

French factory workers discuss upcoming parliamentary election

A WSWS reporting team
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Three days before the National Assembly elections the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at the gates of the Alstom plant in La Courneuve, a suburb northeast of Paris.

Alstom is a French-based industrial giant, originally established as an equal partnership between the French Alcatel and the British General Electric Company. It operates in power engineering, distribution and conversion, and in transportation (railways, subways and shipbuilding). The company has annual sales in excess of 22 billion euros (\$20.9 billion) and employs 120,000 people in over 70 countries.

The La Courneuve plant is an older facility with a long history of struggles—in recent years against layoffs and victimizations. In 2000 workers protested and went on strike against the threat of job cuts. The factory is a focus of left-wing political activity. The local candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections for the Parti des Travailleurs and Lutte Ouvrière work there. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire also has a presence in the plant.

We spoke to a number of production, maintenance and white-collar workers, as well as passers-by. By and large, they were planning to vote for the “left”—the Socialist Party in most cases. We also spoke to a supporter of the Communist Party, as well as a younger worker who was planning to vote for the right-wing coalition, the UMP (Union for a Republican Majority), to “give them a chance.”

The overall impression left by the discussions is that French workers—like workers virtually everywhere at present—have the most varied and often confused responses to the current political and economic situation. There is a great deal of uncertainty about which way to proceed, and a lack of confidence in their own understanding of events.

The response from workers outside the Alstom gates to the upcoming parliamentary election was muted at best, although, this being France, everyone—or nearly everyone—had an opinion.

It does not appear that workers expect very much from these elections or from the parties, whether of the official left or official right, that will form the next government. Why should they, given the experiences of the recent past?

There is no party or political leader that generates much interest or enthusiasm. The strongest language is reserved for attacking this or that figure or measure: *against* right-winger Jean-Marie Le Pen, *against* the current president, Jacques Chirac, *against* the 35-hour week of former Socialist Party prime minister Lionel Jospin, *against* those left parties that participated in the coalition government from 1997-2002. (It should be added that despite the efforts of the so-called “far left,” we found little excitement about their programs or activities.)

If there are not many illusions among workers about the present political parties, or the trade unions, for that matter, there is also very little understanding of the independent political role of the working class, or even that such a thing is desirable. Decades of dominance by the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies, which subordinated workers to the French “national interest,” have taken their toll.

When we told an African-born worker that we thought the working class should have actively boycotted the second round of the presidential election, when faced with two reactionary candidates (Chirac and Le Pen), he strongly disagreed. “We had to vote for Chirac,” he said, even though he was politically opposed to the Gaullist leader. “You have to vote!” It never occurred to him to ask: why are workers obliged to vote for candidates hostile to their interests in a bourgeois election?

The decline in the level of class-consciousness is bound up with the decay of the traditional working class parties and organizations, whose national-reformist programs are worse than useless under conditions of a globally integrated economy dominated by transnational corporations. The French Stalinists are disintegrating, although their reactionary presence and influence is still felt. Significantly, a number of workers denied that anyone at the plant voted for Le Pen and his National Front, but the CP member to whom we spoke was honest enough to admit that he knew of former CP voters who now cast ballots for the ultra-right. The nationalism and even, at times, xenophobia of the French Stalinists has had a thoroughly pernicious effect, rendering sections of workers vulnerable to the chauvinist, pseudo-populist demagoguery of Le Pen.

The groups on the petty-bourgeois left react to the crisis of the Communist Party with dismay or view it merely as a cheap opportunity to win over disgruntled Stalinists. In reality, the French CP has functioned as one of the pillars of French and European capitalism for decades. The end of its stranglehold, while accompanied historically by a temporary lowering of political understanding in the working class, is an entirely welcome phenomenon and sets the stage for a deep-going political clarification and the rebirth of an internationalist and socialist current in the French working class.

Below are some of the discussions we had in La Courneuve:

Mamadou, originally from Gambia

I believe people are going to vote for the left, but I’m not sure. The campaign is not going well. It’s dead.

In my opinion, the Jospin government gave too many gifts to the employers. He did very badly with the 35-hour week. The bosses now make us come to work whenever they want! I’m against that. Some of them have made lots of money. The government gave many subsidies to companies, and, in the final analysis, they hired nobody. Retirees are not replaced. It was a dirty trick. When you talk about a 35-hour week, it was supposed to be about creating work for other people. I don’t agree with what’s happened.

The Communist Party is pretty strong here, that’s the CGT. It’s the biggest union. Not everybody votes for the CP though. People are disgusted. The CP was in the government and it didn’t do anything.

There were people working part-time, who were supposed to keep being paid. In the final analysis, the bosses made use of the situation to lay them off. I’ve never seen an employer give a present to an employee and pay him while he was sitting at home.

People here don’t vote for Le Pen. Not the people who work here. Le

Pen has support in neighbourhoods where there are problems. Le Pen is not going to give anybody work. He's a thief who lines his pockets playing on people's heritage.

In the second round of the presidential election? We had no choice but to vote for Chirac. You have to vote! We couldn't boycott the election. The CGT didn't call for a vote for Chirac. They said, vote for whoever you want. Chirac received 80 percent of the vote because people were scared of Le Pen. But they're not going to vote for Chirac this time.

André, who works in the factory cafeteria

Jospin made mistakes. But I believe in [SP leader François] Hollande. He is better motivated. I don't think he'll do the same thing as Jospin. He is much more open.

There are quite a few people who vote for the CP here, the SP also. The "far left?" I don't know them.

As far as the presidential election was concerned, you had to vote for Chirac. It was smarter than voting for Le Pen. In reality, it's true, there was no choice. But one had to vote for Chirac. The vote on Sunday will be important and also what happens afterward. I think people will go out and vote.

I think "cohabitation" [between Chirac and an SP-led government] will be a good thing. As far as the reduction of hours of work is concerned, things are better for me personally, because I work in the cafeteria.

People here might have voted for Le Pen, but they don't boast about it. Here it's the metalworkers.

Thierry, owner of a small consulting firm

I run a small business, a consulting firm, of less than 10 people. I am against the 35-hour week because it weakens the work dynamic. In general, it is difficult to find people who want to work. They're interested in other things. The first thing a potential employee wants to know is, what are my hours? How much leisure time will I have? Small businesses find it difficult to apply the 35-hour week and they get penalized. Jospin didn't really help the French economy.

People say, among other things, that the problem with the National Front has been due to the manipulations of the left. That began under [former Socialist Party President François] Mitterrand, who used them against the official right. The NF became bigger, which they didn't want to happen, and it became a problem which they couldn't get rid of.

A Moroccan-born worker

I think there is too much freedom in France. The young people do what they want and create lots of problems in the cities. It's like with a tree, you have to grow it straight from an early age.

There is some interest in the elections, some discussion. I'm not so interested myself. As far as Le Pen is concerned, he is like the other politicians, he's out for himself above all. In the factory, there are three or four parties. I've only been in France 32 years. Is that a long time? I don't have my voters' card and so I can't vote on Sunday.

Roger Mansuy, member of the Communist Party and administrative secretary of the works committee

People feel that the 35-hour week has been a disaster. It was entirely negative. It was supposed to be negotiated, but the company didn't negotiate. It was simply applied. You have to take into account the situation in a given company.

The Communist Party was in the government, it's true. That there were Communist ministers in this government doesn't bother me. They tried to put pressure on the Socialists, but the Socialists wouldn't keep their promises. Now people are making the Communists pay.

The Communist Party lost votes because it didn't show itself in the best light and didn't put forward the true values of the Communist Party. It was entirely sunk in the left coalition. For people now, left, right, it's the same thing. There are Communists who are coming back to the party because of the fact that we got less than 5 percent of the vote, which was less than we deserved. They don't want the party to disappear.

There are people who used to vote Communist who now vote for Le Pen. I don't want to believe it, but it happened.

The "far left" [Lutte Ouvrière, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire] is in the CFDT and the FO [union federations]. In general, I'm not saying they are for management, but they are ready to sign anything. Arlette Laguiller [the leader of Lutte Ouvrière] says, "Look at the left, they're all traitors, all liars, vote for me—but I won't do anything, because I can't do anything."

The majority here is in the CGT [the Stalinist-led union federation]. One problem we have in France, unlike in Germany or the US, is that not everybody who works in the factory is automatically enrolled in the union. They have a choice to be or not to be in the union. Very often the people who don't fight profit from the things we've gained by fighting. They are the first to look at the notices to see what they've won.

As far as the Soviet Union is concerned, I can't tell you anything since I never set foot there.

There are about 500 people working here now. There were more than 3,000 in the 1960s.

Patrick, a white-collar worker

The Jospin government made too many compromises. I don't know how the legislative elections will turn out, but it seems likely that it's the right who will have a majority.

By nature, I'm an anarchist, not the bomb-throwing type. I'm for people managing themselves, but it might take several generations before that will happen.

As far as world affairs go, and the Bush administration and the war led by the US, I think it's likely that at best the American government let the terrorists carry out their attack on September 11, and, at worst, helped them do it. It seems almost inconceivable that the airplanes could be aimed at the twin towers with such precision. It is very probable that one of the reasons for launching the war against Afghanistan is the fact that they need to sell war materiel and arms. That's also involved in what's happening with Iraq.

Pierre, an engineer

In terms of the National Front vote, I think it's true that insecurity [fear about crime] is behind it, but to blame that on immigrants is not going to get us anywhere.

I don't understand why in regions where there aren't problems with unemployment or crime, like in certain parts of the Alps, people voted for Le Pen.

I'm going to vote for the UMP. I figure we might as well give them a chance for five years. I don't believe in "cohabitation." But I think that, on balance, Jospin did good things too. It's not so clear to me.



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