

The left and the French presidential election: An exchange of letters on the politics of Lutte Ouvrière

4 May 2002

The following letter criticizing our coverage of the French elections was submitted by a supporter of the French Lutte Ouvrière group. It is published together with a reply on behalf of the editorial board by Patrick Martin.

Hello,

As you have urged your readers, I am responding to your articles about the French presidential elections. I am a sympathizer of Lutte Ouvrière. Nonetheless, my thoughts are mine alone—this is not a discussion between organizations.

Your articles about France are interesting. However, concerning the positions of the Trotskyist organizations, certain of your statements are without foundation. I hope that this is due to lack of information and not bad faith. It would be advantageous, when you give your readers the position of an organization whose politics they do not have the possibility of verifying, to give complete citations, and not only the interpretation you have made of them.

First of all, I completely agree with you in refusing to support Chirac against Le Pen. It is pointless to revisit the reasons why revolutionaries cannot support a representative of the bourgeois order to “defend” the workers.

You write: “The initial response of Laguiller, however, has been entirely passive. In her most recent statement, she said she would ‘not call for abstention in the second round of the presidential election.’ She added she would urge workers not to vote for Le Pen, while refusing to join the coalition backing a vote for Chirac.

“This is an evasion, not a policy to fight the right wing. It leaves workers unclear as to what they should do next. Laguiller’s formula leaves it to the individual voter to decide, and implicitly encourages a vote for Chirac.”

This is an untruth, at least by omission. How can you say that she calls, even implicitly, for support for Chirac? Why did you not give your readers the contents of her statement? In her first TV statement, she said, “It is not by voting for Chirac that we will change such a situation. Because Chirac, once elected, will not even carry out his own policies, he will above all seek to please the 20 percent of voters who have voted for Le Pen. I address again the world of labor to say: the rise of the extreme right in public opinion is disturbing. But, outside the polls, the world of labor is the strongest and no one will be able to impose on it what it rejects. It’s not by supporting Chirac and giving him a certificate of good conduct that we can fight the ideas of Le Pen and his weight in public opinion. Thus, we must reject the politics of big business, whether led by Chirac, by Jospin or by Le Pen.”

Why do you not inform your readers of this? One hour later, she declared: “In any case, we do not call for a vote for Chirac. We want to fight Le Pen, but it is only possible on the social plane, by other means than those proposed by Chirac or Jospin.” Is that supporting Chirac

implicitly?

Trotsky said that only the truth is revolutionary. In holding a position against the truth, do you think you still stand on the ground of Marxism?

The statement of April 27, in which you retain only the phrase “I don’t call for an abstention” reads as follows: “Arlette Laguiller, spokesperson of Lutte Ouvrière, reaffirms that she will not call for abstention and that not one vote from the world of labour should be given to Le Pen. But she refuses to call for a vote for Chirac as does all the left which has chained itself to the chariot of Chirac, which is dangerous to the world of labour, since this gives a free hand to a man who openly represents big business to pretend, in the future, that he has been endorsed by the entire electorate. This rallying to Chirac shows how little the left parties make of the differences between themselves and the parties of the right. This is why Lutte Ouvrière does not call for abstention but calls for casting blank or spoiled ballots at the polls. What will count is that Le Pen obtains the least votes possible, and Lutte Ouvrière will contribute to this with a campaign against Le Pen and his ideas in the street, in the popular quarters and in the workplace.”

You did not even have the decency to finish the sentence of Arlette Laguiller! You employ the same methods as the journalists: phrases chopped off to change the meaning of the statement. Do you think you have correctly informed your readers of the position of the LO?

At the demonstration of Saturday, April 27, the LO marched under the slogan, “Not a vote for Le Pen but not a plebiscite for Chirac.” The delegation of the LO was jeered by the militants of the PS [Socialist Party], PC [Communist Party] and Greens, because we were the only ones who refused to call for a vote for Chirac. Why not give credit to the LO, despite the differences which our organizations might otherwise have?

The LCR [Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire], on the other hand, marched under a banner “Block the path for Le Pen,” which has the advantage of being understood by each person as he wishes. Alain Krivine, in an interview on the radio, declared, “It is necessary to block the path for Le Pen, in the street as in the polls.” How can you put in the same bag the position of these two organizations, LO and LCR?

Elsewhere you declared in your article, “Vote for National Front leader heightens political crisis in France,” that “Laguiller’s Lutte Ouvrière group has always rejected membership in the Fourth International, from the nationalist and opportunist standpoint that this would conflict with the organisation’s standing with the workers in France.” This is false, for the LO has never invoked any reason of that kind. You have no quotation, even of a truncated kind, to support what you say.

The LO has always believed in the necessity of rebuilding an international, and never seeks to hide this from the workers. However, faced with multiple internationals, all claiming to be Trotskyist, the LO holds that none constitutes an international worthy of the name, because their weight is much less than necessary to intervene on the international

scene. LO believes that to pretend that such an international exists is to give lip service and to provide excuses for not building it. You can choose not to be in agreement with this analysis. But why the devil make your readers believe that it is for the reasons that you invoke that the LO has not adhered to your international?

To conclude, the first necessity of debate is to honestly present the positions of your opponents. Your analyses lose all value, due to the light-mindedness with which you inform your readers of the positions of the LO, the chopped-up quotations to be used in your arguments. If on this point, which I can easily check, I find that you have attributed to the LO a position contrary to that which the LO really defends, what credence can your articles have on subjects about which I am uninformed?

Hoping that you learn in the future to develop your analyses without making a travesty of reality.

Fraternally,

A militant communist revolutionary

EB

29 April 2002

Patrick Martin replies:

Dear EB,

While you charge the WSWWS with distorting the politics of Lutte Ouvrière and its presidential candidate Arlette Laguiller, the positions which you advance in your letter are themselves a clear demonstration that our criticism of LO and Laguiller is well-founded. Moreover, since your letter was written, we have also received a letter sent by Lutte Ouvrière to a supporter of the WSWWS providing further confirmation—of which more later.

You begin: “First of all, I completely agree with you in refusing to support Chirac against Le Pen. It is pointless to revisit the arguments which revolutionaries make against supporting the representative of the bourgeois in order to ‘defend’ the workers.”

Your agreement is certainly welcome, but things are not so simple as that. In addition to yourself, Lutte Ouvrière and the WSWWS, there are all the others—millions of French workers and youth who clearly do not yet understand the necessity for political independence from the bourgeoisie.

The April 21 vote demonstrated what an enormous task of revolutionary education is posed in France—as in every country. Millions of French workers, including a staggering 38 percent of those unemployed who voted, cast their ballots for Le Pen, their worst enemy. Many more millions voted for Chirac, Jospin, Robert Hue, and others who defend the capitalist system as much as Le Pen, if with different ideology and methods.

The campaign in the second round threatens to do even greater damage to the political consciousness of the workers, and especially the new generation of youth and students, by indoctrinating them in the belief that it is possible to defend their democratic rights by uniting behind Chirac, the principal representative of big business. The traditional parties of the working class, the PS (Socialist Party) and PCF (Communist Party), are spearheading this campaign, and their efforts have had an impact.

In that context, the WSWWS is necessarily critical of any tendency to adapt to the pro-Chirac campaign, a tendency which is visible, in different ways, in both Lutte Ouvrière and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (as well the Parti des Travailleurs—PT).

Our fundamental point of contention with Lutte Ouvrière is that we give first place to the political education of the workers, the development of their revolutionary consciousness, rather than to any specific form of practical activity, such as the trade union struggle. Far from it being “pointless to revisit the arguments,” as you put it, the development of such a discussion in the working class is the central purpose of political life in a period like ours, of preparation for revolutionary struggles.

This struggle to educate the working class is based on the principles of Marxism, but it is a creative process that has nothing in common with the

doctrinaire preaching of positions handed down, in the form of dogma, from Marx, Lenin or Trotsky. Our opposition to a vote for Chirac is not based merely on a formal restatement of orthodoxy about the impermissibility of supporting the representative of the bourgeoisie, but is the product of a Marxist analysis of the political tasks confronting the French working class in the concrete conditions of May 2002. In our open letter to the LO, LCR and PT [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*] we explain this:

“Some may argue that boycotting the May 5 vote will strengthen Le Pen and his fascist movement. We reject such claims entirely. Politics is not arithmetic, and opposition to Le Pen does not require support for Chirac. On the contrary, it is the official campaign for Chirac, uniting the governmental right and governmental left, which reinforces Le Pen’s entirely false and demagogic claim that he alone gives voice to popular opposition to the political establishment.

“A widespread campaign of boycott and opposition to May 5, spearheaded by the socialist left and mobilizing workers and youth against both Le Pen and Chirac, would puncture Le Pen’s false pretenses and demonstrate to the broad masses that there is a progressive social force which challenges the existing social and political order.”

You say nothing at all about the content of our political analysis or about the connection between the political tasks of the working class and the tactic we propose of boycotting the May 5 vote. Instead, you confine your response to complaints that we have misquoted or distorted Arlette Laguiller, whose statements of April 22 and April 27 you quote in full. It is you, however, who distorts the position of LO, which underwent a distinct political shift between these two dates.

In her initial statement of April 22, Laguiller declared that she would not advocate abstention in the second round, but urged workers not to vote for Le Pen on May 5, without actually spelling out what workers who support Lutte Ouvrière should do. She concluded, as quoted in the newspaper of Lutte Ouvrière: “Of course, each one must make the choice which seems to themselves the most justified, but each must think about what this choice could involve for the future.”

This is the statement that was criticized in several articles on the *World Socialist Web Site*. You object to our charge that this statement is vague and implicitly condones a vote for Chirac. However, Lutte Ouvrière itself recognized the inadequacy of this statement. Beginning April 26, statements by Laguiller and articles in the newspaper of Lutte Ouvrière have called on workers to go to the polls and cast a blank ballot on May 5. The LO itself acknowledges that this represented a political shift, in a letter to a WSWWS supporter who sent the group a copy of our open letter to the LO, LCR and PT and asked for a response. The LO letter, dated May 3, reads in full:

“On the evening of the first round of the presidential elections LO issued a statement (available on our site) in which we warned workers against voting for Chirac (or for Le Pen, of course). Since then, in view of the hysterical campaign for Chirac mounted by the papers and just about every political current, we reformulated our position in an even more precise fashion, by calling for a blank vote, so as to allow workers to make a political gesture against both candidates.

“All this has been available on our web site all along. Before writing your ‘open letter’ and advising us what to do, you could at least have got your facts right!”

Putting aside for the moment the significance of the call for a “blank vote,” this letter certainly demonstrates that LO itself recognized the weakness of Laguiller’s initial statement. The group sought to make a correction—a perfectly reasonable decision, but one which it describes diplomatically as “reformulat[ing] our position in an even more precise fashion.”

Laguiller then issued a second statement on April 27, incorporating the new political line of the LO calling for a blank vote. You claim that we have misquoted that statement, but that statement was not, in fact, available to us at the time the WSWS articles in question were written. It was not referred to in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) statement dated April 26, which called for a boycott of the May 5 vote, or in the open letter posted on the evening of April 28.

You do not address the difference between calling for a boycott and calling for a blank vote, and perhaps it may appear to you to be slight. Certainly, if this were so, we would not publicly attack the LO over mere terminology, simply for the sake of manufacturing differences where none really exist. That would be sectarian in the genuine meaning of the term.

But in politics, what might appear to be fine distinctions may turn out to have profound consequences. That is the case here. The boycott and the blank vote are not merely different proposals for action on May 5, but represent different conceptions of the political tasks both of the working class and of the revolutionary elements within the working class.

Our call for a boycott is not based on the belief that socialists, in general and in all cases, must refuse to participate in bourgeois elections. That would be a sterile and reactionary abstentionism. It would convince the workers only of our unseriousness. So long as the working class is not strong enough to overthrow the ruling class, it has no alternative but to make use of the existing political forms to conduct its struggle.

However, we are dealing not with just any election, but with a runoff May 5 between the principal political representative of the French bourgeoisie and a fascist demagogue. In those concrete conditions, the task of the working class is to repudiate that choice in the most public, organized and demonstrative fashion. The tactic that facilitates such a political mobilization is a boycott. Workers should refuse to give any sanction or legitimacy to this political farce, or to the policies of the government that emerges from it.

Boycotting the polls has a different social and political character than casting a blank vote. It goes beyond rejection of the two men whose names appear on the ballot in the second round, to rejecting the entire political framework that has produced this false and anti-democratic "choice."

The tactic proposed by the WSWS is aimed at mobilizing the working class as an active political force, putting the working class at the head of all those who oppose the entire political establishment, both "left" and right, and the fascist reaction. This is a well-established tactic, not only of the workers movement, but even of bourgeois-democratic parties, as in the recent referendum sponsored by the dictatorship of General Musharraf in Pakistan, which was boycotted very effectively by the bourgeois opposition.

The call for casting a blank ballot, as LO itself admits, is a passive response to the pressure being placed on the workers to vote for Chirac, or, as the LO letter says, "a political gesture." It is neither fish nor fowl, allowing the LO to oppose a vote for Chirac "for the record," while adapting to the pro-Chirac campaign in practice.

Lutte Ouvrière evidently does not take its own policy very seriously, for it has not proposed to the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the Parti des Travailleurs that they adopt the same policy, or that the three parties campaign for it jointly. The WSWS issued its open letter to the LO, LCR and PT, despite well-known political differences, because the second round represented a tremendous political opportunity. If organizations accounting for more than 10 percent of the vote had joined together in a united call for a boycott of the May 5 vote, denouncing the election as a sham, it would have had a major impact on the working class and on French and international public opinion.

Whatever its intentions, Lutte Ouvrière has evaded the sharpest point of the struggle against the "republican front" of the governmental right and governmental left. Supporters of Lutte Ouvrière will join in the great

march to the polls May 5—one slogan of the pro-Chirac campaign has been for a 100 percent turnout to "defend democracy." It is only within the privacy of the voting booth that the LO supporter distinguishes himself or herself from the supporters of Chirac—or Le Pen, for that matter.

Publicly advocating a boycott, on the contrary, would have pitted Lutte Ouvrière against the SP, PCF, Greens, etc., in every workplace and on every street corner. The boycott also draws a sharper line against support in the working class for Le Pen, since those confused workers who voted for the National Front will also go the polls on May 5.

Despite the official posture of supporting a blank vote, there is considerable evidence that the LO's opposition to a vote for either Chirac or Le Pen is not as clear-cut as you claim. LO and Laguiller have repeatedly declared that what matters May 5 is that Le Pen receive the smallest possible vote—a sort of backhanded suggestion that voting for Chirac is the lesser evil. They combine this with the argument that Chirac should be elected only with the votes of the right, not those of the left, so that he will be in a weaker position to carry out his own right-wing policies. There is, in this position, more than a hint of parliamentary cretinism—as though ballot totals, rather than the balance of class forces in conflict, will decide the outcome of the coming struggles.

In the demonstrations of April 27, the LO marched under banners bearing the slogan, "Not a vote for Le Pen but not a plebiscite for Chirac." The language is revealing. The LO did not say, "Not a vote for Le Pen or for Chirac." The LO did not call for its own official position, for a blank vote May 5. Instead, the LO marched under a banner that clearly suggested workers should adopt a different approach to Le Pen than to Chirac.

You criticize the banner of the LCR on these demonstrations, "Block the path for Le Pen," pointing out correctly that it "has the advantage of being understood by each person as he wishes." The same can be said about the banner of the LO. No one should vote for Le Pen, you declare. At the same time, the vote for Chirac should not become a plebiscite, i.e., a mandate for Chirac to portray himself as the authoritative representative of the whole French people. It is clear that this slogan is an adaptation to the pro-Chirac campaign. The banner could just as well have read: "Vote for Chirac but don't give him a blank check." Sections of the Socialist Party left and the Greens have adopted precisely this position.

The language of the banner was endorsed in Laguiller's third statement on the election, issued April 30, which declared, "only a few days before May 5, it is important to declare that not one vote should be given to that sworn enemy of the working class, Le Pen, but also that the second round should not be a plebiscite for this man openly in the service of big business, Chirac." The addition of a few more negative words about Le Pen may be a response to the attacks of the official "left," who branded the LO as pro-fascist, or may reflect concern that some workers under its influence might vote for the fascist candidate as a protest.

Finally, there were the May Day demonstrations in Paris and other cities, in which the LO again marched under the banner of "Not a vote for Le Pen but not a plebiscite for Chirac." The group did not distribute a leaflet or political statement opposing the pro-Chirac campaign of the march organizers, mainly union officials, Stalinists and social democrats. In effect, LO decided to avoid a direct confrontation with the political thrust of the demonstration and with the illusions held by many of those marching, who have been told that a vote for Chirac is a blow against fascism.

This kind of evasion is, unfortunately, characteristic of the politics of Lutte Ouvrière, which shies away from the political struggle required to clarify and educate the working class.

You conclude your letter with a harsh attack on the Fourth International, defending Lutte Ouvrière against the criticism that, for opportunist and nationalist reasons, it has always stood against the building of a world party of socialist revolution.

I cannot, in the space of this letter, review the history of Lutte Ouvrière and its predecessor, Voix Ouvrière, which have existed as a political tendency since World War II. Suffice it to say that the VO/LO were the political heirs of those like Isaac Deutscher who opposed the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, claiming that it was impossible to build a new international until there were new mass revolutionary parties and new revolutionary victories of the working class.

This position put the cart before the horse, rejecting the only means of creating new mass parties and winning new revolutionary victories—the building of an international movement based on the defense of revolutionary socialist principles. This opposition to the building of the Fourth International reflected a pervasive skepticism about the prospects for the struggle for Marxism, and a demoralization produced by the great defeats of the working class in the 1930s and the bestial crimes of Stalinism and Nazism.

You write, referring to the organizations claiming to represent the continuity of Trotskyism: “The LO holds that none constitutes an international worthy of the name, because their weight is much less than necessary to intervene on the international scene.” This is pragmatism of the crudest sort. For you and the LO, it is numbers and not political principles which determine the viability of a political tendency.

You declare that the ICFI is too small to have an effective intervention on the international scene—a proposition we entirely reject. But in that case, let me pose another question. What’s your excuse in France? Lutte Ouvrière has thousands of supporters and received 1.6 million votes—yet the organization effectively abstains from political struggle, not only within France, as we see in relation to the election, but above all, internationally.

It is noteworthy that Laguiller, in her presidential campaign, made almost no reference to the international issues facing French workers. She did not campaign against French intervention in Afghanistan, against French collaboration with US imperialism in the Middle East, against French support for neo-colonial rule in Africa.

The hostility of Lutte Ouvrière to the Fourth International must have the most pernicious consequences, both for the political health of this organization and for the French working class. The building of a revolutionary socialist leadership in France can only go forward as an international task.

Faternally,
Patrick Martin



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact