Interview with a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire of France, and comment by David Walsh

David Walsh
14 May 2002

We post below an interview conducted May 4 with a member of the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) in Amiens, an industrial city 85 miles north of Paris. Reporters from the WSWS spoke with the LCR’s Francis Dollé as part of an intervention into the political crisis in France produced by the first round of the presidential election. The interview is followed by a brief comment.

The April 21 balloting saw ultra-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front finish second, with nearly 17 percent of the vote, to the Gaullist candidate and incumbent president, Jacques Chirac. Le Pen finished ahead of Socialist Party (SP) Prime Minister and presidential candidate Lionel Jospin, knocking the latter out of the second round of the election and delivering a shock to the French political and media establishment.

After the first round results were announced, tens of thousands of young people, in particular, responded to the presence in the May 5 runoff election of Le Pen, whose party is virulently chauvinist and anti-immigrant, by pouring into the streets. On May Day, 2 million people demonstrated in French cities and towns against the extreme right and its policies.

As soon as the protests erupted, the governmental left parties (the Plural Left)—the SP, the Communist Party (CP) and the Greens—as well as various protest movements and major sections of the media, mounted an intensive campaign to channel the anti-fascist opposition in a pro-Chirac direction, proclaiming that there was no choice but to vote for the reactionary and discredited incumbent.

Elections of deputies to the National Assembly will take place in two rounds June 9 and 16; any candidate who receives 12.5 percent of the vote in the first round may advance to the second. Chirac, the favored candidate of French big business, has appointed a right-of-center interim government, under the new prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and is hoping to translate his victory in the presidential election into a right-wing majority in parliament.

The LCR, headed by Alain Krivine, is one of the organizations on the so-called “far left” of French politics. The LCR, Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), all of which call themselves “Trotskyist,” ran candidates in the first round of the presidential election, winning a combined total of some 3 million votes—nearly 10 percent of the ballots cast. The LCR ran its own candidate for the first time in decades. Oliver Besancenot, the LCR candidate, received 1.2 million votes. The explosive political conjuncture produced by the first round results, both Le Pen’s electoral success and the relatively large size of its own vote, threw the LCR into crisis.

WSWS: What do you think of the LCR line on the presidential runoff May 5 between Chirac and Le Pen?

Dollé: Admittedly, it’s a bit ambiguous. Anyway, we’re not to call for a vote for Chirac. The debate inside the LCR is not decided either way. Some say vote Chirac because he’s the only barrier to Le Pen. As for me, personally, I won’t vote Chirac. The Plural Left called for a vote for Chirac. We didn’t do that, all the same. We didn’t call for a vote for Chirac.

WSWS: The impression people get nevertheless is that the LCR has called for a vote for Chirac. I quote from an LCR leaflet: “We must stop Le Pen in the streets and in the ballot box.” Isn’t that a call to vote Chirac?

Dollé: I find it hard to answer that, because, indeed, that’s the debate that’s going on in the LCR right now. And we can’t agree. My wife is in the LCR. We’re arguing every day, because she says to me: “I’m going to dirty my hands voting, on your behalf, for Chirac.” I don’t accept that argument. My not voting doesn’t mean she’ll be dirtying her hands instead of me and that it will be thanks to her Le Pen won’t get in.

I agree with your document [No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election: An open letter to Lutte Ouvrière, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and Parti des Travailleurs] on this: Le Pen has not such an enormous following as all that. True, it is not nothing, but it’s far from being a majority. I think he won’t get in anyway. Even if he did, I think the French people as they are now would react. True, a section of the working class did vote for Le Pen. As soon as we take a proper look you can see the working class lacks political education, political understanding. The left has neglected training and education for decades.

WSWS: Isn’t the task of a revolutionary party exactly this: to educate the working class? Is the LCR afraid that by calling for a boycott it will create a distance between itself and the population?

Dollé: Unlike LO, the LCR hasn’t run in elections. The LCR has been present in all the struggles at the grassroots level. We’re active at that level, we give out information.

The left always said, “When we get to power, we’ll change the constitution.” Mitterrand came to power and he never touched it. He acted like the monarch of the republic. Now even the CP puts forward arguments which fully accept De Gaulle’s constitution.

WSWS: Three million people voted for the LCR, LO and the PT.

Dollé: We do not call for a vote for Chirac. We are meeting up
The youth want to fight fascism. Straight away the Plural Left
The danger is that the LCR will take part in a new “Popular
Every time I say I’m not going to vote Chirac I get criticised.
In the
I tell my comrades in the LCR that we react in the short term. We
The young people are thirsty to understand the lessons of
have had an enormous impact.
agreed to meet with the SP. If Krivine had called for a boycott it would
This must be used to construct a socialist perspective.
don’t talk about the other countries. There’s no long-term view. The SP
personal courage, but of perspective.
know how to take up positions that are not popular. It’s not a question of
working class, fight confusion. That was Trotsky’s method. We have to
French society.
about the ambiguity of the SP and the CP and the place they still have in
partitioning off, a polemic with the media. It’s not easy. I’m worried
there’s the chance to speak out, but at the same time a very rapid
campaign, we haven’t got the same resources as the others. It’s tricky,
elections are there to get over a message. It’s going to be a very short
The legislative elections being so close bothers us. Our relationship with
Tested by the events of late April and early May, the radical phrase-
mongering of the LCR proved to be entirely hollow. The organization, far
from defending the political independence of the working class, lined up
behind the pro-Chirac camp in the second round of the presidential
election. It revealed itself to be a “left” party of the existing social and
political order. Its battle cry was “May 5, let’s vote against Le Pen,”
which, in the context of an election with only two candidates, amounted
to an endorsement of Chirac. Indeed, Besançon, the party’s presidential
candidate, announced that he was voting for the incumbent president.
The LCR has long occupied a place on the left wing of official political
life in France. It is tied to the governmental left by a thousand threads,
although it criticizes the social democrats and Stalinists to maintain its
credibility with more radicalized layers. LCR leader Alain Krivine told Le
Figaro April 30 in an interview that the CP and Greens had invited his
party to a meeting, an invitation “which it naturally accepted,” to discuss
the possibility of political collaboration at some level.
The LCR is active in a variety of protest and radical organizations,
which receive the official or unofficial support of the SP and CP.
Christophe Aguiton, for example, a member of the LCR’s political
bureau, was a founding member of Attac, the anti-globalization
movement, which received the endorsement of Jospin. The LCR has also
been active in organizations like SOS Racisme, Ras l’front, the “Sans
papiers” movement and others. Virtually all of these movements and their
largely middle-class supporters supported Chirac in the May 5 vote.
The left establishment that sought to defend itself and the French status
quo by rallying behind Chirac in the second round of the presidential
election includes the LCR, as its “far left” flank. The Krivine group felt
this pressure very strongly, and was organically incapable of breaking its
ties with this thoroughly corrupt and anti-revolutionary milieu.
The LCR is being groomed and it is grooming itself to take part in a new
political alignment to the left of the discredited SP and CP, which is to
serve as another trap for the working class and the youth. Krivine has
described this proposed regroupment as “a new feminist, ecological, anti-
capitalistic party, which is not limited to the present extreme left.”
The discussion with Francis Dollé provides some insight into the means
by which left groups like the LCR arrive at and carry out centrist and
opportunistic policies. He describes a party internally divided, in
considerable disarray and, above all, unprepared for the political
responsibilities confronting it in the wake of the April 21 vote. Whether
Dollé is fully aware of it or not, his comment, “The leadership of the LCR
has not been able to get a grip on the situation,” is an indictment of the
organization.
While acknowledging the LCR’s lack of a serious political analysis and
clear, principled political line, Dollé points to the party’s militant
participation in various demonstrations and its calls for mass protest, as
though these were positive features that somehow offset the organization’s political failings. This sort of protest politics is typical of the organization’s particular brand of opportunism. For decades the LCR has masked its adaptation to the labor bureaucracies and leftist bourgeois currents behind a smokescreen of “mass action.”

The intra-party situation Dollé describes is a textbook example of the fate of a centrist movement caught up in big events. Such a party does not orient itself in a politically coherent and principled fashion, basing itself on the interests of the working class and the history of the international Marxist movement. On the contrary, it is operated upon, steered in an opportunist direction by powerful class forces. Confusion and unpreparedness become the subjective manifestations of an objective political trajectory. In and through the internal disarray and evasion of principled political issues, the organization is conditioned to capitulate to the dominant current of official public opinion, in this case—the pro-Chirac camp.

Without intending to, Dollé confirms from the inside, so to speak, the fact that the LCR does not take itself seriously as a revolutionary organization. When confronted with the task of providing political leadership to the working class, under conditions where the party has received more than one million votes, the LCR ducks and dodges, and, in the end, capitulates. This capitulation, however, has been prepared by the entire history of the organization. The LCR has always rejected the historical responsibility of the Fourth International to provide revolutionary leadership to the working class, instead assigning that role to other, anti-Marxist forces.