of virulent infighting, the fascist *Front National* has split in two. One wing is led by the FN's founder leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, the other by his former lieutenant, Bruno Megret. Both tendencies are fighting for control of the party's membership and assets.

Megret had insisted on holding a special congress, hoping to win sections of the membership by giving himself a unifying and 'democratic' coating. Le Pen opposed this, using his powers as the movement's president to wield the administrative axe, and has been expelling and sacking his opponents. Amidst the mutual recriminations in the FN's committees and the media, there has been recourse to the courts regarding party assets. In Marseilles, one of the offices of the Megret tendency was invaded by Le Pen supporters looking for lists of party members.

The crisis has been developing over several months. It intensified when the FN won the leadership of several local councils, mainly in Southern France, and when the party made gains in the March 98 regional elections. Things came to a head after Le Pen verbally abused and assaulted a female Socialist Party (PS) candidate in the regional elections. He was taken to court and found guilty of the unprovoked attack. This had the effect of debarring Le Pen from standing in the 1999 European elections as the party's lead candidate, leaving the field open to Megret. However, Le Pen bureaucratically imposed his own wife to head the party list against Megret, nominally the FN's second in command. This triggered a series of attacks and counterattacks involving all the party's leading layers. The bitter and public infighting has culminated with the present split.

As far as their basic programme is concerned, there are no fundamental differences between Megret and Le Pen. Although Megret often uses democratic phraseology, they both share the same fascist ideology.

Megret had tried to instigate a 'reform' of the FN, in

order to win wider support and make the party more acceptable as a partner to the traditional right-wing parties, the Gaullist RPR and the UDF. In Italy a similar change took place when Gianfranco Fini changed the fascist *MSI* into a more 'respectable' *Alleanza Nazionale*, able to form an alliance with the right-wing populist party of Berlusconi *Forza Italia*. For the first time in post-war Italian history, a party that came directly out of the fascist tradition of Benito Mussolini entered government in the spring of 1994. The regime headed by Berlusconi and Fini then imposed drastic attacks on the living standards of the Italian working class, provoking mass protests and demonstrations.

Megret sought to emulate this in France, but it proved difficult given the FN's reliance on lumpen and semi-lumpen elements. Under his influence, the FN presented itself as 'efficient politicians' in the councils they manage. Although trying to distance himself from the 'bully boy' element in the FN, Megret's policies are no less racist. In Vitrolles, where his wife was elected mayor, they expelled Algerian families from council flats, cut funding to cultural organisations that did not agree with their aims, and banned 'left-wing' books from libraries.

After initially opposing moves to get closer to the Gaullists and Conservatives, Le Pen reluctantly agreed to sanction this in March last year. Megret's policy of making the FN more acceptable as a coalition partner then found some success in the regional elections. For example, in Rh'ne-Alpes, the region around Lyons, the votes of FN members of the regional council were decisive in the appointment of the regional president. The growing support for Megret within the FN provoked Le Pen to mount a counterattack.

French daily *Le Monde* quotes Megret saying, 'Le Pen's position was one of sterile opposition.... He presides over the demonisation of the National Front in order to stay in a comfortable bunker ... and becomes the great divider of the ... national right ... after being its creator.' He wants to

'launch the offensive in order to achieve power'.

After the March regional elections, the already weakened traditional right-wing parties literally disintegrated. The process of their restructuring is still going on. In May this year Philippe Seguin, chairman of the *Assemblée Nationale* (parliament) during the Juppé administration, created his own grouping, *L'Alliance*, after the UDF and RPR fell out following the regional elections. Seguin tried to gather in one single political group all the elements in the RPR and UDF that opposed direct collaboration with the FN. *L'Alliance* has never really gained any ground.

The UDF also collapsed over the question of collaboration with the FN. Leading figures such as former president Valerie Giscard d'Estaing and former Prime Minister Edouard Balladur gave credibility to the racist theses of the FN. D'Estaing advocated a reliance on FN votes to support the elections of UDF regional presidents, and Balladur spoke in favour of a debate with the fascists.

Out of the splintering of the traditional right-wing parties, François Millon, a former Minister of Defence, created *La Droite*. This was meant to become a focus to regroup all the elements of the UDF and RPR prepared to collaborate with FN politicians. *La Droite* was joined not just by Megret supporters, but also by leading Le Pen supporters, like FN number three man, Bruno Gollnisch, in the Lyons area.

For some time now, the FN has been able to play the role of arbiter in many elections, because of the weakness of the right-wing parliamentary parties. Although they are not represented in the national parliament, they occupy a central position in today's political set-up in France. The FN won just under 16 percent of the vote in the regional elections, where they do have a number of councillors.

The establishment of European Monetary Union from January 1999 has caused all the bourgeois parties to make certain political adjustments, including the FN. One after the other, all the other parties, from the RPR to the Stalinists of the PCF, have dropped their opposition. One of the reasons why Lionel Jospin and his Socialist Party won the general elections last year was their more pro-European stance compared to other parties.

It is no accident that the conflict exploded inside the FN over the issue of who would head the party's list in next year's European elections. Under conditions where the big bourgeoisie supports the single currency and the 'alliance' with German capitalism, the FN's fierce nationalist opposition to Maastricht creates a problem. Many of those politicians that received support from the FN in the last

regional elections, such as François Millon, are for a federal Europe.

The main responsibility for the FN's ability to increase its influence lies with the Stalinists in the French Communist Party (PCF), for two decades after the war the biggest political party in France. In the 1980s, the PCF abandoned a policy of social reforms in favour of social cuts, and then helped to implement them under the so-called 'government of the left'. In local councils the PCF proved no less racist than the FN, with Communist Party mayors overseeing the forced eviction of immigrant workers. The chauvinism of the PCF is also expressed in their 'France first' policy.

By attacking the working class directly as part of the bourgeois government on behalf of big business in the 1980s and '90s both the PCF and the social democrats drove layers of the lower middle class and even sections of more backward workers into the arms of the fascist demagogues. Under the previous conservative government of Alain Juppé, the unions linked to both the PS and the PCF sought to demobilise the mass opposition which culminated in the strikes of November-December 1995 and channel support behind Jospin's social democrats and the PCF and Greens.

Today these parties are in office, and are doing everything they can to allow the FN to resolve their crisis. Their reaction is to join hands and collaborate even more closely with the so-called 'Republican Right', sections of the RPR and UDF that are opposed to an open alliance with the FN. The Socialist Party is presently engaged in a campaign to 'destabilise the alliances between the right wing and the FN' in the regional councils by supporting the election of UDF and RPR politicians as regional council leaders. In this way they are creating the political conditions where the extreme right wing can resolve their crisis without any independent intervention by the working class and therefore prepare the way for future disasters.

See Also:

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