

Right wing wins solid majority in French legislative election

Record abstention reflects popular disaffection

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The right-wing parties, principally the Gaullist-led Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) of Jacques Chirac, won a substantial victory in the first round of the French legislative elections June 9, a vote marked by a record abstention and a further collapse of support for the Communist Party.

In Sunday's voting the parliamentary right received some 43 percent of the total, including 33.3 percent for the UMP and 4.8 percent for the Union for French Democracy (UDF) of François Bayrou. The UMP is expected to emerge from the second round next Sunday with anywhere from 370-419 seats and the UDF with 12-27. Chirac's UMP coalition of right-wing parties, therefore, is expected to muster an absolute majority in the 577-seat National Assembly.

Under the French electoral system, legislative candidates who receive less than 50 percent of the vote and more than 12.5 percent of the total number of registered voters in a given district (which, in yesterday's voting, meant approximately 20 percent of the actual vote) can enter the second, deciding round. This will be held June 16.

The Socialist Party (SP), the majority party in the previous "Plural Left" coalition government, maintained its percentage of the first round vote, at 24.1 percent (compared with 23.8 percent in the first round in 1997), but is expected to lose at least a third of its 248 seats in the National Assembly because it will have far fewer votes coming to it in the second round from voters of its coalition partners and because the right-wing has consolidated itself to a certain extent. Under interim party leader François Hollande, the SP ran a dispirited, aimless campaign, which generated little interest among the general public.

The French Communist Party (CP) continued its historic decline, obtaining only 4.8 percent of the vote (1.2 million), compared with 9.8 percent (2.5 million) in the 1997 first round. Party leader Robert Hue faces a run-off with an UMP candidate in his district in the suburbs north of Paris, and other incumbent CP deputies (35 in the last National Assembly) face possible or likely defeat. The French Stalinists are expected to win between 8 and 17 seats. At its height of support, the CP won 22.5 percent of the vote in the first round of the 1967 legislative election, or nearly five times its present share of the vote.

The newspaper *Libération* commented: "After the pitiable European [election results] in 1999, the municipal catastrophe in 2002 and a presidential calamity seven weeks ago, leaving the party's finances drained, the CP has not yet reached bottom." *Le Figaro* wrote: "The CP could lose any foothold whatsoever in the majority of French cities and regions." The collapse of French Stalinism, for decades one of the chief instruments for subordinating the working class to the French bourgeoisie, has far-reaching implications.

The extreme right National Front (NF) of Jean-Marie Le Pen experienced a reversal of fortunes. After Le Pen's breakthrough in the

first round of the presidential election in April, when he received 16 percent of the vote, it was predicted that his party would achieve a substantial result in the first round of the parliamentary vote, with perhaps 200 of its candidates proceeding to the second. In the event, the NF received only 11.3 percent (as opposed to 15.3 percent in the first round in 1997) and is expected to have only 37 of its candidates make it through to the June 16 run-off, as opposed to 134 in 1997.

Two of the parties of the so-called far left, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO), saw their vote totals decline from their results in the first round of the presidential election in April, despite running far more candidates than ever before. The LCR received 320,000 votes for its candidates (1.3 percent), while LO collected some 304,000 (1.2 percent). The Parti des Travailleurs (PT) of Pierre Lambert obtained 81,600 votes.

The three self-styled Trotskyist parties collected 2.8 percent of the vote, as opposed to 10.4 percent in the first round of the presidential election. In the first round of the legislative election in 1997, the "far left" won 2.6 percent of the total.

In terms of actual votes, the governmental right gained some two million votes more than 1997, its gains coming at the expense of the far right and the official left. Sections of middle-class voters, who five years ago turned to Lionel Jospin and his coalition partners in the hope that the Plural Left would improve social conditions, in this election expressed their disappointment by voting for the Chirac camp, which promised political stability and law-and-order.

Some 35 percent of the population abstained—making those who failed to cast a ballot the largest single political bloc. This massive abstention rate is one of the most politically telling aspects of the June 9 vote.

Despite a record number of candidates, supposedly offering every variety of political alternative, nearly 14 out of 39 million French voters stayed away from the polls. Chirac's grouping, which will possess an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly, was chosen by less than one-quarter of the eligible voters.

The abstention has a definite class character according to the pollsters. Fifty-eight percent of those 18-24 and 54 percent of those 25-34 abstained, along with 53 percent of university students, 51 percent of the unemployed, 45 percent of workers and 43 percent in "intermediary professions." On the other hand, only 21 percent of artisans and shopkeepers, 25 percent of the self-employed, 20 percent of retired people, 26 percent of farmers and 33 percent of those in the liberal professions and management stayed away from the polls.

The abstention rate reflects the deep level of political disaffection and alienation felt by wide layers of the population.

It is a remarkable fact that two records were established in this election: the greatest number of candidates and the highest rate of abstention. *Le*

Figaro commented: “The confrontation of these two figures ... almost mathematically provides the physiognomy of the first round.”

But what is this physiognomy? The French population had for ten days been inundated with the campaign materials—leaflets, posters, advertisements—of more than 8,400 candidates, an average of 15 candidates per voting district. Yet the level of political interest sagged in inverse relation to the proliferation of candidates. Campaign meetings, of right, left and “far left” candidates, were poorly attended; the election barely made itself felt in the daily activities of the masses, or in everyday conversations.

Not one of the political formations or candidates offering themselves in the French election, including the so-called “far left,” presented a program that corresponded to the elementary social needs and interests of the mass of the population—for decent jobs, better living standards and improved working conditions. The various parties, representing exclusively the ruling elite or sections of the middle class, showed themselves to be indifferent to the growing social inequality in France; to the growth of temporary and part-time labor, to the rising number of families barely able to make ends meet, to chronic unemployment, particularly among the youth, to the growing misery in working class neighbourhoods.

A commentator in *Le Monde* wrote that “the most disturbing aspect of the presidential and legislative double-vote this spring” is that “a full third of French people” feel excluded from both “the present system of political representation” and “the programs offered to them.” The newspaper continued: “They expressed this during the presidential election by voting, more than a third of them, for candidates denouncing in one way or another the governmental candidates, they repeated this June 9 by staying away from the polls in massive numbers.”

The profound and widespread alienation of broad sections of the population and the sweeping electoral victory of the right wing constitute an indictment of the governmental “left”—above all, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. The upsurge of working class struggle against the government of Prime Minister Alain Juppé in the mid-1990s brought down his right-wing regime and eventually brought to power the Socialist led coalition of Lionel Jospin. Whatever hopes may have existed that Jospin would address the most pressing ills of French society were long ago dashed.

The SP coalition government proved itself to be no more than the administrator of the interests of big business. It saw its main task as the subordination of the working class to the plans of French capital to find new markets, resources and avenues for profit through the integration of France into the European Union. The Stalinist CP, which supplied cabinet ministers to the Plural Left coalition government and trailed behind Jospin, has deservedly been abandoned by many of those who still had illusions that there was a difference between the two “left partners.”

A variety of commentators have expressed astonishment that the “mobilization” of late April and May 1, when several million people filled the streets of Paris and other French cities to protest against the extreme right, has been translated into large-scale abstention and the electoral victory of Chirac. An article in *Le Monde* observed: “Strange election. Strange Sunday. As though the France of June was not that of May.... Seven weeks only, and here is France; more abstentionist than ever, gripped by doubt: what remains of the April-May days?”

This is petty-bourgeois political blindness. The process is not so mysterious. The April 21 presidential vote contained a large element of protest against the political establishment—both left and right. Some 16 percent voted for Le Pen, 10 percent for the far left, and 30 percent abstained. Thus, half of the registered voters rejected the government parties of left and right.

In the immediate aftermath of the April 21 vote, which unexpectedly resulted in the exclusion of Jospin and a presidential runoff between the candidate of the official right, Chirac, and the candidate of the neo-fascist

far right, Le Pen, protests erupted amongst the youth over the presence of the racist, anti-immigrant NF leader in the second round.

Fearful that this mobilization might get out of hand and threaten the existing political framework, the political and media establishment, operating primarily through the left and “far left” parties, worked to channel the anti-Le Pen movement into a vote for Chirac. The incumbent president—mired in corruption scandals and facing criminal indictment if voted out of office—was portrayed as the embodiment and defender of “Republican values.” The *Le Monde* columnists seem to forget that the predominant slogan of the massive May 1 demonstrations was “Vote Chirac.”

Having exerted themselves ardently in the second round of the presidential campaign for two weeks on behalf of Chirac, a reactionary career politician who had run a right-wing, law-and-order campaign, the SP and CP turned to the voters in the legislative elections and asked for their support against the Gaullist leader. But their campaign for Chirac had produced definite consequences.

On the one hand, it rehabilitated or partially rehabilitated the incumbent president—who had only received 19 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election—in the eyes of certain members of the public, who accordingly voted for his party. On the other hand, the coming together of the entire spectrum of French political figures and parties behind Chirac deepened the hostility and cynicism of many. They felt, rightly, that the establishment was ganging up on them once again and forcing Chirac down their throats. Their response was to stay home June 9.

The parties of the so-called “far left” share major responsibility for the present political impasse. The LCR joined the pro-Chirac camp, casuistically arguing that it was not campaigning for Chirac, but only “against Le Pen.” Its presidential candidate, Olivier Besancenot, publicly declared prior to the second round of the presidential election that he was voting for Chirac.

Lutte Ouvrière took an equivocal position, first rejecting abstention, then calling for individual abstention, finally calling for a blank or spoiled ballot. Their response was passive, apologetic and defensive. Insofar as LO failed to appeal openly for a Chirac vote, the organization came under fire from the media, the CP and other elements within the “Plural Left.” Intimidated by this hostility, Lutte Ouvrière retreated. On May Day, given the opportunity to address hundreds of thousands, LO made no serious attempt to distribute leaflets or otherwise advance an alternative strategy to supporting Chirac.

What is not done is sometimes more important than what is done. The so-called “Trotskyists” of the LCR, LO and PT were called upon to tell the working class the truth: that a choice between Chirac and Le Pen was no choice at all, but rather the effective disenfranchisement of the working people. An active, aggressive campaign for a boycott of the second round of the presidential election was on the order of the day.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International, in an open letter to the three organizations (See, “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”) proposed a specific course of action. The WSWS argued that an active campaign for a working class boycott would contribute powerfully to the political reorientation and education of workers, youth and students looking for an alternative to the establishment parties.

A boycott would have demonstrated that it was possible and necessary for the working class to adopt a position independent of the bourgeois establishment, its media and its politicians. It would have strengthened the working class for the intensified attacks it was bound to face, whichever bourgeois faction—“left” or right—eventually formed the next government. It would have pointed the way toward the development of a genuinely

independent party of the working class. And it would have helped clarify workers and youth on the historical and political roots of Stalinism and social democracy, and fuelled interest in a genuinely socialist and internationalist program of struggle.

To mount such a campaign was in the power of the LO, the LCR and PT. They had received a combined mandate of nearly three million votes, expressing opposition to both the official left and right-wing camps. The unprecedented vote for parties calling themselves Trotskyist, combined with the massive abstention, indicated a powerful reservoir of support for a working class boycott. How large a response such a campaign won could be determined only in the course of a struggle for it. But whatever the immediate response, it would have been a positive step that strengthened the political position of the working class as a whole.

All three organizations ignored or rejected this appeal. Insofar as their representatives addressed the question of a boycott directly, they rejected it on the grounds that the “relationship of forces” was not favourable to such a course of action. They forgot, as centrist tendencies always do, that a socialist political party’s own activity is part of this “relationship,” and if consciously and systematically directed, can change it.

Above all, LO, the LCR and PT rejected the call for a boycott because to fight for such a course of action would have brought them into conflict with the bureaucracies of the Communist Party and Socialist Party, as well as the leaderships of various middle class protest movements, with whom they have over decades developed the closest relations. This they were unwilling and unable to do.

The failure of all the organizations that once claimed or still claim to represent the interests of the working class has produced a large majority for the right-wing Gaullist forces. This vacuum of leadership also creates the conditions in which the pseudo-populist demagogues of the ultra-right National Front will continue to find a hearing among the most disaffected and oppressed.

The government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and Finance Minister Francis Mer, presided over by Chirac, will now set to work. The position of French capitalism demands it. To mount serious opposition to their rivals within Europe and to seriously contest the insatiable appetite of American imperialism, the French ruling elite must exact enormous sacrifices from its “own” working population.

The French bourgeoisie has been somewhat coy, for political reasons, in spelling out the program it would like to see imposed. An article June 6 in Britain’s *Financial Times* was not so circumspect. It suggested that the incoming UMP government would “have a historic opportunity over the next five years to carry out the kind of economic reforms successive French governments of the right have failed to implement.... [Finance Minister Mer] hopes to regenerate investment confidence by easing employment overheads, loosening the rules on youth employment and allowing greater flexibility for overtime to offset the effects of the 35-hour week, notably for smaller businesses.

“Privatisation—an emotive word—has not been mentioned during the general election campaign. But plans to sell state assets will become an important signal of intent over the coming months.... The pay-as-you-go state-run pensions system is unsustainable without both extending the contribution period and raising the retirement age beyond 60. Yet before any change is made, the government first has to address the generous pension provision made for public sector employees. The unions have promised a battle.”

The French ruling elite views the election result with some degree of smugness and satisfaction. It was easily able to out-manoeuvre the reformists and Stalinists, as well as their “left” appendages, and organize a majority for itself in the National Assembly. A major social confrontation is inevitable. For the working class, the decisive question in the next round of struggles will be ridding itself of the worthless old

leaderships and reorganizing itself on the basis of an international socialist perspective.



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