

French Socialist Party attempts to pick up the pieces

David Walsh in Paris
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The French Socialist Party (SP) convened a public meeting April 30, on the eve of the May Day protests against neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front, in an effort to consolidate its political forces and prepare for the legislative elections to be held in two rounds, June 9 and 16.

From their own point of view, the French Socialists experienced a humiliating defeat in the first round of the presidential election, April 21, when their candidate, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, finished third, with only 15.9 percent of the vote, behind Gaullist President Jacques Chirac and Le Pen.

Since April 21 the Socialists have been engaged in a non-stop effort to drum up support for Chirac in the May 5 presidential runoff, on the grounds that a massive vote for the right-wing incumbent president is the only means of combating Le Pen and the “far right.” The official left parties have been unquestionably the most vocal and active element in campaigning for Chirac.

The social democrats of the Socialist Party, the Stalinists of the French Communist Party (PCF), the Greens and others in the various protest movements assert that their only concern is to “block the path” of the neo-fascists. There are no doubt masses of workers and young people angered and alarmed by the growth of the National Front vote, and rightly so. For many of the latter defending the “Republic” involves a genuine belief in “liberty, equality and fraternity” and a struggle against racism and xenophobia. These sincere concerns, however, are being manipulated by the SP and other forces as part of an effort to prop up the existing political set-up and block the emergence of a genuine socialist alternative to both the Gaullists and the “plural left” (SP, PCF, Greens).

The April 30 meeting organized by the Paris SP federation, which attracted more than 1,000 people, including many former cabinet members, had the character of an election rally for Chirac, albeit a somewhat reluctant one. The banner over the platform read: “All together—let’s mobilize against the extreme right,” i.e., vote for Chirac on May 5.

This insistence on conformist unanimity and the absence

of discussion in a so-called “socialist” party undertaking a campaign for the chosen candidate of the French bourgeoisie is, to put it mildly, not a sign of strength. The social democratic leadership has no interest in sponsoring a debate in which its own record and responsibility for the growth of the Le Pen vote might come under scrutiny. All the more reason to create an atmosphere of panic, so that no uncomfortable questions will be raised.

The meeting was opened by Patrick Bloche, leader of the PS Paris federation, who set the tone by calling on SP members and supporters to “massively put a ballot for Chirac in the box” on May 5, in what he called an “anti-Le Pen referendum.” Referring to the departure of party leader Jospin following his April 21 defeat, Bloche declared, “We are orphans, but we are not animated tonight by gloom or bitterness, because the factious Le Pen is present in the second round of the election and threatens our rights.”

The recently elected mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, who published in April a report exposing the corruption practiced by Chirac and his family while the incumbent president was mayor of Paris, spoke of making a necessary “self-criticism,” but then proceeded to do nothing of the sort. He asserted, without the slightest proof, that “this left remains the only force capable of reknitting a link with those who feel themselves totally outside of society.”

Why should anyone believe this? What is the record after five years of the Jospin government and decades in which the Socialist Party has shared power? Six million people live under the poverty line in France, a figure that has increased over the past decade. More than a million-and-a-half people find themselves in the category of the working poor, unable to sustain themselves despite a full-time job. Part-time, contract labor and other forms of contingent work have proliferated, particularly affecting the youth. Two million are officially unemployed in France, but that fails to take into account those only partially employed, underemployed or forced into early retirement. Social inequality is growing; while the conditions of the working population worsened or stagnated, the revenue of big business increased by 36

percent in 2001.

Jospin and his coalition of Stalinists, Greens, the Civic Block of Jean-Pierre Chevènement and the small party of Left Radicals privatized more state enterprises than his two right-wing predecessors combined. The much vaunted 35-hour workweek has not improved workers' lives, but instead led to a deterioration in conditions. It has fostered greater on-the-job stress and provided employers a means of introducing "flexible" work rules. Jospin and his party played the law-and-order card in the election campaign, assisting Chirac and Le Pen by whipping up the more backward elements of the population against immigrant youth, in particular.

If the official left had been doing such a splendid job, how explain the meager 15.9 percent vote for Jospin, and the 30 percent abstention rate? The implicit conclusion of the complacent gathering on April 30 was that the French people are ungrateful and unworthy.

To call the Socialist Party gathering complacent is, if anything, an understatement. For all the talk about the danger from the far right, there was no air of urgency either in the speeches or in the hall.

The Socialist Party is a bourgeois party, dedicated to the defense of the profit system, and staffed primarily by members of the middle class and upper-middle class. Undoubtedly there are members of the SP who take seriously the threat posed by the neo-fascist Le Pen, but there are considerable sections of the party apparatus who are most disturbed by what the election results mean for their careers and personal ambitions. If the Socialist Party has not pursued the corruption charges against Chirac with much enthusiasm, it is because its own elected officials have been riding the same gravy train.

None of the speakers indicated that casting a vote for their long-time political enemy, Chirac, caused them the slightest internal conflict. Delanoë, to much applause, proclaimed, "[M]y hand will not tremble when I vote for Jacques Chirac next Sunday.... With this ballot we can vote for our republican convictions."

Television and film actor Sophie Duez managed to justify a vote for Chirac as "a left-wing act." Unwittingly admitting more than she intended, she added, "To vote against Le Pen is, in a certain sense, to vote for Lionel Jospin again." This sentiment was echoed by the leader of the Young Socialists Movement, Charlotte Brun.

The final speaker was François Hollande, the chairman of the party and its new leader, who has all the charisma of a successful accountant. Hollande told the crowd, "To choose the right rather than the worst is a moral duty, a civic duty, a citizen's duty.... We vote for Chirac, not for the person whom we know, not for his policies which we combat, but

because we know that Jacques Chirac, overwhelmingly elected May 5, will have no other mandate than to defend the values of the republic."

This is to sow the worst sort of complacency in the French population. Former health minister Bernard Kouchner told a reporter at the meeting: "Jacques Chirac will be elected by the left and it will be necessary to remind him of this as often as possible." Such a comment simply merits derision.

Chirac's camp, for its part, has made clear that the president will proceed to implement his law-and-order, anti-working class program without the slightest hesitation. Far from weakening Chirac, the official left and its hangers-on are guaranteeing him a stronger "moral" position and more room for political manoeuvre than he could ever have imagined possible. The Socialist Party and the rest of those campaigning for Chirac are essentially delivering the masses of the French population to the tender mercies of big business and its political representatives. This will only feed the alienation and disgust that contribute to the growth of Le Pen's support.

The Socialist Party meeting bespoke a privileged, self-satisfied and deeply conservative social layer, far removed from the concerns of the broad masses of working people. The shock of the social democratic political and media establishment over the Le Pen vote in its own way expresses the insularity of this establishment, and the chasm that separates it from the vast majority of the people. This milieu cannot begin to grasp the discontent and anger of the many millions of French people who are barely able to make ends meet. After all, the SP officialdom and media pundits have done quite nicely over the past seven years.

The disruption at the ballot box—not simply the vote for Le Pen, but also the 10 percent vote for the so-called "far left" parties—is incomprehensible to them. The attitudes and actions of this layer in France express a universal tendency: the increasing isolation of all sections of the political establishment, "left" and right, in every country, which ensures that the inevitable eruption of political crisis and class conflict will take an explosive form.



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