

Record abstention in second round of election

French right-wing parties consolidate large parliamentary majority

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On June 16 the final, shabby curtain descended on the 2002 French national elections. The four-act electoral process (two rounds each of presidential and parliamentary elections over the course of eight weeks) resulted, finally, in the right-wing parties retaining the presidency and obtaining 399 of the 577 seats in the National Assembly. Setting yet another record, 40 percent of the population abstained from Sunday's voting.

The Gaullist-led Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) of President Jacques Chirac, with 354 seats, will exercise an absolute majority in the national legislature. The Union for French Democracy (UDF) of François Bayrou, a right-center party, won 29 seats. The extreme right National Front (NF) of Jean-Marie Le Pen, with 37 candidates in the second round, did not win any seats. The mayor of Orange in southern France, Jacques Bompard, came closest for the NF, winning 42.4 percent of the vote in a two-way race in the fourth district in Vaucluse.

The Socialist Party (SP) saw its parliamentary fraction decline from 248 deputies to 140. The French Communist Party (PCF) fared somewhat better than expected, maintaining 21 of its 35 seats in the National Assembly. However, beleaguered party President Robert Hue lost by a few hundred votes in his district in the Val d'Oise to a UMP candidate.

The French Greens saw their parliamentary delegation drop from 7 to 3. One of the seats lost previously belonged to the Greens national secretary, Dominique Voynet. The Republican Pole of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a cabinet minister in the previous Plural Left government, did not win a seat. The official left parties will have a combined total of 178 seats, down from 314 in the last National Assembly.

Other "left" notables to be defeated included Martine Aubry, the SP cabinet minister known as "the lady of 35 hours" for her role in introducing the shorter workweek. The policy, ostensibly implemented to ameliorate the conditions of workers, instead permitted employers to introduce "labor flexibility" and led to a decline in workers' income through lost overtime pay. Pierre Moscovici, a leading figure in the SP closely associated with the previous prime minister, Lionel Jospin, was defeated, as were Vincent Peillon, SP spokesman, and Marie-Noëlle Lienemann, a former cabinet minister.

To explain the outcome of Sunday's voting, as the international media will likely do, as the result of a swing to the right by the French electorate would be seriously off the mark. It should be recalled that in the first round of the presidential election three small parties claiming

to the Trotskyist, with limited resources, obtained 3 million votes, as compared to the sitting president's 5.7 million.

The more profound source of the electoral triumph of the Gaullist party is to be found in the political problems of the French working class revealed over the course of the past two months.

At the outset of the round of elections in late April, the incumbent president, Chirac, was a generally discredited, even despised figure. In the first round of the presidential election he received only 19.9 percent of the popular vote (less than 14 percent of the eligible voters), the lowest total ever for an incumbent president under the Fifth Republic.

The percentage of registered voters who cast ballots in the first round of the presidential vote in favor of the parties (UMP, Democratic Liberals and sections of the UDF) who now control the French presidency, National Assembly, Senate, Constitutional Council and a variety of other state institutions was on the order of 18-20 percent.

The prime responsibility for the reactionary and dangerous outcome lies with the "left" parties—the SP, PCF and sections of the so-called "far left." Their electoral debacle June 16 was of their own making.

The Jospin PS-led coalition government had carried out pro-capitalist policies, presiding over growing social misery and alienating wide layers of the population. This created conditions of such anger and confusion that the pseudo-populist, nationalist demagoguery of Le Pen and his National Front was able to gain a hearing.

When Le Pen finished second to Chirac in the first round of the presidential election, eliminating Jospin, the SP-PCF, assisted by the "far left" groups, compounded their political sins of the past five years by a further act of treachery: whipping up hysteria around the supposed immediate threat of a National Front dictatorship and throwing their support to Chirac.

The unique contribution of the French "left" this spring has been to rehabilitate and sanitize Chirac and convince a larger proportion than ever of the French working population to cast ballots for bourgeois candidates. The SP and PCF, by campaigning for Chirac between the first and second rounds of the presidential election in late April and early May, essentially cut the political ground from beneath themselves. A section of the population quite logically asked itself: why were these "left" parties needed, if, as they themselves argued, Chirac could be counted on to defend the people's rights and the "values of the Republic?"

Another portion of the French voting public—39.7 percent in this latest election—decided not to vote at all. In 180 districts, the rate of

abstention surpassed the national average. In 14 districts it was higher than 50 percent; in three of those districts the races were between right-wing and extreme right candidates. If the social composition of those abstaining runs true to form, approximately half of the unemployed, of workers and of young people 18-24 will not have voted on Sunday.

The explanations offered by some in the French media for the high abstention rate—the World Cup, Father’s Day, pleasant weather—are not to be taken seriously. There is a profound crisis of the French political system, which all talk of a “return to normalcy” or the creation of a de facto two-party system cannot disguise.

Le Monde reports that 42 percent of those who abstained indicated a lack of confidence in elected officials. Many people felt, quite legitimately, that the programs of the parliamentary right and left were nearly identical. One might ask of those who voted, what is the percentage who cast ballots for candidates and parties they despised?

The response of the Gaullist coalition leaders, as one might expect, was smugness and self-satisfaction. Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a figure who obviously intends to exude small-town sobriety and modesty, but who suggests nothing so much as mediocrity and cunning, commented, “It is a success for unity and for confidence; unity and confidence for the government and parliament, unity and confidence between the French people and our activity.”

Demonstrating that he had learned nothing from his party’s well-deserved thrashing at the polls, François Hollande, interim leader of the Socialists, declared, “This result ... will perhaps seem unjust to the left, who during five years, under Lionel Jospin, believed in good faith to be advancing the country on the path of economic recovery and social progress.” In general, the declarations of the SP speak to their belief that the population is ungrateful and unworthy of them.

A struggle will now take place for the leadership of the Socialist Party. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former Jospin finance minister, and Laurent Fabius, the former prime minister, are two candidates on the right of the party; Aubry was considered a possible “left” choice, at least until her defeat Sunday.

The French Communist Party has been thrown into crisis by its recent electoral woes. The Stalinist party apparently preserved its parliamentary group privileges in the National Assembly, for which a minimum of 20 deputies is necessary. The PCF was the target of something of a rescue mission in recent weeks in the left bourgeois media. There is considerable concern as well in sections of the SP about what the total collapse of the Communist Party would mean. The Stalinists have been the political means by which the Socialists have had political access to certain sections of the working class since François Mitterrand’s remake of the SP in the early 1970s.

Hue’s defeat in Argenteuil will not improve his standing in the PCF, where he has been under attack for some time. Critics of his leadership, like Georges Hage in northern France and Maxime Gremetz in Amiens, both won reelection. Hue blamed his defeat on the efforts of the National Front in his district, who threw their support behind the UMP candidate. Jean-Marie Le Pen had publicly called for Hue’s defeat. Why the neo-fascistic party should have any influence in an area dominated politically by the Communist Party for decades was not a question Hue cared to consider.

The PCF is holding a national congress June 26 and 27, which is scheduled to discuss the lessons of the elections and develop a new political strategy. The Stalinists are also attempting to make use of the “far left” parties to improve their wretched fortunes. On June 15 the PCF convoked a meeting to which it invited “all those who feel concerned about the future of communism,” including members of the

Pabloite Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire.

Following the failure of his party to gain a single seat in parliament, Le Pen denounced the election. He declared, “This Assembly will not represent one French person in two.” Claiming to represent the only party fighting for French “independence,” the National Front leader asserted, “This is a rump parliament, since it will vote on barely 40 percent of the laws that are applied to France; the other 60 percent being reserved for Brussels [the European Union].”

The French media complacently discusses the NF’s defeat in the parliamentary elections as an indication that its influence has receded. Whatever its electoral ups and downs, and whatever the solidity of its political base, whose strength it would be wrong to exaggerate, the National Front only stands to increase its support under conditions of a monopoly of the National Assembly by politically conservative blocs of the right and the official left, and the absence of a broad-based socialist opposition. As the economic situation worsens, Le Pen will continue to pose as the anti-establishment critic, speaking for the French “little man,” forgotten in the chaos and trauma of the global economy.

The Chirac-Raffarin government has not spelled out all its plans. However, this right-wing regime faces not only mounting social contradictions at home, but also the growing threat of world slump, tensions and divisions in Europe, and the reckless, predatory international policies of the Bush administration.

Under the new Inspector Javert, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, the government intends to prosecute its law-and-order campaign, particularly against working class and immigrant youth. The new administration—with a certain, if only temporary, legitimacy, thanks to the actions of the left parties—will now, in the name of the national interest, assault the social programs, pensions and living standards of the French working class. Social struggles will erupt and the problems of working class leadership and perspective will acquire a new urgency.



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