

France: Socialist Party feigns shock over collusion between Chirac camp and Le Pen

David Walsh in Paris
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The French Socialist Party (SP) faces ignominious defeat in the second round of the legislative elections next Sunday. Polls suggest that the right-wing parties, including the Gaullist-led coalition, the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP), could win between 392 and 427 seats in the new parliament, compared to the 245 seats they hold in the outgoing National Assembly. The left parties, including the SP, are predicted to return between 150 and 191 deputies, down from the 314 they elected in 1997. The SP could lose half of its 248 seats.

In an attempt to limit the dimensions of this debacle, the French social democrats are trying to reach some of the traditionally left voters who were so alienated by the record of the SP-led coalition government headed by former prime minister Lionel Jospin, they abstained in the first round of the legislative election, held June 9. As part of this effort, the Socialist Party leaders have taken to publicizing, as though it were a shocking revelation, something of which they have long been aware—the collusion between President Jacques Chirac's UMP and the neo-fascistic parties—the National Front (NF) of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the National Republican Movement (MNR) of Bruno Mégret.

The Socialist deputy mayor of Nantes, Jean-Marc Ayrault, declared Tuesday that the official right “was discrediting itself” by refusing to withdraw its candidates in two districts where UMP candidates came in third, behind the SP and National Front. “Once again, the right prefers the National Front,” Ayrault declared. “The decision by the UMP to maintain its candidates in the 2nd district in the Gard and the 13th in the Rhône confirms the existence of local deals aimed at preventing the election of left candidates. Such an attitude discredits the declarations of Jacques

Chirac and [Prime Minister] Jean-Pierre Raffarin against any agreement with the extreme right.”

SP officials in Bouches-du-Rhône, in southeastern France, denounced “the porous relations between local leaders of the right and the extreme right,” particularly in the 12th district in Vitrolles, where Mégret of the MNR was eliminated as a candidate in the first round last Sunday. The MNR leader called on his supporters to “block the route” of the left nationally, without taking a position on the local races. However, a local MNR mayor, Daniel Simonpiéri in the town of Marignane, has openly endorsed the UMP candidate, Eric Diard, who finished second to the Socialist in the first round. The SP accused Diard of “having received and accepted the unconditional support of Daniel Simonpiéri and that barely disguised of Bruno Mégret.”

Christophe Masse, the sitting Socialist deputy in the 8th district of Bouches-du-Rhône, where the only three-way race in the area is taking place (Socialist-UMP-NF), accused the Chirac camp of making appeals to the ultra-right party's voters. One of the local UMP candidate's statements said that “the *triangulaire* [three-way race] will not be an obstacle to the victory of the UMP if NF voters understand that to vote for the extreme right is to help elect the left.”

The local Socialist federation commented, “The left drove the extreme right out the door [in the second round of the presidential election May 5, by helping Chirac obtain an 82 percent majority]. The right has just opened the window for it.”

Another obvious case of collusion between the official right camp and the neo-fascists involves Charles Millon, a former member of the Union for French Democracy (UDF), one of the parliamentary right-wing parties, and defense minister in the Alain Juppé government of the mid-1990s. Millon was one of

a number of candidates who struck an electoral pact with the National Front in the 1998 regional elections. Despite being officially ostracized and slapped on the wrist, the three regional presidents who had accepted NF assistance, including Millon, were present throughout Chirac's recent presidential campaign.

In the first round of the legislative election, the UMP did not officially support any candidate in the Lyon suburb where Millon was running. However, claiming the personal support of Juppé, Millon added "supported by the UMP" on his campaign posters.

Entering the second round, Socialist Party candidate and former Jospin government cabinet minister Jean-Jack Queyranne publicly criticized "arrangements in preparation between the National Front and Millon." Millon, who ran an ultra-right, law-and-order campaign in the first round, did not deny the allegation, and instead vaguely accused Queyranne of "fantasizing about deals which have been negotiated between this and that candidate."

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On Monday, at the same time National Front leader Le Pen was announcing the left candidates he would particularly like to see defeated in the second round of the legislative election—leading members of the SP, Communist Party and the Greens—he openly endorsed Jean Kiffer, mayor of Amnéville, running on a joint UMP-RPF [Rassemblement pour la France] ticket in the Moselle region of northeastern France. Kiffer subsequently indicated that he was "very proud" to have received Le Pen's support.

These episodes are no doubt only the tip of the iceberg. The scale of the right-wing victory in the first round has permitted the national UMP leadership to adopt a somewhat Olympian attitude toward deals with the National Front. They have pledged no compromise with the extreme right, because, at this point, they are not in need of any to assure themselves a clear parliamentary majority. But at the local level, all sorts of dirty deals and arrangements between the Chirac camp and the NF-MNR forces are taking place.

The Socialists are now attempting to frighten a segment of those who abstained June 9 into voting for them next Sunday by invoking the danger of a united right wing—"parliamentary" and "extreme." This is a bit much even for the hypocritical, complacent French

social democrats. They would apparently like the voting public to expunge from its memory everything that occurred between the first round of the presidential election on April 21 and the second round run-off on May 5.

Following the first round of the presidential election, which saw the elimination of SP candidate Jospin and produced a run-off between incumbent President Jacques Chirac and Le Pen, official France mounted a concerted political operation to legitimize and sanitize Chirac and his camp. With the Socialist Party officialdom leading the way, the political and media establishment day in and day out presented Chirac to the French public as the savior of democracy and defender of "Republican values" against the neo-fascist Le Pen. The left insisted that while Chirac was a corrupt politician, he could be counted on to serve as a democratic bulwark against Le Pen's ultra-right.

The SP's new-found concern about collusion between the governmental right and the neo-fascists is thoroughly opportunist and cynical, grounded in narrow electoral considerations. It is unlikely to have much impact on the electorate. Those previously convinced to vote for the Chirac forces, in part by the SP campaign, will ignore the denunciations. They might legitimately ask, "If this is such a concern, why didn't you tell us in May?" For most of those who abstained on June 9 out of disgust with the SP, this outburst of belated "leftism" will only deepen their anger and sense of betrayal.



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