

Chirac wins French presidency with 82 percent of the vote

Gaullist president backed by Socialist Party, CP, Greens

David Walsh in Paris
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The incumbent president of France, Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac, has won reelection for a five-year term after defeating the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front in the May 5 runoff election, by a margin of approximately 82 to 18 percent of the vote.

Following the first round of the election April 21, in which Chirac and Le Pen finished first and second ahead of Socialist Party (SP) prime minister and presidential candidate Lionel Jospin, the French political and media establishment, including its official left wing, carried out a concerted campaign to assure a resounding victory for Chirac. This campaign, spearheaded by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and the trade unions, had an obvious impact. The rate of abstention dropped from nearly 30 percent in the first round to approximately 20 percent in the second.

Chirac and his supporters immediately attempted to reap political rewards from their one-sided victory, with an eye to the legislative elections that take place June 9 and 16. They played on the theme, handed to them by the official left, that Chirac was now a figure rising above parties and social classes.

In a statement made only moments after the polls closed and media experts projected a resounding victory, Chirac adopted a quasi-Bonapartist posture, declaring that he would apply the mandate given him “in a spirit of openness and harmony,” and promising to pursue “the unity of the Republic, the cohesion of the Nation, the respect for the authority of the State.” He committed himself to announcing the formation of a “government with a mission” in a few days time, whose “first duty will be to reestablish the authority of the state in order to respond to the needs of security [law and order].”

Chirac’s former prime minister and one of the leading figures in his Rally for the Republic party (RPR), Alain Juppé (chased out of office by a mass strike movement of the working class in the mid-1990s), told the press that the once and future “president of the Republic is the president of all the French people. His historic responsibility is to bring them together, to listen to the message addressed to us and to act.”

The official left chimed in almost universally with congratulations for Chirac. François Hollande, the chairman of the Socialist Party and its interim leader following Jospin’s retirement from politics, hailed the vote of the French people “who had massively rejected extremism and intolerance,” referring to the neo-fascist Le Pen.

He continued: “In the name of the Socialists, I thank the French people and congratulate them for this unequivocal victory.... France has rediscovered its true colors and the world has rediscovered France.” Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former minister of finance in the Jospin government, said that “the left has done its duty” and that “Le Pen has largely been defeated by the left.”

Robert Hue, head of the French Communist Party, who obtained only

3.37 percent of the vote as a candidate in the presidential election, “rejoiced profoundly” at the defeat of the extreme right, which he called the “only issue” in the second round of the election.

Chirac has been painted by the Socialist Party hierarchy as a defender of the “values of the Republic.” In reality, he is a right-wing career politician, who has resolutely defended the interests of the French ruling elite for more than three decades. He is also notoriously corrupt. Only presidential immunity has prevented him from facing charges that he used hundreds of thousands of dollars of public money to pay for personal vacations for himself, his family and his entourage while he was mayor of Paris. Investigators are also looking into accusations that his city administration received millions in kickbacks in the 1980s and 1990s, funneling the cash into his own personal political vehicle, the Rally for the Republic.

The French left has now helped to create a political conjuncture in which this thoroughly corrupt and discredited reactionary, who received the smallest first-round share of the vote of any incumbent president since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958 (19.88 percent), can be presented to masses of people as their savior and shield against right-wing attacks. This is a fraud and a lie. Many of those who voted for Chirac may despise him, but the left has legitimized the reactionary French bourgeois setup, which will quickly pass over to assaults on workers’ jobs, social conditions and democratic rights.

Chirac has considerable powers under the constitution of the Fifth Republic. The French president, elected for five years, appoints the prime minister, the head of government, and can dissolve parliament. He also conducts foreign policy and presides over cabinet meetings.

The Jospin government will officially resign May 6 and be replaced by a right-wing interim administration, probably headed by either Jean-Pierre Raffarin of the Liberal Democratic party or Gaullist Nicolas Sarkozy, which will serve until the legislative elections June 9 and 16. If the Chirac camp, running under the rubric of the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP), wins a majority in the 577-seat National Assembly, the right will continue to form the government. If the Socialist Party or the left parties as a whole obtain a majority, France could once again undergo a period of “cohabitation,” i.e., a president and prime minister representing different parties.

In the first round of the presidential election, Chirac ran a right-wing, law-and-order campaign, to which Jospin attempted to adapt his own campaign. Both largely ignored the enormous social problems affecting broad sections of the working population, including chronically high unemployment, stagnating living standards, deteriorating housing, health care and education, and pervasive economic insecurity. Le Pen attempted, with considerable success, to take advantage of the political vacuum left by the rightward shift of the old workers’ organizations, exploiting the

social grievances, disillusionment and political disorientation of broad social layers by making a demagogic, populist-style appeal. He sought to channel this discontent along nationalist lines, attacking the capitalist integration of Europe from the right-wing standpoint of French chauvinism and anti-immigrant racism.

The only response of the establishment parties to the social crisis was to propose more police and harsher “security” measures. During the election campaign Chirac promised to get “tough on crime” by setting up a special law-and-order council, reorganizing and extensively increasing the size of the police and cracking down on “criminal groups.” He has made youthful offenders a particular target, calling for “zero tolerance” for crime and eliminating what he calls the “impunity” with which offenders supposedly carry out their offences.

In addition to large tax cuts, Chirac is committed to returning to the attack on the country’s pension and social security system—although he has not spelled out any specific proposals—which provoked the mass strikes in 1995.

It is not for nothing that the Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF), the big business lobby, came out strongly for Chirac on April 29, along with some of the biggest capitalists in the country. Maurice Levy, chief executive officer of Publicis Groupe, one of the world’s top five advertising and communications companies, explained that “employers should take a very clear position calling for a vote for Chirac.” Michel Pébereau, chief executive officer of the giant bank, BNP Parisbas, told *Le Monde*, “Jacques Chirac is the only candidate represented in the second round who represents the values of freedom, respect and democracy which are the basis of our society. I will vote for him.” Notwithstanding the democratic phrases, MEDEF made it clear that Le Pen had to be repudiated above all because of his opposition to the euro currency and the further economic integration of Europe under the domination of the transnational banks and corporations.

The official left has boastfully claimed that its assistance in reelecting Chirac will moderate the president’s policies and oblige him to take into consideration wider demands and interests. If they are speaking of their own positions and privileges, and in essence, they are, Chirac represents no danger. As far as the broad masses of the population are concerned, that is another matter.

Nicolas Sarkozy, one of the prime ministerial hopefuls and a former secretary general of the RPR, made quite clear that the Chirac forces intend to go ahead with their reactionary policies without hesitation. He told *Le Figaro* in an interview published April 30: “The result of the first round was not really an appeal to bring back the proposals of Lionel Jospin and Robert Hue ... To reject the ‘Republican front’ [unity of the right and the Socialists] is to reject a fusion of programs. Elected president of the Republic, Jacques Chirac will scrupulously put into place his program outlined in the first round.” There could not be a clearer retort to the charlatans and opportunists of the SP and CP.

Chirac adopted an Olympian attitude toward Le Pen between the two rounds of the presidential election, dismissing him as a political figure unworthy of France. Justifying his refusal to debate Le Pen, he claimed, “Confronted with hatred and intolerance, no deals, no compromises, no debates are possible.”

However, Chirac’s rejection of a debate had different sides to it. On the one hand, the incumbent president had no desire to place himself in a position to come under questioning about his corruption scandals. Le Pen in the last days of the election campaign called Chirac “the godfather of the clans who are bleeding the country dry. He stinks of corruption. He is dripping with dirty money.” The National Front leader was obviously itching to get into a position to have a go at the incumbent.

Chirac had another motive in keeping his distance from Le Pen. He had no desire to alienate either National Front voters or its apparatus, upon whom he may be dependent for a majority in the legislative elections.

Because of the runoff system, parties regularly make deals either not to stand in a particular constituency against one another or to withdraw in the second round. Three regional presidents allied to Chirac won office thanks to National Front votes in 1998, and they were present throughout his campaign. One of them, Jean-Pierre Soisson, president of the Burgundy region, told a reporter that he thought the “president goes a little too far” in his attacks on Le Pen. All sorts of dirty deals and arrangements are no doubt already under negotiation between the Chirac forces and elements on the far right.

As for the socialist left, the three parties which received some three million votes in the first round—Lutte Ouvrière (LO), Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), all of which claim to be Trotskyist while having long ago abandoned the principles and program for which Trotsky fought—utterly failed the political test presented to them. Faced with the responsibility of publicly rejecting the reactionary and undemocratic electoral charade (the 44 percent of the population which voted for left-wing parties had no choice in the second round), each of these three tendencies in its own way adapted to the pro-Chirac campaign.

The PT simply refused to take a position, essentially telling their supporters and the working class to find their own way out of the crisis. The LCR most openly accommodated itself to the pressure of official public opinion, telling their supporters to “vote against Le Pen,” another way of saying, “vote Chirac.” LO evaded its responsibilities by defensively telling workers that it preferred that they cast a blank or spoiled ballot, but refusing to lead a public campaign for a boycott of the election.

The consequences, as reflected in the post-election reports of polling organizations, are an indictment of these organizations. Among LCR voters in the first round, 79 percent voted for Chirac in the second; for LO voters, the rate was 72 percent.

Naturally, neither organization could dictate the voting habits of its first-round voters, but it is inconceivable that had they undertaken an aggressive campaign for a boycott of the election, explaining the political necessity of such an action, so many of their voters would have cast ballots for the chosen representative of the bourgeoisie. They thus contributed to the further political disorientation of the working population.

Despite the politically deplorable role of these parties, the specter of Trotsky and Trotskyism conjured up in the ruling circles by the first-round votes for the LO, LCR and PT has not dissipated. Between the two rounds, bourgeois commentators could not stop discussing or bemoaning a state of affairs in which such tendencies exist and grow in influence.

The spokesman for the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party of Alain Madelin, Claude Goasguen, told a pro-Chirac meeting in Paris April 30, “It is necessary to avoid a situation where the youth have to choose between Le Pen ... and Trotsky, who inspired so many of the candidates.” Writing in *Le Figaro* on May 3, Jean d’Ormesson of the Académie française lamented the existence of “Three Trotskyist parties in France at the beginning of the twenty-first century!” and deplored the growth of a “Bolshevik and Trotskyist far left.”

On the part of the Socialist Party and Stalinists there will now be a concerted effort to marginalize these parties and blame the Jospin defeat on a “divided left.” Having used the services of the “Trotskyist” left (particularly the LCR) between the two rounds to channel popular support behind Chirac and in defense of the existing political setup, the SP and CP are already speaking of a “single left” candidate in every constituency to prevent a victory of the right-wing parties. The three nongovernmental left parties, having already accepted, openly or tacitly, the argument that it was necessary to unite behind the Chirac bandwagon, or having proved incapable of resisting its pressure, will be in a far weaker position to call for votes once again from their supporters.

Scenes of crowds joyously greeting the Chirac victory were transmitted on election night by the television networks. How large and how joyous they were remains a question. In any event, the French working class has nothing to celebrate. A presidential election in which 25 million people voted for the corrupt and discredited representative of the French ruling elite and another 6 million cast ballots for a neo-fascist demagogue is at once an undemocratic charade and a sign of a deep crisis of perspective and leadership in the working class. In the coming struggles, it will be necessary to clarify critical political and historical questions and lay the basis for an internationalist socialist party in France as part of the world revolutionary movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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