

The French elections: Socialist Party meeting highlights political vacuum on the left

David Walsh in Paris
6 June 2002

With only four days to go, polls continue to predict that the right-wing coalition of President Jacques Chirac will gain ground in the first round of the French parliamentary elections and stands a good chance of winning a majority in the National Assembly in the second round on June 16.

The Socialist Party (SP), after the defeat of its presidential candidate, Lionel Jospin, in the first round of the presidential election April 21, remains demoralized, internally divided and virtually leaderless. A recent headline in *Le Monde* read, “The Left Runs a Dispersed and Pessimistic Campaign.” The article went on to suggest that the SP campaign was fragmented into “local micro-campaigns.”

Individual candidates, worried about their careers, are primarily looking out for themselves. The newspaper cites one SP official as explaining, “Many people are saying, ‘I’m worth more than the national score,’ and are tempted to play the personal [card].”

There is an air of unreality to the brief election campaign, which, according to the same pollsters, has left the population largely unmoved. One Socialist Party functionary even accused the government of engaging in “snooze tactics” (purposely putting the campaign to sleep)—ignoring the fact that it takes two sides to evoke general boredom and indifference.

The current leader of the Socialists, François Hollande, has levelled criticisms at the interim government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, appointed by Chirac, of an entirely secondary character. He has suggested that Raffarin “is not the head of a ministerial team, but of an election campaign.”

Hollande called the right-wing regime “a government of the verb, the speech, the announcement.” He complained that Chirac was acting not like the president of the Republic, but rather the “leader of a party.” What a revelation!

Arguing for a new period of “cohabitation”—i.e., a president and prime minister from different parties—Socialist Party leaders are charging that Chirac wants to “seize all the powers” of the state and that the population must be protected from such a power grab.

Such arguments studiously avoid the pressing economic and social questions foremost in people’s minds. They are calculated to avoid galvanizing the population, 44 percent of whom, according to surveys, find the programs of the official right and left “quasi-identical.” The SP’s indifference to critical issues—unemployment, poverty, social inequality—will only confirm the opinion of millions that the official left has no solutions to their problems, and thereby play into the hands of both Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen’s ultra-right National Front.

Whatever brief surge of self-criticism the social democrats indulged in following their defeat in the presidential election has long since subsided. When Hollande referred positively to the “considerable” accomplishments of the Jospin government at a recent rally, the crowd of 1,500—mostly from the SP youth movement—leapt to its feet and applauded for “three minutes,” according to a press account, shouting “Thank you Lionel!” The position of the SP leadership seems to be that the French population was simply ungrateful and perhaps unworthy of St. Lionel.

The crisis of the existing political set-up is reflected in the record

number of candidates—8,456 in 577 constituencies, or an average of almost 15 each (many Paris constituencies have 20 to 25 candidates). Complaints from the Socialist Party about a fractured “left” ignore the reality that it is precisely the record of the Mitterrand-Jospin years that has disgusted and disillusioned so many and opened the door to the parliamentary right and the neo-fascist National Front.

A local meeting of the SP in Paris’s 19th arrondissement on June 4 did little to contradict this general picture of disarray and demoralization in the party’s ranks. The gathering, held in an elementary school, was attended by 100 or so people, most of them middle-aged or older, belonging mainly to the lower middle class: small shopkeepers, teachers, older and more privileged immigrants.

Because the mayor of the arrondissement was one of the speakers, the meeting had something of the character of a local lobbying session. In the question period, speakers registered complaints about problems with schools, lack of facilities for the youth, an apartment overcrowded with impoverished Polish immigrants, etc. This was not a meeting of the well-heeled, but it hardly reflected the urgency of the social crisis as millions in France are experiencing it.

On the speakers’ platform one was confronted with five complacent faces, including those of the local SP candidates for the National Assembly: Daniel Vaillant, the former interior minister under Jospin and candidate for deputy, and Daniel Marcovitch, a doctor and candidate for vice-deputy or *suppléant*, who would take over the seat if Vaillant became a cabinet minister again.

The generally muted and unenthusiastic comportment of the speakers underscored the character of the SP and its election campaign. This is not an organization fighting to fend off attacks on workers’ rights and living standards, but a bourgeois party threatened with falling from power, with the attendant loss of positions and privileges that such a fate implies.

Paris Deputy Mayor Gisèle Stievenard opened the meeting by referring to the “competence and enthusiasm” of the speakers; they were individuals, she explained, who “love the concrete.” She referred to Vaillant as a defender of “justice and of the values of the left and of the Republic.”

These are catch-phrases that have been repeated endlessly and meaninglessly by the social democrats and Stalinists of the Communist Party since April 21. Stievenard did not specify what those values might be. Looking somewhat abashed, she acknowledged that she had “no desire to return to the events of April 21,” when Jospin lost out to Le Pen. Neither did anyone else at the meeting.

Roger Madec, the mayor of the 19th arrondissement, spoke next, in an even more restrained manner. He said that on May 5, the date of the second round of the presidential election in which Chirac was returned to office with 82 percent of the vote, “there was a political choice against Le Pen.”

Responding to what he obviously felt was in the air, this local functionary asked rhetorically whether there was “no difference” between

the left and the right in the legislative elections. Answering his own question, he rattled off a series of minor social reforms introduced by the SP. Madec acknowledged the obvious: “This is not perfect. We are not angelic.” In terms of what a new left government might do, he suggested more police to fight crime and an increase in the minimum wage.

An official from the SP then called on those in attendance to make sure to turn out and vote, and to get their families and co-workers to vote as well, implying that the cause of the April 21 defeat was popular apathy and inattention to civic duty. He went on to reiterate the standard rationale of the party in regard to the second round of last month’s presidential election: it had become “a referendum against the extreme right.” As a consequence, there had been “no debate” between the parliamentary right and left.

“Now we must have that debate,” he suggested. He criticized the Raffarin government for its proposal to cut income taxes by 5 percent, as a boon to the wealthiest, and its appointment of Francis Mer from the steel industry and the big business group, MEDEF, as finance minister.

The candidate for *suppléant*, Marcovitch, set out also to explain the difference between the left and the right. He denounced those who refer to cohabitation as “paralysis,” enumerating the Jospin government’s achievements over the past five years. “Is this paralysis?” If the right-wing parties win a majority, he declared, “all the power in the country will be in the hands of two men” (Chirac and Gaullist leader Alain Juppé).

Daniel Vaillant, the main speaker, took over from Jean-Pierre Chevènement as interior minister when the latter resigned from Jospin’s government in August 2000. He was thus in charge of the police and security forces at the time of the September 11 suicide bombings in the US and, in that capacity, signed on entirely to the attacks on democratic rights launched by the French government, in the name of the “war on terrorism.” Vaillant has boasted about the number of soldiers, gendarmes and police he mobilized throughout France.

He introduced legislation giving the police wider powers to search cars and access private phone calls and email. The new anti-democratic law allows police to search car trunks on the instructions of a prosecutor in terrorist inquiries. In 1995, a similar plan, which would have allowed police to search cars parked near street protests, was thrown out on the grounds that it would have encroached on personal freedom. Introducing the legislation to parliament, Vaillant said fighting terrorism boosted freedom, rather than restricting it. “Collective security is not the enemy of individual freedom,” he said. “We now speak in terms of before and after September 11.”

Recently, Vaillant called a press conference to complain that Nicolas Sarkozy, the present right-wing interior minister and prime ministerial hopeful, was “plagiarizing” his ideas. He asserted that in several programs announced by Sarkozy, “I find almost word for word the objectives put down in two documents on strategic orientation prepared eight months ago by the directors of the national police, which I remitted to Nicolas Sarkozy during the handover of power.”

This “Socialist” candidate, who boasts that his father was a worker who “voted for the Communists,” has devoted much of his campaign to establishing his credentials as a trusted representative of French imperialism and the capitalist state.

In his speech June 4, Vaillant exhibited the combination of vague talk of token reforms and law-and-order rhetoric that characterizes the campaigning of the official left. He began by complaining about the quantity of low-cost housing in his constituency. “Stop creating ghettos,” he said. Next, observing that there was “uncertainty before us,” the former minister called for more “security” and more powers to the police.

He declared that it had “almost made me sick to cast a vote for Chirac.” He referred obliquely to what had happened the last time there was a right-wing president and a right-wing parliamentary majority: the eruption of mass strikes that eventually led to the defeat of the Juppé government in

1997. The implied warning was clear: a victory for the Chirac camp in the parliamentary election carries with it the danger of social upheavals that threaten the existing social and political order.

Vaillant repeated his standard line of argument—that a victory for the left will not mean “cohabitation,” but “institutional coexistence.” The president “is there to preside, not to govern.” He warned of “a president of the Republic who is at the same time minister of defense, of the interior, of everything.” Vaillant concluded by pompously calling for renewed “respect for one’s parents, society, civilization.”

The meeting in the 19th arrondissement drove home certain political realities. First, what no one, even on the so-called “far left” will say, is that the Socialist Party has been thoroughly integrated into the political establishment. It is one of the chief instruments of bourgeois rule in France. To speak of a “left” which includes this party is a fraud. There is nothing left-wing or oppositional about it. The SP merely has tactical differences with the Chirac camp as to how the needs of French capitalism should be met, as Vaillant’s comment about the short-lived Juppé government indicated.

The SP is not a “workers party,” nor even, under the present increasingly volatile conditions, a party of moderate social reform. It is an organization whose indifference and hostility to the pressing needs of workers, unemployed, young people and immigrants have earned it the well-deserved hatred of millions.

It is within this political and social context that Le Pen and the National Front, which demagogically raise the issues of unemployment and poverty, have gained a hearing among oppressed sections of the population, including sections of workers. It is impossible to understand the dynamics of the present election campaign in France apart from the betrayal of the working people carried out by those parties claiming to represent them—the Socialist Party and Communist Party. The overriding political issue is the crisis of perspective and leadership in the working class.



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