

The French left and the referendum on the European constitution

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“The scenario that is being written is the scenario of April 21,” said Socialist Party (PS) spokesman Julien Dray in reaction to the first of many opinion polls revealing that more French voters are inclined to vote “no” than “yes” in the May 29 referendum on the European constitution.

Dray’s reference to the elimination of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of the 2002 French presidential election at the hands of neo-fascist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen has set the tone for the PS campaign for a “yes” vote in the coming referendum.

“Let’s be careful not to wake up with a hangover like after a certain election,” warned Socialist Party leader Jack Lang. Party leader Francois Hollande continued in the same vein: “On April 21, it was the idea that the vote would not change anything.”

The only lesson drawn by the PS from its 2002 electoral fiasco is that the experience could be used to politically frighten those working class voters who are turning away from the official left parties, which have proven, from the election of Francois Mitterrand in 1981 to Jospin’s “Plural Left” government, their full commitment to the capitalist order.

The Socialists’ resort to such intimidation tactics suggests a mood of panic in the face of their apparent failure, up to this point, to sell the European constitution to the French people. The latter’s mistrust of corporate Europe’s constitutional project is on the rise, with hardly two months to go before the May 29 vote.

Alliance at the top for a “yes” vote

Three years ago, it was the threat from the ultra-right National Front that served as the justification for a call by the PS to vote for conservative leader Jacques Chirac, the consensus candidate of the bourgeois establishment, in the runoff vote for president. This capitulation served to legitimize a government committed to carrying out a brutal attack on pensions, education and jobs.

Today, it is the opponents of the constitutional treaty who are indulging in “a certain form of demagoguery and populism,” according to Socialist leader Lang—a statement aimed at equating all opposition to the European Union constitution with the anti-European xenophobia that is the stock-in-trade of Le Pen. In similar fashion, the PS deputy for Seine-Saint-Denis, Bruno Le Roux, said, “The ‘no’ vote is the sign of a nationalist or sovereignist turn inwards.”

As in 2002, the official left is using the far right as a foil to justify rallying to the defense of the fundamental interests of the French and European ruling elite, in the holy name of the French Republic. The convergence of the PS and the right-wing government in promoting a “yes” vote on May 29 is proceeding with remarkable speed.

Nicolas Sarkozy, head of the leading party in the ruling coalition, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), argued that he had staunchly a

decline in support for the constitution among right-wing voters by putting to rest fears that it would facilitate the entry of Turkey into the European Union. He called on the Socialist Party to play its part among left-wing voters by “making clear that the European constitution provides protections from a Europe of the markets.” But, he cynically added, “Don’t ask me to wage this campaign for the PS.”

This latter quip did not prevent the UMP leader from posing at the side of his PS counterpart, Francois Hollande, on the cover of *Paris-Match*, France’s premier popular magazine.

The PS has reacted to opinion polls unfavorable to the “yes” side by turning ever more openly to its allies on the right. President Chirac, in his capacity as “signatory to the text,” must “defend it in front of the French people,” said Hollande on the LCI news channel. The PS leadership declared it a “good thing” that Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin had pledged to get personally involved in the “yes” campaign. As pointed out by the daily newspaper *Le Monde*, Chirac “needs the Socialist voters today just as he was indebted to them for his re-election in 2002 against Jean-Marie Le Pen.”

Media references to the 2002 election carefully avoid addressing the socio-economic conditions and growing popular alienation from the political establishment at the time that produced the large vote for Le Pen and the defeat of Jospin. The same factors, however, inform the current political situation.

Jospin’s defeat at the polls reflected popular anger over the anti-working class actions carried out by his “Plural Left” government—a record number of privatizations, and the European vote in Barcelona pushing back the retirement age. Today, opposition to such reactionary social policies, continued and intensified by the Chirac-Raffarin government, feeds not only protests and strikes, but also hostility toward the European constitution. The latter is seen by working people, with good reason, as a legal basis for a dramatic increase in privatizations, relocations and social spending cuts—the essential content of the policies pursued by all European Union governments under the pressure of the global financial markets.

There is a difference, on the surface, between the current referendum campaign and the near-universal rallying, across the political spectrum, behind the conservative Chirac in the May 2002 runoff vote. Despite the coming together of the media and the major bourgeois camps—the official left and conservative right—in support of the European constitution, a number of political groupings are calling for a “no” vote on May 29. On the right, the opposition is either from the standpoint of naked national chauvinism and racism (Le Pen’s National Front), or French sovereignty (the so-called “sovereignist” right of Philippe de Villier’s *Mouvement pour la France* and Charles Pasqua’s *Rassemblement pour la France*). On the left, opposition groups attack the European constitution’s “neoliberalism” (a minority within the PS, the Communist Party, anti-globalization groups such as Attac, the “extreme left” organizations—*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*, *Lutte Ouvrière* and *Parti des*

Travailleurs).

Spokesmen for the left opponents of the constitution object to the parallel with 2002, but none more so than the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR). “Hollande keeps referring to ‘the risks of an April 21’ that he claims a victory for the ‘no’ camp would represent,” reads a recent article in the LCR’s weekly newspaper *Rouge*. “Actually, it would be nothing less than a reversal of the situation on May 5, 2002—a rejection of both the right and social-liberalism.”

However, an analysis of the positions put forward by the “Noto Neo-liberalism” campaign shows that the “reversal” talked about by the LCR is only apparent.

In May 2002, the radical and “extreme left” organizations either called for a vote for Chirac (the LCR and the anti-globalization movement), or adapted to the “republican” tide with a passive call for abstention (Lutte Ouvrière). Both the LCR and Lutte Ouvrière (LO)—which, together with the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), had received a combined vote of more than ten percent in the first round of the presidential election—rejected the fight for an active working class boycott of the second round runoff between the neo-fascist Le Pen and the right-wing consensus candidate of French big business, Chirac. This initiative was put forward by the *World Socialist Web Site* as the only avenue available to French working people to express their opposition to and independence from all of the bourgeois parties. Such a political campaign would have helped politically clarify the working class and strengthen it in advance of the intensified assault on its living standards and democratic rights that a reelected Chirac was certain to oversee.

In the current referendum campaign, the “left-wing” opposition mounted by the same elements is similarly aimed at preventing the emergence of a politically independent working class standpoint.

Popular anger is being directed at the constitution’s articles supporting the mobility of European capital and its ability to take advantage of a cheap, skilled labor force in the impoverished Eastern European countries. Those clauses are painted as an excessive dose of “neoliberal” policy, and not the translation in legal terms of the irrepressible and objective tendency of the productive forces to break out of the straightjacket of an obsolete nation-state system.

This tendency takes socially destructive forms under the capitalist system based on private property. Nevertheless, it contains within itself great potential for social progress. Its realization depends on the ability of the European and international working class to intervene as an independent political force and put the productive powers of a globally integrated economy at the service of society as a whole, rather than the profits of a few.

This perspective—socialist internationalism—is the only viable basis for building a progressive opposition to a more politically and militarily integrated capitalist Europe. It is summed up programmatically in the slogan of the Socialist United States of Europe.

Such a perspective is rejected by the left campaign for a “no” vote in the constitutional referendum. The various “left” and “extreme left” groups separate “neo-liberalism” from capitalism itself, thereby obscuring the objective causes for the collapse of Keynesian national-reformist policies. This serves to encourage the illusion that past social conquests can be defended and workers’ living standards raised without challenging the profit system.

Denouncing the European Union’s neo-liberal “excesses,” these organizations fail to address the essential nature of the drive for a unified capitalist Europe: the effort of the dominant sections of European big business, led by French and German capital, to create the political conditions for an intensification of attacks on workers throughout the continent and the assertion of European imperialist interests against the drive of the United States for global hegemony.

Left campaigners for a “no” vote angrily point to the constitution’s

provision that Europe’s defense policy remain within the framework of NATO—“an alliance controlled by Washington,” in the words of the LCR. But they say hardly a word about ongoing efforts to establish Europe’s own military intervention forces, independent of the United States. Under the cover of safeguarding Europe’s “social model” from the depredations of the “Anglo-Saxon” model, and opposing a “unipolar” world under US domination, these elements are adapting themselves to the agenda of European imperialism, which is historically no less brutal or predatory than its American counterpart.

This finds political expression in efforts to channel popular opposition to the European constitution back under the umbrella of the Socialist Party.

Political subordination to the Socialist Party

This is the acknowledged objective of a minority current within the Socialist Party which broke ranks by calling for a “no” vote on May 29, drawing the ire of the party establishment, including threats of exclusion. But it is instructive that those threats were not carried out.

Beyond the jockeying of party factions and individuals for influence two years ahead of national elections, a basic fact remains: the PS could not fulfill its role of containing working class resistance from below if it did not tolerate gestures by its left wing to appeal to working class opposition, the better to neutralize it.

Prominent supporters of the “no” campaign within the PS are quite candid about this. Said former Socialist prime minister and current presidential hopeful Laurent Fabius last November: “We haven’t forgotten April 21, 2002. When Socialists do not look first to their left, they lose.”

Henri Emmanuelli, a former head of the PS who also calls for a “no” vote, bemoaned the lack of tact shown by the current party leadership in threatening with sanctions or expulsion those who “violate party democracy”—a reference to an internal referendum among the membership that resulted in majority support for the European constitution. Nostalgically recalling the era of Mitterrand, Emmanuelli said, “At least he [Mitterrand] knew the left. With a proportional system, he proved able to build a great party. But the approach of the current majority is endangering those gains.”

An analysis entitled “The War of the Lefts” in the March 24 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a weekly news magazine close to the PS, makes a similar point. “The official left may suffer a backlash,” the authors warn. “Mistrust towards the PS is recurrent.” They then make the crucial observation: “Fabius broke ranks to head off a break with the radical left.”

Another noteworthy element in Fabius’ position is his fear that “our ambition for a powerful and united Europe” will end up “drifting towards a large market open to all winds and politically diluted.” Thus, Fabius last month published a column in *Le Figaro* in which he pleaded for a “political organization that enables [Europe] to influence the affairs of the world.”

This statement points to the essence of Fabius’ opposition to the constitution. The former Socialist prime minister balks at supporting a constitution he considers “diluted” and not “ambitious” enough in asserting the interests of European big business. That a Fabius can nonetheless take his place in the “left-wing” campaign for a “no” vote speaks volumes about the operation being conducted, with the assistance of forces such as the LCR, to bring the growing mood of popular dissatisfaction under the political tutelage of the PS.

Attac and the anti-globalization movement

A fact noted in the analysis offered by the *Le Nouvel Observateur* is that “anti-globalization elements have close links with minority Socialists.” Attac, a leading component of the anti-globalization movement, whose French branch has always been under the political influence, if not control, of the PS, leaves no room for doubt on this. For the first time the group will officially campaign in a national election, calling for a “no” vote on May 29.

The text of the constitution “calls for an end to any social striving,” says Attac-France President Jacques Nikonoff. For years, he points out, “Europe has been going through a deep economic, social and environmental crisis.” He goes on to formulate the political perspective underlying the entire campaign for a “left-wing” vote against the European constitution. “This crisis is the direct result of political choices made by European Union governments and the European Commission, putting competitiveness and the market ahead of any other considerations, such as cooperation, solidarity and social justice.”

By thus denying any objective basis for the crisis of European and world capitalism, and painting the “economic, social and environmental” manifestations of this crisis as merely the consequence of bad “political choices,” Nikonoff serves as a defender of the profit system.

Nor does he seek to hide the fact that his organization is basically working on behalf of the PS. “A ‘no’ victory will undoubtedly stimulate social and labor struggles... This victory will lead to a clarification in the position of the Socialist Party and the Greens on the central issue of our time: the [neo]-liberal question. This clarification could reach a mature state right in time for the 2007 presidential and legislative elections, and those could then result not merely in an alternation, but a genuine alternative.”

In speaking of a PS victory in 2007 as an “alternative,” Nikonoff conveniently ignores the record of the Jospin government, which began the attacks on working people which are now in full swing under the right-wing Chirac regime. Likewise, he says nothing of the “Project for 2007” recently unveiled by the PS, which boasts: “The Socialists do not propose a break with the market economy or a departure from globalization. This has already been proven in practice; now it must be openly said.”

The “extreme left”

Attac is one of the political forces being courted by the LCR as part of the latter’s efforts to build a big “anti-capitalist” party. The two organizations are campaigning together for a “no” vote on the “neo-liberal” constitution.

The minority current within the PS is another political field for action. Christian Picquet, a leading member of the LCR, recently took part in a joint meeting in Paris with the Stalinists of the French Communist Party as part of the “no” campaign. He sat beside Socialist senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who has been, since the start of the referendum campaign, the most vocal PS leader calling for a “no” vote.

Picquet summed up his intervention at the meeting with the words: “On May 29, we will have to tell Chirac: ‘Twenty years, that is enough!’” Thus, the radical-sounding “no” for which the LCR has pledged to fight—the central element of its political activity for weeks—ends up being a mere protest vote against Chirac.

The principal political “catch” for which the LCR is angling is the decayed remnants of French Stalinism, in the form of the Communist Party (PCF). Longtime LCR leader Alain Krivine regrets that “to this

point, the [PCF] national secretary only takes part in meetings organized by the PCF, even if they are open to other forces, including the LCR.”

Krivine laments, in particular, the existence of elements within the leadership of the PCF “who refuse any ‘minority-resulting’ alliance with the LCR, and do everything in their power to preserve tomorrow’s alliance with the PS, using the formula that a ‘yes’ vote need not necessarily be ‘only a right-wing yes.’”

The LCR’s political trajectory is clear. It is running after the PCF Stalinists, who can think only of “preserving tomorrow’s alliance with the PS.” Along a somewhat more tortuous path than Attac, for example, the LCR will end up in the same place—within the political orbit of the PS.

As for Lutte Ouvrière, its position on the May 29 referendum is dominated by the same political passivity and semi-abstentionism it exhibited during the 2002 runoff election. In the lead editorial of the March 18 issue of its newspaper, the organization’s spokeswoman Arlette Laguiller writes as follows:

“During and after the March 10 demonstrations, it was said that their success had to be converted into a success for the ‘no’ vote in the referendum. All those who say this are betraying the interests of workers. The mounting anger must not be diverted into the ballot box... It is on the shop floor and in the street that we are strong.”

The third group in France claiming, along with the LCR and LO, to be Trotskyist, the *Parti des Travailleurs* (PT), takes an openly nationalist position on the May 29 referendum.

National Secretary Daniel Gluckstein writes on the front page of the March 10 issue of *Informations Ouvrières*, the PT’s newspaper, “The *Parti des Travailleurs* wants all those taking part in today’s actions to realize that the origin of the attacks they are facing is the European Union. Their demands can be met only if we put an end to European directives.”

Since its issue of December 23, 2004, *Informations Ouvrières* has been trumpeting: “No to the European constitution! For a Europe of free peoples and sovereign nations. No to regionalization. No to forced inter-community. No to privatizations. Defend public services. Defend the 36,000 communes. Defend the Republic, one, indivisible and secular. Let’s free ourselves from the yoke of the European Union! For a free and fraternal union of the peoples of Europe!”

With this chauvinist rhetoric, the PT is taking a major step toward the right-wing and extreme right opponents of the European constitution. They aid the French and European ruling elite’s efforts to paint any opposition to their constitutional project for a “strong” capitalist Europe as exclusively driven by a narrow nationalist viewpoint.

In the case of the PT, this charge is clearly justified. But nationalism also lies, in a more concealed form, at the heart of the perspective put forward by movements such as the LCR and Attac. They sow the futile and dangerous illusion that the capitalist national state can serve as an instrument to control global finance capital and preserve a “social Europe,” providing pressure is applied from below.



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