

Opportunism in practice: the response of French left groups to the presidential election

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The results of the first round of the French presidential election posed an enormous responsibility to the parties of the socialist left. The three million, or more than ten percent, who voted for Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière (LO), Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), and Daniel Gluckstein of the Parti des Travailleurs (PT) reflected the search for a progressive, socialist alternative to the policies of the Jospin (Socialist Party) government, which suffered an electoral rout.

The significance of these events cannot be overestimated. Election results always provide only a distorted reflection of real social forces. They are a static snapshot of a dynamic process. For the purposes of the election itself, each vote has the same significance, but in terms of future social development, it is not at all the case that every vote is the same.

The vote in France must be understood as the expression of a society increasingly polarized between a wealthy elite and the vast majority whose living standards have stagnated or fallen. The masses have no clear perspective and see no way out of the crisis, except that they increasingly reject the official governing parties, the Gaullists and the Socialist Party-led coalition, with some voting for the three candidates of the socialist left, and others, deceived by his right-wing populist demagoguery, for Le Pen and the National Front. Even among the voters for the extreme right, fascist sympathisers constitute a distinct minority.

The biggest immediate danger facing French working people is not a fascist takeover, but rather the continued subordination of the working class, in the name of the “defence of the Republic,” to Chirac and the bourgeois political establishment, which, as the second round of the election has demonstrated, includes the official left parties—Socialist, Communist and the Greens.

All social progress, including the fight against the danger embodied by Le Pen, depends, in the end, on whether it is possible to develop and build an independent movement of the working class. But so far, not one of the three non-governmental parties that claims to be Trotskyist has shown the slightest indication that it will meet up to this responsibility. All three reacted to the defeat of Jospin and the electoral surge for Le Pen with evasions and excuses, exhibiting the most glaring forms of opportunism.

In the most naked manner, the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), whose candidate Daniel Gluckstein received 130,000 votes, rejected taking up any political responsibility. Since the polling stations closed, the party has literally disappeared from the scene. It did not take part in the demonstrations against Le Pen and has not engaged in any public action. The party’s web site has not been updated since April 20, and its weekly paper can only be obtained with difficulty.

On the eve of the election, Gluckstein said, “Workers and youth are now entering an incontestably difficult period. But we trust in their ability, on their own part, by means of their own mobilisation, to find all the means which permit them to find solutions.” It is not possible to react to the situation that developed on April 21 in a more cowardly and evasive manner. In response to the question, what should they do, Gluckstein

answers his voters: I trust in the fact that you will find a response.

Otherwise, he refers them to the trade union bureaucracy. “As in many earlier cases,” he continues, “the defence of democracy necessarily depends on the ability of the trade unions to forge the unity of the working class and its organisations in order to defend its rights and guarantees and democracy.”

Gluckstein’s assertion places the existence of the PT itself in question. If the working class on its own can find solutions for the political crisis, why does it need its own party? And how could it have ended up in the present difficult situation?

As far as the trade unions are concerned, they bear a central responsibility for the present crisis. In France, as everywhere, they have moved sharply to the right and stopped defending democratic rights and social gains long ago. In the last five years, they have collaborated closely with the Jospin government. To refer workers who voted against Jospin to the corrupt and discredited trade union bureaucracy is so absurd that any further comment is superfluous.

The cowardly and evasive behaviour of the PT following the election can be attributed, not least, to the fact that Jospin’s defeat is a debacle for the PT’s own politics. A considerable part of the present leadership of the Socialist Party, including Lionel Jospin, was schooled by the PT or its predecessors.

In the 1970s, Jospin was a secret member of the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), and rose in the Socialist Party to become the closest ally of François Mitterrand and even party secretary of the PS. At this time, the OCI, the predecessor of the PT, never tired of declaring that the collaboration of the Socialist Party and Communist Party bureaucracy was the realisation of the working class united front, and supported Mitterrand.

In the 1980s, when Mitterrand, during his first term as president, turned sharply to the right, the OCI went their own way and established the PT. Several prominent members broke with the organisation as a result, and went over to join the Socialist Party, where they took on leading positions. They put into practice what they had learned in the OCI—covering over a policy that was in essence right-wing with left-sounding phrases.

The PT also kept to its old methods: Instead of openly fighting for a socialist perspective, it organised behind the scenes manoeuvres, sought out the ear of influential bureaucrats and positions inside the trade union apparatus. The leadership of the trade union Force Ouvrière (FO) was, largely, under its influence. The chair of the FO met for regular consultations with Pierre Lambert, the leading figure behind the PT.

Jospin’s defeat is a devastating blow against this type of politics. It makes clear that many workers will no longer allow themselves to be deceived and are looking for an alternative. The PT reacts to this with silence.

In this election campaign, the LCR continued the role that it has long played in French politics: it serves to contain those forces among the youth, intellectuals and workers threatening to break from the control of

the political establishment. It always endeavours to put forward rhetoric as radical as possible, while at the same time making certain that its slogans and actions do not stand in the way of its numerous links to the political establishment.

The party's official election recommendation for May 5, confirmed by the central committee, is completely in line with this: "In the elections and on the streets, one must block the path of Le Pen, the worst enemy of the working class."

This formula implies casting a vote for Chirac, and it is so interpreted by prominent representatives of the party. On May 2, LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot called for Chirac's election on *Europe-1* and added: "We suggest all voters wash their hands on Sunday evening [i.e., after casting their votes for Chirac], and organise a third, social, round by going onto the streets in substantial numbers." Daniel Bensaïed, a prominent representative of the party, expressed himself in a similar fashion at a May 1 meeting. "On Sunday, we chase out Le Pen, and starting on Monday, we chase out Chirac," he said.

This formula also leaves room for violent verbal tirades against Chirac, without obligating any particular course of action. Above all, the LCR's youth organization, which expressly holds back from calling for a vote for the hated president, has specialized in such attacks. Casting a vote for Chirac obviously encounters much resistance among young people.

As a whole, the intervention of the LCR is marked by its endeavours to mask the dangers that would result from a landslide for Chirac due to the votes of the working class. Under the present conditions, the only possibility of uniting the working class against Chirac and Le Pen would be an organized boycott of the election, as the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* advocates. This is rejected by the LCR, which goes head over heels in its demagogic calls to mobilize the youth and the workers to carry the fight onto the street, etc., etc.

But, with what perspective should youth and workers take to the streets, if at the same time the LCR calls on them to vote for Chirac? "For social demands," the LCR answers. In other words, they should first legitimize Chirac by giving him their vote and then put pressure on him to achieve what they could not achieve so far by putting pressure on Jospin. This conception is absurd.

There is an obvious reason why the LCR does not oppose Chirac's election. It would lose too many of its friends. The collapse of the governmental left and the surprisingly high result of its own candidate Besancenot, who received 1.2 million votes, have awoken in the LCR leadership new hopes for constructing a large centrist movement, in which it would play an important role.

Immediately after the first round, the LCR political bureau said, "The question of a new anti-capitalistic force, of a new workers' party, is posed in all sharpness." According to the LCR, such a party should be based in the first instance on the forces who voted for Besancenot and Laguiller, then on the social movements that are fighting against fascism and globalisation, and finally upon members of the Communist, Socialist and Green parties, who are looking for a political perspective.

On April 30, LCR leader Alain Krivine gave an interview to *Le Figaro*, in which he was even clearer: "The leadership of the Greens and the PCF had invited the LCR to a meeting, which it naturally accepted. The Communist Party has experienced an electoral implosion, and many members would have voted for Besancenot. In the long run, the implosion of the Communist Party could lead to the emergence of a new feminist, ecological, anti-capitalistic party, which is not limited to the present extreme left. Also, thousands of the politically homeless, members of the trade unions and other action groups could find a place in it."

The candidates for the type of party Krivine has in mind are almost without exception calling for Chirac's election—the trade unions, the parties of the "plural left" and organizations like the defenders of the Sans-Papiers, ATTAC, Ras l'Front! and AC!, in which LCR members play an

active role. By supporting Chirac, they are sending a clear signal to the ruling elite of their reliability. They respect the existing institutional framework and will not permit it to be blown up by a social movement.

The left-wing movement for which Krivine is striving is thus not anti-capitalist. Rather, it should replace the "plural left", which has served the French establishment so well over the last five years, but which failed in the first round of the election.

It took nearly a week before Lutte Ouvrière gave a definitive recommendation for the election on May 5. On Saturday, April 27, Arlette Laguiller issued a short statement which read: "Lutte Ouvrière does not call for abstention but calls on voters to leave their ballot papers blank or invalid." Two days later the party published an editorial with the headline: "Against Le Pen, but not for Chirac: a blank paper in the ballot box." Preceding this statement was a week full of turnabouts and ambiguous declarations.

On the evening of the first round of voting Laguiller stated on television that one could not combat Le Pen by supporting Chirac, a statement which was generally regarded as a call for abstention in the second round. However, on the following day a written statement appeared which began with the words: "I do not call for abstention in the second round of presidential voting." This went on to categorically reject Le Pen and less categorically Chirac. Many workers would try voting for Chirac in order to block the path of Le Pen, but she, Laguiller, did not believe that it was in the interests of workers to turn the vote into a plebiscite for Chirac. She declined to give a concrete recommendation for the vote.

The statement could only be interpreted to mean that personally Laguiller regarded support for Chirac to be wrong, but did not call on others to support her example. She confirmed this on the same day and in an editorial with the words: "Mind you, everyone should do what he regards as right, but he should also consider the future consequences of his vote."

This standpoint exudes passivity. It is the typical stance of centrists who are not prepared to call things by their right name, and when they finally are obliged to do so, feel under no obligation to draw any serious political consequences. Revolutionary Marxists have always seen their task as fighting bourgeois public opinion in order to arm workers against this pressure from the ruling class, by posing their own independent programme. Lutte Ouvrière does nothing of the sort. During the entire period during which the media and the official left sought to draw workers into the Chirac camp, Lutte Ouvrière declined to undertake any sort of counteroffensive. They treated the issue in an utterly complacent manner along the lines of "Thank you, it's not really my business!" Politically, this represents a capitulation to the pro-Chirac campaign. Lutte Ouvrière formally rejects inclusion in the ranks of the pro-Chirac front, but fails to exhibit any sign of revolutionary initiative.

There are a number of indications pointing to sharp conflicts within the organisation over its response to the Le Pen vote. The minority tendency, which regularly publishes a column in the party newspaper, called for abstention as soon as the results of the first round were known. They did not propose an active boycott, but simply that LO supporters ignore the second round of the election. Workers, they wrote, had no alternative in the second round. The LO minority tendency recommended that workers prepare with strikes and action in the streets for the struggles that would inevitably arise in the aftermath of the vote.

Once again, this stance expresses political passivity, this time dressed up in the garb of militant syndicalism. It does not appear to have occurred to the representatives of the minority tendency that an active standpoint opposing the elections in the form of an organised boycott is an essential precondition to prepare workers for future struggles. Instead of conducting a determined struggle against the broad alliance attempting to chain workers to Chirac, the minority tendency merely turned their back on the elections.

From the other side, Laguiller has been placed under pressure from the media and the Communist Party, which reacted angrily to her refusal to openly call for a Chirac vote. The left-liberal newspaper *Libération*, which is run by former Maoists, has played a particularly malignant role in this respect. The paper argued vigorously for the left to take up the leading role in assuring a vote for Chirac. One particularly foul column went so far as to describe Laguiller as the perfect wife for Le Pen. *l'Humanité*, the paper of the Communist Party, has also resorted to the sort of Stalinist slander that characterises the history of the party, accusing Laguiller of following “a suicidal policy of exclusion” and playing “the game of the Front National”.

Lutte Ouvrière reacted to this pressure in typical fashion: withdrawing into itself and falling into political lethargy. The call made by the organisation for either blank or invalid ballot papers was aimed presumably at quelling the heated opposition from some of its members and supporters. It did not represent a break with its hitherto passive position. The party made no attempt to campaign in an active manner for its standpoint or even convince its members.

At the mass demonstration in Paris on May 1, Lutte Ouvrière did not carry out a serious distribution of leaflets or political statements. Neither were LO newspaper sellers to be seen. The party's contingent on the demonstration was strictly cordoned off from the rest of the demonstrators by LO stewards.

The only organisation calling on the demonstration to undertake an active boycott, through the distribution of thousands of leaflets, was the International Committee of the Fourth International and its editorial voice, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Given that the LO claims to be revolutionary and was able to win, for the second time, a total of 1.6 million votes for its presidential candidate, and given conditions of a deep crisis on the part of bourgeois institutions and the official left, one would have expected LO to employ every means at its disposal to exploit the situation. The defeat of the governing left parties and the collapse of the Communist Party offered an outstanding opportunity to clarify fundamental issues of political perspective.

However, such a policy of political initiative is entirely alien to Lutte Ouvrière. The organisation could not even bring itself to print a special edition of its newspaper. The sparse commentaries in its press on the elections are, as usual, no longer than a few lines or paragraphs.

The LO fails to indicate the least interest in illuminating the new political situation from its many different sides, intensively taking up the arguments of its political opponents—the other socialist left parties, the government parties left and right, the fascists—in order to educate and arm workers. Revolutionary organisations are always put to the test in the course of great political events. In this respect Lutte Ouvrière has failed miserably.

Anyone who has followed the fortunes of the organisation for some time would not be surprised by such a development. Although the organisation claims to base itself on Trotskyism, it has always rejected membership in the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky. LO justified its stance by arguing that such membership would interfere with the party's links to the workers' milieu.

In a 1983 review of its own history, LO declared: “Because Lutte Ouvrière was a very small group, it defended the standpoint that it had to invest all of its energy in sinking roots into the working class, and nothing else mattered.” (“Lutte Ouvrière dans le mouvement trotskyste”.) Unable to understand that a proletarian orientation can only develop on the basis of an international orientation, LO counterposed its links to the workers milieu to the construction of an international party.

Since its foundation in 1956 the party has led a tranquil existence inside national trade union circles, profoundly convinced that the working class was no longer revolutionary and that there were no prospects of it becoming a revolutionary force in the foreseeable future.

While the party criticised the trade union leadership from time to time, LO regularly rushed to the latter's side when the bureaucracy sold out a workers struggle. This was the case in 1995, when an enormous strike wave threatened the Juppé government. At that time Lutte Ouvrière rejected any call for the bringing down of the government and operated as a political attorney for the trade union leadership when it finally sold out the strike movement.

In the course of the latest election campaign, the narrow outlook of LO, limited to the most immediate trade union issues, occasionally took bizarre forms. Laguiller managed to speak for an hour to hundreds of supporters without mentioning a single international event—including the war in Afghanistan (in which French troops are playing an active role), the events in the Middle East or in the Balkans. One would think that France was an isolated island on a completely different planet.

At the same time Lutte Ouvrière appeared to be shocked rather than encouraged by its electoral success. It continually goes to lengths to play down the role of its own vote and deny any resulting political responsibility. This was the case in 1995 and remains so today.

A comment on the election result, published in the *Lutte Ouvrière* of April 26, emphasised, with a sense of relief, “the stability of the electorate” and then went on to stress that voters for LO did not necessarily share the party's communist aims: “It is a matter of voters who know that Laguiller bases herself on communism and are not ashamed of the fact, even though they themselves do not support such aims.” It cannot be denied that voters gave their support to Laguiller for a variety of very different reasons, but it is necessary to pose the question in an active rather than a negative manner: how to develop the socialist potential expressed in such a significant vote as 1.6 million?

In its April 26 statement, Lutte Ouvrière went on to welcome the result recorded by the LCR and PT with the words: “The presence of a number of extreme-left candidates, representing different policies, is not a handicap, but rather an enrichment.”

It then proceeded to wish the LCR all the best for that organisation's efforts to assemble a centrist melting pot: “We are pleased that the LCR, thanks to its significant electoral total, which is almost as big as that for Laguiller in 1995, can now take up the initiative which they once recommended to us—the proposal to construct a party ‘of the left of the left’ or the 100 percent left, consisting of the various political forces, groups and anti-globalisation initiatives with which it collaborates.”

This lack of any political initiative in favour of a defensive, contemplative and profoundly pessimistic position constitutes the “culture of opportunism” which has struck deep roots inside the LO organisation. In a pamphlet published in 1996 dealing with the huge strike movement against the Juppé government of that time, David Walsh of the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “A truly remarkable feature of these circles is what might be called the culture of opportunism. One did not meet with a single member of LO, the LCR or their periphery who could imagine raising an issue or standing on a principle that was not already in the air and more or less accepted by most workers. These were people with no political musculature.”

The grotesque forms of opportunism demonstrated by all three “left” movements reveal a problem which confronts workers all over the world: the decline of political consciousness resulting from the decades-long dominance of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies over the working class.

As they have shown in the course of the current election, the PT, LCR and LO have no answer to this problem—indeed they do not even understand that such a problem exists. The *World Socialist Web Site* has set itself the task of resolving this problem through the construction of a genuine international, socialist party and calls upon all those in France who are seeking a political alternative to regularly read and support our web site, the central instrument for the realization of this revolutionary

perspective.



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