

May Day in France: 1.5 million march against neo-fascist Le Pen

Socialist Party, unions campaign for Chirac

David Walsh in Paris
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In one of the largest demonstrations seen in Paris in decades, hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, students, immigrants and professional workers marched on May 1 to oppose the extreme right in France, represented by Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front. Across France an estimated 1.5 million took part in anti-Le Pen protests.

In addition to the Paris demonstrations, some 400 regional protests were staged, the largest in Lyon (50,000), Bordeaux, Toulouse and Grenoble (40,000), Marseille, Lille and Nantes (30,000) and Strasbourg (15,000). Even smaller communities, such as Saint-Nazaire (14,000) and Rouen (13,000), had sizable marches.

Le Pen received 17.2 percent of the popular vote in the first round of the presidential election held April 21, finishing ahead of Socialist Party prime minister and presidential candidate Lionel Jospin. Le Pen's second-place finish put him in the runoff election against the incumbent president, Jacques Chirac of the Gaullist party. That second round takes place Sunday, May 5.

Jospin's collapse and Le Pen's success in the first round sent political shockwaves throughout France. The response of the governmental left parties, the unions and the media has been to channel anti-fascist sentiment behind the reelection campaign of Chirac, who ran a right-wing law-and-order campaign and supports an intensification of the attacks on the conditions of the French working class.

The leadership of the massive May Day protest made every effort to turn it into an election rally for Chirac.

There were actually four anti-Le Pen marches in Paris. The main one, organized by the trade unions and supported by dozens of left-wing and protest organizations, took hours to proceed from the Place de la République to the Place de la Nation. The crowd was so large that police were obliged to create new routes for the marchers, many of whom waited for hours before setting off.

The crowd was representative of the French working population, as well as its younger generation: trade unionists, undocumented workers, Arab and African immigrants, as well as Vietnamese, Chinese and Turkish immigrants, technical and professional workers, students from high schools, colleges and universities, and the unemployed.

Union leaders Bernard Thibault of the CGT, politically allied with the Stalinist Communist Party, and Nicole Notat of the CFDT, linked to the Socialist Party, were at the head of the main march, along with Mouloud Aounit of the Movement Against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (MRAP), José Bové of the Peasants Confederation

(famous for his attack on a McDonald's restaurant in 1999) and Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Noël Mamère of the Greens.

Supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in the Paris march, distributing thousands of copies of an open letter to the three left-wing parties that received a combined vote of more than 10 percent on April 21—Lutte Ouvrière (LO), the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT).

The open letter, from the WSWs editorial board, was headlined "No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election." The ICFI supporters were the only participants actively campaigning for a boycott of the May 5 contest between the two right-wing candidates.

The LO and the LCR marched, but made no serious effort to advance an independent policy in opposition to that of the protest organizers. WSWs reporters did not see a single LO member or supporter distributing political literature to the demonstration.

While these parties, which call themselves Trotskyist, have not called for a vote for Chirac, they have in practice adapted themselves to the pro-Chirac campaign of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and the trade unions, refusing to fight for an active, independent policy for the working class to counter the reactionary program of Chirac as well as the danger of fascism. Their submissive posture at the May Day rally in Paris was evidently calculated to avoid a conflict with the SP-CP-trade union campaign for the Gaullist president.

Every effort is being made by the political and media establishment in France to stampede the population into voting for Chirac and providing him with a significant mandate for his right-wing program. They are deliberately creating an atmosphere of panic over the election result for Le Pen. The latter is a thoroughly repugnant and reactionary figure, but in no sense an immediate threat to become a fascist dictator.

The greatest danger, revealed in the election results themselves, comes from the absence of an independent political alternative for the working class, based on a genuinely socialist perspective. This political vacuum, under conditions of growing economic insecurity and crisis, becomes the breeding ground for political confusion, disorientation and demoralization, which fascist forces are able to exploit.

With the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and the unions all complicit in implementing the program of the French-based transnational corporations for European integration on the backs of the

working class, Le Pen is able to make a demagogic appeal to the social concerns of sections of workers, unemployed and middle-class people, portraying himself as an anti-establishment candidate and channeling their anger and frustration in the direction of national chauvinism and anti-immigrant racism.

The demonstration staged by Le Pen earlier in the day, an annual affair of the National Front to honor French national symbol Joan of Arc, underscored the fact that Le Pen does not have a mass base of popular support for his fascist policies. Some twenty or thirty thousand people from all over France assembled to support Le Pen, sporting the French flag and placards reading, "Proud to be French."

Aside from a certain percentage of toughs and neo-Nazi types, more or less reined in for the day in the interests of electoral respectability, the Le Pen forces were primarily small-town petty bourgeois, with a sprinkling of student youth and unstable urban elements. The disparity in size between the pro- and anti-Le Pen demonstrations is indicative of the narrow base of the National Front. This party has come to the fore by default: as a result of the treachery and impotence of the traditional working class organizations.

The essential argument of the Socialist Party reformists and the Stalinists, echoed by countless protest organizations, is that Chirac is the lesser of two evils, and that the French population, no matter how reluctantly, must vote for the Gaullist candidate and hope for a left victory in the legislative election to be held in June. In their May Day editorial, the Stalinists of the French Communist Party declared: "It is necessary not simply to defeat him [Le Pen] severely at the ballot box, but everything must be done to reduce his score by utilizing the only ballot that will permit that, the one bearing the name: Jacques Chirac."

The Gauche Socialiste, a "left" group within the Socialist Party, commented: "The result of the first round in the presidential election entails a major political crisis. No one knows how it will end. We are obliged to vote for Jacques Chirac in the second round of the presidential election. But we do not want that to be repeated in the legislative vote."

The "SOS Racisme" group wrote: "In brief, to break the dynamic of the [National] Front, only one choice is possible: a vote for Chirac."

This is vulgar, pragmatic and reactionary reasoning. According to this logic, one might as well dissolve the socialist movement immediately and throw in one's lot with the least right-wing of the bourgeois parties. None of these organizations can explain how directing the working class and youth to vote for the representative of their class enemy, Chirac, who is the defender of French imperialist interests all over the world, will stop the growth of the extreme right, much less defend the basic rights and living standards of French workers. In fact, the social democrats, Stalinists and middle-class protest movements, which spend a great deal of time declaiming about the "values of the Left," are largely indifferent to the needs of the broad mass of the population.

The elementary demand raised by the statement of the ICFI and *World Socialist Web Site* —for a boycott of the second round of the presidential election, rooted in the need of the working class to adopt its own independent political orientation—provoked the ire of not a few of the left protestors. A member of the above-mentioned Gauche Socialiste denounced the ICFI delegation as "fascists in disguise" for refusing to call for a vote for Chirac.

The irony of this "leftist" zealously campaigning for the corrupt and discredited incumbent president was obviously lost on him and apparently on many others. Indeed, the Socialist Party and its hangers-on are now the most ardent of Chirac's supporters. His election

posters have sprouted stickers all over Paris, reading "May 5—I vote Chirac" and carrying the SP symbol.

The ICFI/ *World Socialist Web Site* statement was read with interest, however, by many workers, native-born and immigrant, and many young people.

The political and social pressure being brought to bear by the French political and media establishment around the campaign for Chirac has had its obvious effects on the left-wing organizations that ran their own candidates in the first round of the presidential election and won considerable support, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Lutte Ouvrière.

The LCR, whose membership is deeply involved in the operations of various left protest movements, has capitulated to the pro-Chirac stampede in its usual evasive manner. As always, this organization is highly conscious of the need to maintain its "far-left" coloring. But what can the phrase "It is necessary to block the route to Le Pen, the worst enemy of the workers, in the street as in the elections" mean, except a back-handed accommodation with the pro-Chirac establishment? In its leaflet for May Day, the LCR was more critical of the campaign for Chirac, but its headlines refer simply to Le Pen and the National Front. Its criticism of the social democrats and union bureaucracy is buried deep in its editorial.

As for Lutte Ouvrière, its attitude was summed up by the editorial of Arlette Laguiller in the April 26 edition of the organization's newspaper: "This is why workers must not vote for Le Pen. On the other hand, the less Chirac will be able to win workers' votes, the better it will be for the labor movement. Of course, everyone must make the choice that seems justified to him, but everyone must consider what this choice might entail in the future."

Thus Laguiller tacitly sanctions a vote for Chirac. This does not even rise to the level of a call for abstention, which itself would be entirely inadequate. The position of Laguiller and LO, which is entirely passive, is calculated to have little practical effect.

What is demanded by the present situation is the organization of a serious political campaign, a mass boycott of the presidential election, demonstrating the opposition of large sections of the working class and the youth to this undemocratic charade and the two right-wing candidates. Such a campaign will create the best conditions for the development of an independent political movement of the working class in the major class battles that lie ahead.



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