

Mass demonstrations against Le Pen throughout France

Social democrats channel anti-fascist sentiment behind Chirac

Peter Schwarz in Paris
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France has been in a state of turmoil ever since it became clear that Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the neo-fascist Front National, had finished second in the first round of the presidential election and would face the current president Jacques Chirac in the second round May 5. There have been mass demonstrations every day expressing popular opposition to Le Pen's racist, ultra-right politics.

Tens of thousands took to the streets on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of last week. On Thursday the total protesting exceeded 300,000 in 70 different cities and on Saturday hundreds of thousands demonstrated across the country. In Paris alone, 100,000 took to the streets in the single biggest demonstration so far.

Initially the street demonstrations were dominated by young people and students, who gathered to protest as soon as the result of the election was known. Joining the schoolchildren and students were thousands of residents of France's working class suburbs, along with Arab and North African immigrants, unemployed workers, teachers, pensioners and housewives, and then later, after working hours, blue collar and white collar workers from the factories.

The protests were directed against Le Pen and the xenophobic, racist policies of the Front National, although protesters evidently had no clear idea of how to counter the threat. In the course of demonstrations participants shouted: "F for Fascism, N for Nazi" (FN are the initials of the Front National); "First—second—third generation, we are all the children of immigrants!" Widespread unease with the political system as a whole, expressed in the election, took new forms following the shock result on April 21.

At first the main parties took their distance from this movement. The former Gaullist prime minister Edouard Balladur went so far as to call for the banning of all demonstrations, including those on May Day, until the second round of voting May 5, in order, he said, "to avoid any risk of disturbance and violence." According to a report in *Le Figaro* (April 25), Lionel Jospin told his ministers and those in attendance at a dinner following the last meeting of his ministerial council "not to take part on the anti-Le-Pen demonstrations, and also not those planned for the 1st of May."

Eventually, however, an intensive campaign was launched to transform the wave of spontaneous anger into a campaign of support for the Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac and in support of the Fifth Republic—i.e., precisely those leaders and institutions which were shown to have dismally failed in the first round of voting. Those parties in the forefront of this campaign for Chirac were the same ones who had suffered such a heavy defeat on April 21, the "governmental left" coalition of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens.

Leading members of these parties had already spoken out for a vote for Chirac on the evening of the first presidential ballot. In the course of last

week a veritable chorus of voices emerged with the single message that a high level of voter participation and a massive vote for Chirac were the only means to fight against the danger embodied by Le Pen. This campaign was echoed powerfully in the media.

The leaders of the Socialist Party besieged the party's defeated presidential candidate Lionel Jospin, who had refused to make any public statement for some days, to speak out openly in favour of a vote for Chirac. Jospin eventually did this last Friday in the form of a press statement, although he failed to mention the name of his opponent. At the same time the press ran reports about numerous local SP meetings in which leading party functionaries had great trouble in overcoming scepticism within the membership regarding a vote for Chirac.

The candidate of the Green Party, Noel Mamère, made his web site available for a campaign for the re-election of Chirac. The leader of the Green fraction in the European parliament, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, together with his brother Gabriel, published a full-page commentary in *Libération*, in which, in a thoroughly cynical manner, he presented Chirac as the embodiment of democracy, warning of the danger "should we lose the second round due to an irony of democratic procedure and a grotesque nightmare."

Grovelling before this corrupt big business politician, Cohn-Bendit even made an anagram of Chirac's name: "Saying no to the executioner's Chopper, to Hatred, to Intolerance, to Racism, to Anti-Semitism and the spread of the Cancer means developing a new grammar to spell out the word C-H-I-R-A-C. When we drown the right wing and the vote for a right-wing government in a sea of ballots, then the Front National will drown."

The Communist Party has also called for a vote for Chirac and used its influence in the League for Human Rights (LDH), where the party has traditionally played a leading role. The LDH was one of the main initiators of the mass demonstration in Paris on Saturday.

The newspaper *Libération* has published malicious commentaries against Arlette Laguiller, the candidate of Lutte Ouvrière, for refusing to call for a vote for Chirac. One of the most vicious comments, recalling the slanders issued by the French Stalinist Party in the '30s, was written by the filmmaker Gerard Mordillat. He described Laguiller and Le Pen in near-pornographic terms as "an exemplary married couple."

The consequences of the week-long campaign in favour of Chirac were evident on the demonstration which wound for hours through Paris last Saturday. Around 60 civil and human rights organisations called for the demonstration and were joined by the political parties from the Jospin camp and the socialist left.

Loud and enthusiastic slogans were directed against Le Pen by many participants, including youth, immigrants and members of the *mouvement sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants). But the organisers of the

demonstration directed this sentiment entirely into the channels of the vote next Sunday, with the message: "Whoever fails to vote on the 5th of May supports Le Pen."

The League for Human Rights (LDH) made up one of the biggest contingents, with marchers carrying hundreds of placards with the words, "100% against Le Pen. We are going voting!"

In an appeal which was distributed at the demonstration they argued as follows: "Tomorrow we must take particular care to prevent those striving to obtain power from abusing the situation to limit democracy and intensify injustice and social insecurity, to suppress foreigners and subject the weakest amongst us to blind repression under the deceitful excuse of security. We will continue to fight for the maintenance of freedom and legal equality."

"But today we direct ourselves to the threat of the deadly ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen making their way into people's minds and destroying the foundation of the Republic ... we must do all we can to ensure that Jean-Marie Le Pen is beaten and beaten decisively. Every vote on the 5th of May which contributes to the defeat of his opponent [i.e., Chirac] will be a blow to democracy."

"The League for Human Rights calls upon all citizens to make the second round of the presidential elections into, not a triumph for Jacques Chirac, but a referendum against Jean-Marie Le Pen, for human rights and democratic values."

Similar arguments could be heard all along the demonstration.

Jean-Florent, a member of the Socialist youth movement, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The 5th of May offers the opportunity of making both candidates laughable in the second round. To the extent that one votes massively in favour of Chirac, one makes both Chirac and Le Pen a laughing stock. There will never be such another good opportunity."

The claim that whoever votes for Chirac is defending democracy embodies a clear contradiction. A vote for Chirac remains a vote for Chirac, quite apart from the intentions of the voter. A president confirmed in his office by an overwhelming majority and high levels of voter participation will be strengthened and it will be increasingly difficult to question the legitimacy of his politics.

At the same time it is utterly false to maintain that Chirac, as he is widely described at the moment, represents a genuine democratic political alternative to Le Pen. It is not so long ago that Chirac's own racist diatribes hit the headlines at the beginning of the '90s, when he publicly complained of the "smell and noise" made by African immigrants. And it was Chirac who contributed greatly to Le Pen's victory with his right-wing law-and-order campaign in the latest election.

Chirac is also concerned not to completely burn his own bridges to the National Front because he will be dependent on support from the organisation in forthcoming parliamentary elections in June. In a large election rally in Lyon last Thursday Chirac demonstratively invited three Gaullist regional presidents (the equivalent of a state governor) who owe their positions to parliamentary deals with the Front National. One of them, Charles Millon, defended this state of affairs to the press with the comment that in June "dozens of deputies will only be successful in elections thanks to the votes of the FN."

The campaign for a vote in favour of Chirac is aimed first and foremost at breaking the back of the massive opposition to the established parties expressed in the election result and the subsequent spontaneous protests, and intimidating anyone who dares to challenge the official politics of class collaboration. To this end, Le Pen's real influence has been hugely exaggerated in order to subordinate the independent interests of the working class to the French bourgeoisie and the institutions of the Fifth Republic.

Jospin & Co. fear an independent movement of the working class much more than a return of Chirac to the presidency. In the hope that the mood of the electorate will swing in their favour once again in the June

elections, they are preparing for a further five years of collaboration with the right.

It was notable that many of those who declared to the WSW they would vote for Chirac regarded Jospin's poor result in the polls as pure misunderstanding.

Jean-Florent declared: "The poor result by Jospin is the product of the splitting of the left and above all from the fact that all French people regarded Jean-Marie Le Pen as a troublemaker who would never make it to power. Many people could not imagine that he could ever make it to the second round and said: in the second round I will then vote for Jospin."

Cécile, a student from Paris studying English, who intends to vote for Chirac, said: "Jospin lost because he ran a bad campaign. In reality he has done a great deal for the French. He was not punished for his work in government but rather for his election campaign. He did not know how to address left-wing voters. The left voters were satisfied with him and what he has done over the last five years, but he was not capable of uniting them."

Fabien, a student of economics from Paris, said: "Jospin was taken to be the same as Chirac. Because we were so sure that both would make it to the second round we voted for the candidates of the extreme right and the extreme left. But I do not think this was because of Jospin's record in power. He could demonstrate a good record in government."

These layers close to the Socialist Party are blind to the poverty and social insecurity which has spread amongst broad layers of the population during the last five years of *cohabitation*.

Both Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) called for participation on Saturday's demonstration and marched with their own contingents at the rear. The third left-wing organisation, the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), which also ran a presidential campaign, did not take part in the demonstration and has barely appeared in public since the election.

Lutte Ouvrière took part under the slogan: "Not a single vote for Le Pen, but no to a plebiscite for Chirac." At first glance this appears to be a call for abstention, but when one looks closer it is not so clear. The parties which actively call for a vote for Chirac also say at the same time it should not be seen as a plebiscite in favour of the Gaullist leader. At a press conference last week, Arlette Laguiller expressly made the point that LO was *not* calling for abstention in the vote.

As a whole this group has failed to propose an active policy for the working class. In a statement following the first round election result—with 1.6 million votes, Laguiller received nearly the same total as 1995, although her share of the vote rose slightly because of the high level of abstention this time around—the Lutte Ouvrière candidate noted that the electorate for LO remained a "stable potential electorate" without, however, drawing any political conclusions.

The LCR, whose candidate Olivier Besancenot was able to secure 1.2 million votes in a first-time showing, took part in the demonstrations against Le Pen even before the first round vote. A leaflet distributed at the demonstration by the organisation's youth movement stated: "The solution is not to be found in the ballot boxes, as we are told, because one cannot answer the growth of the extreme right with ... Jacques Chirac. The only alternative to the Front National consists of a massive mobilisation of the youth, the historic driving force for the struggle against fascism. We must strike among our faculties and schools, organise general assemblies and take to the streets in dozens, hundreds and thousands to repulse fascism and the entire asocial policies which give rise to it."

This call to action, however, is not accompanied by any political perspective which could give the youth a lead and unite them with the working class in an independent orientation. While the LCR continuously emphasises the importance of the struggle "on the streets," it adapts to the election charade which subordinates the working class to the alliance for Chirac. Besancenot and the LCR as a whole have repeatedly declared that

the struggle must take place both on the streets and *at the ballot box*. As a result the militant protests evoked by the LCR threaten to become the cover for a shabby political manoeuvre.



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