

Members of the French Young Communists Movement speak to the WSWS

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High school students Eloïse Vis and Maxime Carliez are members of the French Young Communists Movement (*Mouvement Jeunes Communistes*), the youth organisation of the Communist Party (PCF). They live in a constituency in Amiens whose long-standing PCF deputy in the National Assembly is Maxime Gremetz, an interview with whom we posted earlier this week on the WSWS. The Stalinist party, although in terminal decline, obviously still maintains an apparatus and certain political influence in the area.

Eloïse and Maxime played a role in organising strikes and demonstrations by high school youth in Amiens following the first round of the presidential election April 21, which resulted in ultra-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front (FN) finishing second in the balloting.

The pair, students at the lycée Robert de Luzarches in *Terminale*—the final year of high school—gave the WSWS this interview on June 12, the day before the first exam of the baccalauréat, the philosophy paper, and four days before the second round of the legislative elections.

The two high school students are articulate and serious-minded young people, but it must be said that they have absorbed at an early age the Stalinist political line in large doses. Their views represent the outlook of petty-bourgeois democracy—opposition to fascism through the defence of the French Republic and its institutions—not socialism or Marxism. They defend the Socialist Party-PCF campaign for incumbent president Jacques Chirac following April 21, although it resulted in a political debacle for the left parties in the parliamentary elections. They cannot begin to grasp the political significance, or political potential, of a working class boycott of the second round of the presidential elections, so wedded are they to the preservation of the existing French political set-up.

Eloïse and Maxime quite openly state their opposition to social revolution and the project of replacing capitalism. These are essentially very conservative youth. Nationalism is deeply embedded in their thinking. The French Stalinists have encouraged this for decades, promoting the conception of defending the national economy. In the recent election many former PCF voters switched their allegiance to Le Pen, who campaigned on a chauvinist and pseudo-populist program, calling for France's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) to protect French labour and products. His anti-Maastricht rhetoric overlaps with the anti-EU propaganda of many within the French left and trade union bureaucracies. It is not accidental that Eloïse says, "Le Pen had a fairly attractive line, we have to admit."

In regard to Stalinism, Eloïse and Maxime reject the terrible crimes that the bureaucracy inflicted on the Soviet and other populations, but not the national-opportunist politics that constitutes the essence of Stalinism and which obliged the counterrevolutionary regime to resort to terror to defend its power and privileges.

The pair find the embodiment of their political ideals, a conception which they obviously derive from their Stalinist mentors, in China, the land of "red capitalism." Sections of the PCF officialdom, those identified with the "refoundation" of the party in particular, are clearly wrestling

with the problem of maintaining their influence and privileges under volatile economic and political circumstances. The Chinese model appeals to them because in that country, as opposed to the USSR, the Stalinist bureaucracy has overseen the introduction of capitalist market relations while holding on to the political reins.

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WSWS: How did you react to the elections?

Eloïse Vis: At the *lycée* people were a bit shocked, but that's not surprising. They had said before the first round that Le Pen was at 15 percent. But in the *lycée* there were reactions, like the fact that they demonstrated. You see, three quarters of the pupils are not eligible to vote.. It was their way of having their say. There were petitions signed and some parties participated in the youth demonstrations.

WSWS: What parties?

EV: The *Jeunes Communistes* and also *UNEF* [the Communist Party-led university students union]. Some university students said Le Pen should not have got into the second round and if people voted that way it was a protest.

Maxime Carliez: I know some *Terminale* pupils who voted Le Pen and who say it was a protest, but I figure that at my age you don't have a deep knowledge of politics.

WSWS: What were the slogans and the policies of these demonstrations?

MC: The policy was primarily that France is a country of immigrants, especially after the Second World War, that France has always been a democracy and to put Le Pen in power would be a blow against democracy. So the program was to show that we are all immigrants. After the Second World War many Belgians and Italians came to France to rebuild. In a way, they are France's roots. You can't clear out your roots in one fell swoop. The North African immigrants, it was France which went and got them after the Second World War, so now to kick them out does not make sense.

WSWS: I understand the hostility to Le Pen. But why this call to vote Chirac?

MC: The call to vote Chirac was a sort of referendum, it was to keep the Republic. It was not to cast a vote for Chirac but a vote against Le Pen, against fascism.

EV: However, there were a lot of people who abstained. There were a lot of broken promises made by the government. It's true it wasn't a vote for Chirac, it was a vote against Le Pen.

WSWS: That was the argument. But the upshot is that Chirac got elected and there's a right-wing government.

EV: In fact, we wanted to turn it round in the legislative elections. But it's true that's the result.

WSWS: For two weeks the left said "Vote Chirac," and then they turned around and said "Vote for us."

EV: It doesn't make sense.

WSWS: They convinced a part of the population to vote Chirac and the rest are disillusioned.

MC: In the *Jeunes Communistes* we called for a vote for Chirac, so he would be elected and block Le Pen, but we must also mobilise against Chirac because he is going to favour the bosses, not the workers.

WSWS: The result now is there's a right-wing government which is going to attack the working class and the working class is less prepared now because of this campaign which presented Chirac as the defender of Republican principles. It's a lie. There isn't a Chinese Wall between Chirac and Le Pen. There are a lot of links between them, between the National Front and the so-called democratic parties. Now the Socialist Party is denouncing the right-wing ties with [neo-fascist leader Bruno] Mégret and Le Pen. What a surprise!

EV: It's not such a surprise because many workers decided to vote Le Pen for law and order. Le Pen had a fairly attractive line, we have to admit. Half the working class went over to the right or abstained. The left has its share of responsibility because there was no left policy. Rather, the policies were centrist. Of course, when the left does nothing, people turn to other parties.

MC: The media are greatly responsible for Le Pen getting through to the second round. They predicted everywhere that "It will be [Socialist Party leader Lionel] Jospin and Chirac." Well, the French were a bit fed up with the idea that it was going to be the same two again. It's the same with law and order; the press contributed to this climate. Before when there was an assault, they said "one youth assaulted another youth". Now they say "a youth of a certain origin assaulted another youth" and that plays into Le Pen's hands. In fact, to me, a youth, let's say of Algerian origin, going and stealing some cakes from the local supermarket is less serious than when that Frenchman—a member of what Le Pen calls the superior race—went and killed five people in Nanterre. I don't think people have grasped that.

WSWS: In Longueau [a town in the Amiens metropolitan area] most people voted for Le Pen in the presidential elections and for the first round of the legislative elections they voted for Gremetz. You get the impression that now you can hop from one to the other.

EV: In Longueau the council is Communist, but now in Longueau there are a lot more right-wing people than left. Longueau is growing and is not really the old Communist town it was. It's changed a lot. It's true that it's strange, this massive vote for Le Pen in the presidential elections and then after that it's Gremetz who is out in front. It may be a reaction after the shock of the presidential elections.

WSWS: The Communist Party has lost a lot of votes. Why?

MC: I think it's because of the national candidate. Robert Hue's score in Amiens must have been about 5 percent, Gremetz got over 30 percent in the legislative elections. Well, the media gave more time to Chirac and Jospin than the smaller candidates.

WSWS: What is the Communist Party's programme?

EV: Solidarity inside the working class. Because Chirac is all for the bosses. It's not special privileges for the proletarians and working classes, but more rights for workers and government employees, and equality between the different jobs. Then no differences between the different races, a more egalitarian France in all spheres: economic, at work, in commerce. It's also solidarity.

MC: To try and take from the rich and give to the poor. It's a bit Robin Hoodish, but that's really it. The Communist Party is a party that defends the workers. It's trying to get social equality, but also equality between peoples. It's not going for profit at all costs. It's trying to feed the population. Like Mao when he came to power: he fed his population rather than exporting. In France there are a lot of homeless people who can't eat every day. I think it's very important to feed those people rather than try and get profits in from abroad.

WSWS: There were Communist ministers in Jospin's government. What did they do?

MC: Marie-Georges Buffet, minister of Youth and Sport, especially

tried to tackle the problem of drugs in sport and also law and order on the estates: football matches in the Paris region often ended up in a brawl.

EV: There were poster campaigns with leading sportsmen against delinquency and for sport, etc., which showed that sport was solidarity and was against violence.

WSWS: Do you think the capitalist system should be replaced?

MC: I'll say that it should be like what's happening in China. The problem with the USSR was that their economy was too cut off. In China it's what they call red capitalism; economically it's fine. They keep the big firms nationalised, but they allow export and import. There is trade with other countries. You have to be able to look outwards.

EV: In capitalism you have competition between countries. You should be able to be self-sufficient, be able to supply your needs and afterwards, in relation to foreign trade, already it would be a bit better because capitalism is, above all, foreign trade, rather than supporting the living standards of the people in the country.

I don't want a social revolution, just a reform of capitalism; not change capitalism completely. You have to keep foreign competition, but minimise it in comparison with what is happening today and concentrate a lot more on inside the country.

WSWS: Have you made a study of the Soviet Union? What do you think of the Russian Revolution and Stalinism?

EV: I don't agree with the Stalinist movement, but all the same, they are the ones who set up communism with Marx's ideology. Stalin is a sort of extreme form of communism.

WSWS: Extreme form or opposition to?

EV: In fact, during the Second World War the USSR was fighting for Stalin. He was a god and people fought in Stalin's name.

MC: It was the personality cult. But my mother went to the USSR and, despite what people said outside, people seemed quite free and it was quite cultured. People left work at six and went to the theatre or the cinema. Well you don't see that in France, or anywhere else. Although it was a country with weaknesses. Still, there wasn't much unemployment, because it was the state's job to give work and housing to every citizen. The initial idea was worthwhile. Or maybe Stalin had a bit too much power.

EV: A lot of people in France today think communism is Stalin's communism while they're completely different. That's why communism is rejected a lot. Under Stalin it was terror. He annexed countries during World War II, which has got nothing to do with communism. Stalin is really extreme communism and even anticommunism.

WSWS: Have you read Trotsky's writings?

MC: No, I admit I haven't read a lot of the books. I've tried to read some passages from *Capital*, but it's very difficult.

WSWS: What do you think of the far left?

EV: It's the extreme of the left. It's a bit like the far right but not so powerful. If you take the Lutte Ouvrière movement and [its presidential candidate] Arlette Laguiller, she only appeals to one section: the workers. She doesn't appeal to anybody else. In fact, if she came to power, the workers would be the privileged ones and there wouldn't be anything else. It's like if Le Pen came to power, then the only people with privileges would be the French and nobody else. It's the same. For her it would only be the workers.

MC: Also, this year she fielded candidates in the legislative elections, but in previous years she hadn't done so. In some ways it's easy to open your mouth during the presidential elections, but if after that she does nothing in government to try to improve workers' conditions, to try to defend them, I think it's a wasted vote to vote for Arlette or [presidential candidate Oliver] Besancenot [of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire].

EV: A lot of people voted Besancenot or Arlette. They got 10 percent on the first round. She was satisfied with that and she didn't call for a vote

for Chirac after that. Those are parties which aren't even in solidarity with other parties, which only want to win, that's all.

MC: Anyway, abstentionism favoured Le Pen. If we look at Le Pen's results in 1995 and in 2002, we notice that Le Pen hasn't done any better. It was the abstentions which helped him to get through to the second round. That Arlette should call on people to abstain in the second round, in some ways helped Le Pen to get a good vote. Straight away I said, we've got to vote Chirac. We haven't got any choice, that's all we can do.

EV: It's true the left is to blame. They'd got no policies. They were completely centrist. They made mistake after mistake, especially with [Jospin's education minister Claude] Allègre, for example. So everybody turned to the right or the far right. Anyway, it was [former Socialist Party President François] Mitterrand who brought the National Front into parliament. Everyone knows that, as far as the Cold War is concerned, capitalism came out of it as the victor over communism and now a lot of people look more to capitalism than to communism. There's a whole past which has brought the left to being what it is now. It's less than nothing now.

WSWS: What do you think is going to happen with the Chirac government?

EV: There'll be reforms in relation to law and order. That is certainly going to get done. Two or three days after Chirac's election law-and-order reforms were already in place.

MC: Now this is really going to be a right-wing government, really right-wing. On the one hand it's not such a bad thing, people are going to wake up to what a right-wing government really is. The workers who voted for the right will realise that it's enormously against their interests. That might be important later.

EV: It may be a lesson, but it's going to last five years.

WSWS: What political alternative can you see for workers?

EV: The left must really change its policies.

WSWS: Are you personally optimistic about the future?

EV: In France? No. When I see some reactions at school I think that we'll never get away from the right or the far right. Really, young people are conditioned by their parents, by their friends. I had a friend who was in the Communist Party like me. Now he votes for the National Front. He's a racist. He says he's fed up with all the violence. It's a load of rubbish. He had some trouble just one time. And then there's all the rumours and it goes very fast. Also there's the media.



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