

The French elections and the failure of the left

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The following analyses were submitted to the WSWs by a reader in France.

The campaign for the presidential election in France could have been the occasion for a debate on Trotskyism, following revelations that Lionel Jospin, Socialist Party candidate for president, had once been a member of the OCI [Internationalist Communist Organization, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International until 1971]. This debate did not take place because Jospin did everything to hide his past inside this organization and because the Parti des Travailleurs (successor to the OCI), the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Lutte Ouvrière remained on the defensive.

In 1995 journalists had already raised the issue with Jospin, but he vehemently denied his membership in the OCI, arguing that they were confusing him with his brother. He reiterated his lies until June 5, 2001, when, following the publication of an article in *Le Monde*, a deputy in the National Assembly asked him the following question: “A newspaper has reported your membership, until 1971, in the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste, a revolutionary Trotskyist movement. It reports that you allegedly maintained relations with this OCI until 1981, while being a member of the Socialist Party. This commitment, if it were true, was not taken up as a youth: it was the commitment of a mature man. You have always denied this membership. Today, circumstances lead me to ask if the reported facts are true, and if it is the case, the reasons why you have covered them up until now?” Jospin made a half-confession: “It is true that, in the 1960s, I showed interest for Trotskyist ideas and that I formed relationships with one of the organizations of this movement. This involved a personal, intellectual and political choice for which there is no reason, if it is the right word, to be ashamed.”

He added: “In regard to this outlook, these commitments, which were a matter of intellectual meetings, of private conversations, I have therefore no regrets or apologies to make. I met in the course of these contacts some remarkable men, and this has contributed to my education. A second question arises: why have I not talked about it earlier? Well, in all honesty, ladies and gentlemen of the National Assembly, because I believe no one was interested in that.”

This public debate is all the more lacking today in that these three Trotskyist organizations (the PT, the LCR and LO) received close to 3 million votes on April 21, 2002, in the first round of the presidential election (that is, almost double their score in 1995), while Jospin lost 2.5 million. For the first time since the exclusion of the Left Opposition in 1927 and the physical liquidation of its militants by the Stalinist bureaucracy (Trotsky was assassinated in August 1940 in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico, on the orders of Stalin), organizations claiming to be Trotskyist not only had an electoral success in a bourgeois democracy of a developed country, but also won three times as many votes as the French Communist Party (PCF)—the last Stalinist bastion in Europe.

This event, which could have been a major one in the history of the international workers movement, was virtually skipped over by commentators and, above all, it has been willingly marginalized by those very same people who had just achieved this success. The silence of the PT and the statements by the LCR and LO have had the effect of

transforming this victory into a defeat. Each organization tallied up its own votes like a narrow-minded shopkeeper, without ever probing the significance of the total, which indicated the radicalization of more than 10 percent of voters.

Three million workers, unemployed people, poor and marginalized people, used the ballot box to say “No” to the right and the government left (French Communist Party and Socialist Party [PS]), which had long betrayed the hopes for political and social change. Even worse, LO kept its distance from those who had preferred the young postal worker (Olivier Besancenot of the LCR) to the retired lady from Crédit Lyonnais (Arlette Laguiller of LO).

On the evening of April 21, the Trotskyist organizations, on the strength of their audience which went well beyond their electoral result, had the means to turn to workers, to PCF militants shaken by the historic setback of their candidate (Robert Hue), to PS militants stunned by the defeat of Jospin, and call on them to boycott the second round of the presidential election. They had the possibility of using the television airwaves to make an unambiguous statement and say that the working class should not take part in the Chirac-Le Pen duel, that it did not have to choose between a “crook” and a “fascist,” and that it did not have to come to the rescue of the right and assist Chirac with the strategy he has been pursuing for 26 years of reconstructing the right on the ruins of Gaullism.

The Trotskyist extreme left had an historic occasion to weigh in politically, but it did not carry out its responsibilities. The LCR called for a vote for Chirac supposedly to block Le Pen, when he had no chance of winning. LO, for its part, vacillated between abstention and a blank vote before letting each worker decide as an individual what to do in the “privacy of the voting booth.” Actively and passively, the LCR and LO contributed to the plebiscite in favor of Chirac.

What was the relationship of forces on April 21? The qualification of Le Pen by default (according to the electoral law, only the two candidates winning the most votes in the first round remain in the second) disguised the resounding failure of all the parties represented in the National Assembly and the serious push forward of the Trotskyist extreme left.

As a whole, the right wing represented by Chirac (Rally for the Republic—RPR), Bayrou (Union for French Democracy—UDF) and Madelin (Liberal Democrats—DL) lost 3 million votes—680,000 for the RPR and 2.3 million for the UDF and DL. Facing the prospect, announced long before by the media on the basis of opinion polls, of a Chirac-Jospin confrontation, a section of the traditional voters on the right abstained or was radicalized and voted for the extreme right. The so-called “Plural left” was shattered to pieces. Jospin (PS), who boasted about his exceptional record, was massively rejected by 2.5 million voters. The PCF paid for its lack of political perspective beyond government participation by losing 1.6 million votes. A section of the left voters abstained or was radicalized and voted for the extreme left.

The massive condemnation of all the political figures—both right and left—who have shared power for the last 20 years was expressed in a record abstention rate (28.4 percent) while, paradoxically, the great number of candidates diversified the political choice in all camps, and because of a radicalization of a significant section of the voters in the

direction of the extreme right (13.2 percent) and the extreme left (10.4 percent), the parliamentary parties which, as a whole, represented 60.5 percent of registered voters in 1995, represented no more than 45.8 percent in 2002. This disaffection is the sign of a political crisis, which was amplified in a caricatured manner by the plebiscite in favor of Chirac on May 5, with an 82.2 percent result worthy of a banana republic.

June 20, 2002

On the evening of April 21, 2002, the French left parties deliberately chose to risk losing the legislative elections rather than draw the lessons of their defeat. The French Communist Party (PCF) and the Socialist Party (PS) mobilized their troops and put them at the disposal of Chirac, the representative of the bourgeoisie. The government left paid in cash for this unconditional support by losing 136 MPs and holding on to only 31 percent of seats as opposed to 54 percent in the previous National Assembly. While the right as a whole won 148 seats in the second round of the legislative elections June 16, it is the new Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) which will hold 64 percent of the seats, as opposed to 23 percent in the outgoing parliament.

On June 16, 2002, Chirac turned the tables on Giscard d'Estaing of the Union for French Democracy (UDF) who, on May 19, 1974, gained the upper hand in the race for leadership of the divided right. Chirac has now won the struggle he has been waging since 1976, the year of the creation of his Rally for the Republic (RPR), to dominate the right which emerged out of Gaullism by marginalizing the UDF and excluding the National Front (FN).

Even if the PCF absorbs the shock of its fall by preserving a parliamentary group, the defeat of Robert Hue is a symbol of the dead end reached by the party's politics since 1981, based on the renunciation of the class struggle in exchange for a few cabinet posts. The turn to "austerity" by Pierre Mauroy in 1983, and the barely disguised rallying of the left to neo-liberalism, laid bare the reality of the participation of the Communists in government: to serve as a guarantor that the working class would accept the anti-social policy of the government. This desire to manage the affairs of the bourgeoisie was not new, since the PCF had already sold its influence on the working class, from 1945 to 1947, in exchange for sharing power with the social-democrats of the SFIO [the official name of the Socialist Party—French Section of the Workers International—until 1971] and the Christian democrats of the MRP (Popular Republican Movement). Tomorrow, the PCF will play a marginal role in the recomposition of the left.

The PS remains the central political force on the left, but it has lost several figures upon which the strategy of Lionel Jospin rested. The fall of Martine Aubry in Lille, formerly a stronghold of the working class, is a symbol of the popular disapproval of the Jospin government's politics. It illustrates how removed from the concerns of the popular masses was this party of "énarques" [graduates of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA)—elite French civil service university].

The law creating the 35-hour week, the so-called "Aubry Law," which the government tried to dress up as a social conquest similar to that of the 1936 general strike creating the 40-hour week, has benefited above all privileged workers in the private sector. But this law eliminated the weekly accounting of hours in favor of a yearly calculation, increasing flexibility, and thus the individualization of working hours.

The first Aubry Law has also enabled companies to finance an organizational and managerial restructuring with government funds. It has had, according to all experts, very limited effects on employment, since the subsidized job creations were already planned, but its financing was and will increasingly be problematic. It is part-time and temporary workers, and retired people, who do not benefit from the law, who will pay heavily for this gift to the corporations.

The rout of Jean-Pierre Chevènement and his Republican Pole is a symbol on the left, mirrored by the poor showing of the RPF [Rally for

France, the right-wing party of Charles Pasqua and Philippe de Villiers] and the MNR [National Republican Movement, ultra-right party led by Bruno Mégret] on the right, of the failure of the "sovereignist" [anti-European] ideology which resisted the development of the European Union. The smooth passage to the single currency, in January 2002, has undermined a nationalist reaction that only the populist extreme right still maintains: "The legislative elections have cleared the path. All our rivals, villerists, pasquaists or chevenementists, have been wiped out" (Bruno Gollnisch, number two man in the FN, in *Libération*, June 22, 2002).

The UDF had initiated the conversion of the French state and French capitalism to the European Union in order that French corporations could remain competitive in the reorganization of the world market after the oil crisis of 1974; the PS and the PCF implemented this policy; and the RPR has rallied to it.

Finally, the Greens are passively suffering the failure of Dominique Voynet [the party's national secretary, who lost her seat in the recent parliamentary election]. The ecologists, long attached to the ideology of "neither right nor left," took advantage of the PS strategy of the so-called "plural left," aimed in fact at reducing the influence of the PCF, to take part in the last government. The calling into question of the coastal law in Corsica [in connection with the Jospin government's granting of greater autonomy to Corsica] has demonstrated how the ecologists were less committed to the defense of the environment—the ecological revamping of capitalism—than to their short-lived cabinet posts.

Chirac's victory on May 5 and that of the UMP on June 16 remain very fragile. The new UMP-dominated National Assembly does not truly represent the country since more than 42 percent of voters refused to choose between the left and the right who uphold the same political project, that of neo-liberalism. Thus, the presidential majority represents only 28 percent of registered voters. The absence of representation for the 3 million voters on the extreme left and the 5.5 million voters on the extreme right will weigh heavily in the next five years, as opposed to the 9.2 million votes for the official left and the 10.8 millions votes for the official right. Those 8.5 million votes, excluded from parliament, represent, even in a distorted way, those excluded from growth and from society: temporary and part-time workers, unemployed people and the poor (the minimum-wage earners and the homeless).

The left has ignored those voices for five years and the right will naturally not hear them. The [Jean-Pierre] Raffarin government is bent on transforming the political victory of Chirac and the UMP into a social victory by making workers pay for the defeat of the government left through, for example, a 3.6 percent increase of the price of the Orange Card [Paris-area commuter's pass] in Ile-de-France and a doubling of the cost for individual trips. The parties of the left are bankrupt. The Trotskyist organizations which contributed, actively or passively, to the plebiscite in favor of Chirac and thus to the victory of the UMP are unfit to lead the political struggles of tomorrow. What is required more than ever is the building of a party which represents the class interests of workers internationally.

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