French electorate rejects European constitution

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30 May 2005

The following is an initial report on the results of Sunday's referendum in France on the European Union constitution. A more comprehensive analysis of the vote and its political implications will be posted Tuesday.

French voters decisively rejected the European Union (EU) constitutional treaty in Sunday's national referendum. Over 56 percent voted "no" while 44 percent cast ballots in favor. The turnout was exceptionally high. More than 70 percent went to the polls, as compared to 43 percent who participated in elections for the European parliament one year ago.

Opinion polls on the eve of the vote projected a defeat for the constitution, but the result nevertheless came as a shock to the political elite in France and throughout Europe. It has thrown the European political establishment into a deep political crisis.

The vote had the character of a sharp popular rebuff not only to President Jacques Chirac and his conservative Union for a Political Movement (UMP), but also to the Socialist Party, which joined with Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin in campaigning for the constitution. The Green Party was also part of the official "yes" camp, which had the overwhelming support of the media.

Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie (UMP) said the result was "a defeat for Europe and a defeat for France." Dominique Strauss-Kahn (Socialist Party) called it "a grave defeat and bad news for Europe." Jean-Claude Juncker, prime minister of Luxemburg and current EU president, said he was "perplexed" and added that the result "created a problem."

It was the clear that a decisive factor in the large margin against the constitution was broad popular opposition to the "free market" orientation written into the document, and concern that it would serve as a blueprint for an intensified attack on jobs, living standards and the welfare state. Opposition to the constitution was fueled by and linked to rising social discontent with Chirac and Raffarin and their right-wing social agenda.

The referendum was preceded by a broad political mobilization. Hundreds and sometimes thousands turned up at the many meetings and rallies for or against the constitution that were held all over the country. A three-hour television debate on Thursday night with representatives of all the major parties, including organizations of the so-called "far left" that are not represented in parliament, attracted an audience of eight million.

The more the debate spread, the more the social and democratic issues began to predominate. The campaign issues of the far right element within the "no" camp—opposition to immigration, hostility to Turkey's entry into the EU, law and order, etc.—receded into the background, while the constitution's "neoliberal" economic bias and anti-democratic features came to the fore.

The "no" vote was, taken as a whole, not directed "against Europe," despite the attempt of the conservative parties and their Socialist Party allies to cast opposition to the constitution in that light. One of the most popular arguments advanced over and over again at rallies opposing the constitution was that by rejecting it, the French people would be striking a blow for working people all over Europe.

Initial media comments tended to attribute the wide margin against the constitution purely to anger toward the government. Such comments, however, misrepresent the real motives of the electorate.

Opposition to the government played a major role in the growth of the no vote. But the fact that this was

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directed against the European constitution was by no means accidental. The constitution is an embodiment of the very policies promoted by Chirac and Raffarin. When people began to view the referendum as an opportunity to reject these anti-social policies, the wave of opposition became unstoppable.

The establishment parties—the Socialist Party and the Greens as well as the ruling conservative parties—launched a massive effort to reverse the "no" tide. But to no avail.

The referendum has thus exposed the deep gulf separating broad layers of the people from the entire political establishment. The vote reflects the social divisions in French society.

According to one poll, three quarters of all wage workers, two thirds of all employees, and the majority of farmers voted "no," while executives and academics generally voted "yes." More than 80 percent of the supporters of the government parties (Chirac's UMP and the "free market" liberal Union for the French Democracy—UDF) voted for the constitution, while a majority of Socialist Party and Green supporters voted "no," in defiance of the recommendations of their respective party leaders.

The referendum result has deeply shaken French politics, and the reverberations will be felt for a long time.

Less than an hour after the result was known, Chirac went on television and announced that he would make major decisions regarding the government and its priorities within a few days—an unmistakable indication that he will sack Prime Minister Raffarin. This, however, will not solve the problems within the UMP, where a sharp struggle is already underway between party leader Nicolas Sarkozy and the Chirac camp.

The official leadership of the Socialist Party, mainly followers of former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, has been discredited by its campaign for a "yes" vote. The party, which was deeply split on the issue, could very well break apart.

For the European Union, the rejection of the constitution in France, one of the European Community's six original member countries, heralds a protracted crisis. Further political integration will likely be blocked for a considerable period, if it does not begin to disintegrate altogether.

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