Neo-fascist Le Pen to face Gaullist Chirac in runoff for president

Vote for National Front leader heightens political crisis in France

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The result of the first round of the presidential elections in France amounts to a political earthquake. Against all prognoses, in the second round on May 5 the incumbent, Jacques Chirac (Gaullist), will be challenged not by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (Socialist Party), but rather by Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the extreme right-wing National Front. Le Pen received 17.2 percent of all votes cast, which gave him a clear lead over Jospin (15.9 percent). Chirac received 19.4 percent.

For the first time in the 44-year history of the Fifth Republic, a candidate of the extreme right will stand in the run-off for the highest state office. This will mark only the first time since 1969—when two right-wing candidates, George Pompidou and Alain Poher, made it to the second round—that no Socialist Party candidate has stood in the final ballot.

Several representatives of Jospin's governing coalition commented on Le Pen's success with horror and dismay. François Hollande, the secretary of the Socialist Party, spoke of a "shock for the country" and a "cruel and undeserved defeat." Robert Hue, the leader of the Communist Party, expressed "grief" and "anger." The candidate of the Greens, Noel Mamère, spoke of the "worst political crisis in post-war France."

Jospin took personal responsibility for the defeat and announced that he will resign from political life after the second round of voting. While the election result was "disappointing," he said he was still proud of his efforts while in office. He blamed his defeat on the disunity of the left and the demagogy of the right.

In fact, Le Pen owes his surprising success above all to the ruling left coalition, which is made up of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens, the Civil Block of Jean-Pierre Chevènement and the small party of the Left Radicals. The election result is a devastating indictment of the policies of Jospin and all those who praised him as a supposedly left alternative to Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair and Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

Jospin took office in 1997, after his Gaullist predecessor Alain Juppé failed in his attempt to dismantle social benefits and provoked a massive strike wave. Jospin managed to gain a certain popularity by fostering the illusion that a policy of gradual reforms would improve the social situation of broad layers of the population, under conditions of globalization and European integration. His actual practice as head of government was quite different. It was largely tailored to the needs of the business and financial community.

The Jospin government privatized more state enterprises than his two conservative predecessors taken together. The reforms he had promised either never materialized, or turned into their opposite. Jospin's prestige project, a law introducing a 35-hour workweek, did not improve the situation of workers, but instead served as a lever to break down on-the-job protections and introduce flexible working conditions. Wages were lowered while the workload increased. While the unemployment figures improved for a short time, economic security did not, as the number of workers compelled to work on a short-term or temporary basis rose.

Jospin's left image served to promote, in the interest of the ruling elite, illusions about a gradual improvement of the social situation, while the conditions of broad sections of the working population continued to deteriorate. His debacle at the polls shows that these illusions have largely been shattered.

Sunday's vote was the worst Socialist Party showing since 1969, when the Communist Party was the major party of the left. Nor did Jospin have to confront powerful opponents. His main rival, incumbent President Chirac, is deeply implicated in corruption scandals, and the 73-year-old Le Pen had been written off as a political relic after his National Front underwent a split and lost a considerable part of its membership in 1999.

Robert Hue, the candidate of the once-powerful Communist Party, which has been loyally working with the Socialists since the 1970s, suffered even more dramatic losses than Jospin. The party was virtually wiped out, with 3.4 percent of the vote. (In 1995 it received 8.7 percent). Among the 16 presidential candidates, Hue ended up in eleventh place.

The issue of law and order and domestic security, which was the central theme of Chirac's campaign, played a decisive role in the elections. Jospin tried to outdo Chirac in his turn to right. They vied with one another, each demanding harsher sentences for petty criminals and youth and proposing a "super ministry" for domestic security. This provided grist for the mill of Le Pen, who has long specialized in manipulating the anxieties of social layers that feel insecure—a fact that has been widely noted.

However, it would be wrong to ascribe Jospin's defeat merely to tactical mistakes in the election campaign. He jumped on the bandwagon of Chirac's law-and-order campaign because he himself has no progressive answer to the social problems that lie at the root of the fears and anxieties of broad sections of the population. The desperate situation in the working class suburbs, where masses of unemployed youth see no prospect for a decent future, and impoverished families are crammed into small apartments, has not changed in the least during Jospin's term in office.

If one takes the election result as a whole, the objective reasons for the collapse of the left-wing alliance become clear. Society has become polarised, the political centre is breaking up, and masses of people are looking for more radical solutions.

If one combines the votes for Le Pen with those for Bruno Mégret, who heads a split-off from the National Front, it is evident that a fifth of all those who went to the polls cast votes in favour of the extreme right. On the left, three candidates calling themselves Trotskyist took part in the election—Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière (LO), Olivier Besancenot of Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), and Daniel Gluckstein of the Parti des Travailleurs . Together they won a total of 10.6 percent.

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In addition, some 30 percent of those eligible to vote abstained or cast invalid votes—a record figure in France. Seven years ago electoral participation stood at 78 percent—at that time a low figure.

These results reflect a process of social polarisation that makes it increasingly difficult to maintain the status quo by suppressing class contradictions. The political foundation for social democracy, which took the containment of class contradictions to be its basic task, has been undermined.

This development is not restricted to France. While in the second half of the 1990s social democratic governments ruled in the majority of European Union countries, in recent years they have been forced to yield to centre-right governments in Austria, Italy, Denmark and Portugal. In German elections taking place at the same time as those in France, the governing Social Democratic Party suffered the biggest loss in its history in a state election.

To this point, the right wing has benefited from this development. It has sought to divert the anxieties of dissatisfied layers of the population into chauvinist and reactionary channels. In this respect France is typical, and Le Pen is well aware of how to proceed along such lines. On the evening of the vote he repeatedly declared: “I am left on social issues, right-wing economically, and, above all, a French patriot.”

His speech thanking those who voted for him, which was transmitted on French national television, was a demagogic appeal to oppressed social layers. He declared: “Do not be afraid to dream, you who are small, without social status, socially excluded. Do not allow yourself to be divided along the lines of right or left.” He went on to make a direct appeal to sections of the working class: “You miners, steel workers, workers of all industries who are being destroyed by the Euro-globalisation of Maastricht. You peasants, living in miserable conditions of retirement, driven into ruin and desperation. You who are the first victims of insecurity in the suburbs, cities and villages...”

Le Pen’s chances of winning the second round of the presidential election are considered slim. He is well down in the opinion polls. However, the results of the first round exposed the political blindness that characterises the entire political and media establishment of France, including its social democratic and Stalinist flank. The enormous anger and frustration within large sections of the population and the degree to which the entire conservative political apparatus has been discredited could produce a much closer race than is presently anticipated.

Even with a victory for Chirac, there can be no doubt that the entire political establishment will move further to the right. Already the parties of the left alliance have called for a vote for Chirac—in order, as they say, to stop Le Pen. Chirac, who faces the prospect of criminal indictment if voted out of office, will, if re-elected, be hailed by the political establishment as the bulwark of French democracy.

The election result is an expression of the growing crisis of the Fifth Republic. The political institutions established in 1958 on the initiative of General De Gaulle to rescue France from a civil war, after the end of the Algerian war, have been showing increasing strain. Several times in the past decade and a half, the strong presidency, established under the constitution, has been unable to dictate policy because parliament was controlled by opposition parties.

This *cohabitation,* first of Socialist Party leader Mitterrand as president and Chirac as right-wing prime minister, then of Chirac as president and the Socialist Jospin as prime minister, came to be regarded as a formula for political deadlock. The 2002 presidential election is the first to be held under a modified constitution in which the president’s term is cut from seven years to five, with parliamentary elections held a month later, in an effort to ensure control of both the presidency and parliament by the same party.

But Chirac’s aides are now expressing fears that the upsurge in the National Front vote, together with an anti-fascist reaction from left-wing voters in the upcoming June parliamentary vote, will deny the Gaullists a majority and recreate the stalemate of *cohabitation* in a new form.

There are already clear signs that political tensions will transfer to the streets. Le Pen’s electoral success shocked large sections of the population. Already on Sunday evening thousands took to the streets in several cities to demonstrate against Le Pen. The first of May holiday, which takes place shortly before the second round of voting, promises to take the form of a mass demonstration against the National Front. For his part, Le Pen has called on his supporters to demonstrate, as they do every year on May 1, to honour Jeanne d’Arc, France’s national heroine.

The fact that two right-wing parties will compete in the presidential runoff election is not an accurate reflection of the political views and social aspirations of the population at large. The role of the Socialist Party and its Stalinist ally, the French Communist Party, has been to stifle and diffuse any organized expression of anti-capitalist and socialist sentiment among workers and youth, thereby enabling the right to register electoral gains out of proportion to its real base of popular support.

Even taking into account that many votes for Le Pen represented more an expression of protest against the political elite than support for his fascist views, the vote for the National Front leader was by no means overwhelming. Just 4.8 million of the 40 million eligible voters actually voted for Le Pen. When one takes into account electoral abstentions, the two remaining candidates in the second round of voting, Chirac and Le Pen, together obtained the votes of only a quarter of the electorate.

Nevertheless, it would be a potentially fatal mistake to underestimate the dangers to the working class represented by the vote for Le Pen. His electoral success is a malignant expression of the profound crisis of leadership and political perspective within the working class, not only in France, but throughout Europe and, indeed, internationally.

Decades in which the workers movement has been dominated by Stalinist and social democratic labour bureaucracies have dealt enormous blows to the political consciousness of the working class. The very conception of an independent policy of the working class has been undermined.

The sharp turn to the right of the Stalinists and social democrats over the past two decades, during which these parties have adapted themselves to the free-market nostrums of the bourgeoisie and abandoned any semblance of socialist politics, has created an enormous political vacuum, while engendering mounting frustration and political confusion within the working population.

To the extent that these politically diseased organizations continue to exert a stifling influence—in the absence of a new leadership that offers a genuinely socialist and revolutionary alternative to decaying capitalism—the path is open for right-wing movements to demagogically exploit social grievances for extremely reactionary ends.

The political disorientation within the working class was reflected in Sunday’s election in a significant vote for Le Pen from working people and the unemployed, as well as a high rate of abstention among these sections of the population. Overall, Le Pen’s vote increased over the last election from 15 percent to 17 percent, despite the split in his organization.

Le Pen had his highest percentage of the vote among young people and in working class areas impoverished by the closures of factories and mines. These included districts in the north, such as the Lille area, and Alsace-Lorraine in the northeast, all former strongholds of the Stalinists. He also ran well in the southeast, home to many North African immigrants, whom the National Front has made the target of its xenophobic campaigns.

The abstention rate was also higher in working class areas, especially in the outer suburbs of Paris—another area once dominated by the Stalinists—with 32 percent of those registered not voting in Ile de France and 36 percent not voting in Seine-St. Denis.

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While no candidate or party in the elections advanced a political perspective capable of successfully taking on the right wing, the nearly three million votes for the three left-wing candidates provided a clear signal that such a perspective is being sought for. It should be noted that for the first time in French history two candidates declaring themselves to be Trotskyists, Laguiller (6 percent) and Besancenot (4.3 percent), won bigger votes than the candidate of the Communist Party (Robert Hue, 3.4 percent), which has a long Stalinist tradition in France.

The campaign of propaganda carried out following the fall of the Soviet Union against Lenin and Trotsky, the most prominent leaders of the October Revolution—a campaign that took extreme forms in France—appears to have had limited effect. Trotsky is still, correctly, identified with the socialist political alternative to social democracy and Stalinism.

There are, however, only vague notions of the political aims defended by the founder of the Fourth International. Laguiller, Besancenot and Gluckstein do not represent the traditions and political program for which Trotsky fought.

Laguiller's *Lutte Ouvriére* has always rejected membership in the Fourth International, from the nationalist and opportunist standpoint that this would conflict with the organisation's standing amongst workers in France. The organisation's conceptions are characterised by a pronounced syndicalist orientation. Laguiller spoke at length in her electoral speeches without mentioning the war in Afghanistan, the situation in the Middle East or any other international development—as if France were an island on another planet.

Besancenot belongs to the so-called United Secretariat, which already in the 1950s abandoned the struggle to build independent parties of the Fourth International in favour of collaboration with various Stalinist, nationalist and petty bourgeois formations. At present, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionaire works closely with the Attac movement, which has very close links to the Jospin government and regards defence of the nation state as the answer to globalisation.

Gluckstein is a member of an organisation that has close links with the bureaucracy of the right-wing trade union *Force Ouvrière*, as well as with sections of the social democratic apparatus. For nearly two decades Lionel Jospin was himself a member of this organisation, at a time when he was carrying out leading functions inside the French Socialist Party.

A genuine answer to the right-wing threat can be based only on an international perspective aimed at uniting workers in France and world-wide on the basis of a socialist programme.

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