

European Constitution rejected

The political consequences of the French “no” vote

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The French voters’ rejection of the European constitution has thrown ruling circles in both France and the whole of Europe into a major crisis. The shock’s full effect will only become evident in the coming weeks and months.

While President Jacques Chirac, the governing parties, the major opposition parties and the media employed every available means to secure a “yes” vote, a clear majority of 55 percent rejected the constitution. This vote represented an unambiguous declaration of opposition to the entire course of European social and political development. Even Chirac was forced to admit in his initial comment on the result that France had made a “democratic” and “sovereign” decision on the issue.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, leading member of the Socialist Party and advocate of the “yes” camp, put the constitution’s defeat down to irrational “fear” and “demagogy.” But if there was any fear mongering, it was on the part of the constitution’s supporters. In the face of considerable popular pressure, they resorted to threats and intimidation.

Foreign Minister Michel Barnier warned that a “no” vote would put France “out in the cold” and “back in second league,” while Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin painted a nightmare scenario of immigrants flooding the country if the constitution—with its regulations reinforcing the EU’s perimeter borders—were to fail.

The resounding “no” was the result of a broad political mobilisation that developed at an astonishing pace over the last four weeks. Hundreds of thousands participated in numerous meetings for and against the constitution. Television discussions drew audiences of millions. The atmosphere in the country became akin to the campaign fever accompanying a parliamentary or presidential election. Voters became convinced they could put a stop to a social and political development that they opposed.

The wider the political mobilisation, the less was heard of the far right’s “dog whistle” issues such as immigration and xenophobia, and the more social and political issues came to the fore. The neo-liberal and undemocratic character of the constitution was at the centre of the “no” campaign. It was directed not against “Europe,” but against an anti-social, reactionary constitution. While the “yes” camp campaigned for “a strong France,” the most popular slogan from the “no” camp was “For another Europe.”

The division between the camps was along social lines. Three-quarters of blue-collar and two-thirds of white-collar workers, as well as the majority of small farmers and rural workers, voted “no.”

With the failure of the referendum, France’s ruling elite confronts the fragmentation of its domestic and foreign policy.

Rejection of the constitution means a decisive personal and political defeat for President Chirac, the greatest since he took office ten years ago.

Replacing the prime minister will not dispel the crisis. Chirac accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and appointed his ally Dominique de Villepin to the post, rejecting his bitterest party rival, UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) chairman Nicolas Sarkozy, the advocate of a “French Thatcherism.” But trench warfare within the government camp is bound to intensify and its unpopularity amongst voters will inevitably grow.

However, the greatest loser in the referendum is neither Chirac nor the UMP but the Socialist Party, which was deeply split on the issue. The party officially backed a “yes” vote, but some leading figures were prominent supporters of the “no” camp. Amongst party members, the split is deeper still, with a majority more decisively against the constitution—60 percent voted “no” in the referendum. A split in the party is a definite possibility.

The current leadership team under François Hollande, which owes its political rise to Lionel Jospin, has severely discredited itself through its fierce advocacy of the unpopular constitution. Jospin himself, who broke three years of silence to promote the constitution, has finally put paid to his reputation as a “left-wing” socialist.

But opponents of the constitution within the Socialist Party are too clearly associated with the right-wing politics of previous socialist governments to be able to present themselves as a credible alternative. The same applies to the chairman of the Communist Party, Marie-George Buffet, who was Minister for Sport in Jospin’s cabinet. Moreover, the “left-wing” socialists are deeply divided among themselves.

The international character of social democracy’s decline was underscored by the participation of numerous social democrats from Germany and Spain—including the heads of the German and Spanish governments, Gerhard Schröder and Jose Luis Zapatero—in the campaign in France for the constitution. In Germany the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) decided to call early national elections following its eleventh consecutive defeat in state and local elections.

The crisis of the French government has developed under unusual circumstances. Political crises in parliamentary democracies are traditionally defused by the replacement of the government with the opposition. In this case, both the ruling parties and the official left opposition have been repudiated, suffering defeat at the hands of the electorate. Thus one can predict that the political crisis will inevitably deepen and assume increasingly malignant forms.

The floundering of the constitution has delivered a terrible blow to the cornerstone of French strategy for the last 15 years.

Since Jean Monnet and Maurice Schuman first established the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950, France, together with Germany, has played the leading role in the economic integration of Europe. The now defunct constitutional contract was drawn up by the former French

President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who headed the European Constitutional Assembly. This was supposed to be the crowning moment in the process of European unification, by emulating in the political arena the integration that has been brought about in the continent's economic relations. Europe—and thereby France—was to be empowered through the constitution to take its place on the world stage, to play a leading role and confront the United States on equal terms.

Such plans now lie in cold storage, and have possibly gone into reverse. On the eve of the referendum, incumbent president of the European Council, Jean-Claude Juncker, (Luxemburg) described a possible “no” as “a catastrophe for France, for Chirac and for the whole world.”

Now he is trying to put on a brave face. “Europe will go on and its institutions will continue to function. We are aware of the difficulties, but we are confident of finding a way of moving Europe forward again,” runs the joint declaration from Juncker, EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso and EU Parliament President Josep Borrell after the result of the French referendum.

A means to move Europe forward is, however, hard to imagine. A rejection of the constitution in Holland's referendum today (June 1) is virtually certain, and in all likelihood Britain's Prime Minister Blair will not even hold the scheduled referendum. The transition of governmental power in Germany, where the national elections will be brought forward to next September, threatens to dampen relations between Paris and Berlin—until now the twin motors of the European Union. The CDU (Christian Democratic Union) candidate for chancellor, Angela Merkel, has repeatedly criticised Schröder, along with Chirac, for his course of conflict with Washington.

An economic and political crisis is also mounting in the US. The occupation of Iraq is developing into an inescapable disaster, while domestic debt and the balance of trade deficit are spiralling out of control. The American government will invariably seek to resolve its problems by an increasingly unilateralist policy, involving renewed military interventions and at the expense of its European rivals.

The paralysis of the European Union, on the one hand, and increasing pressure from America, on the other, will also strengthen the tendency towards a go-it-alone foreign policy and military adventurism in Europe. One option already widely discussed is the shaping of a German and French-led core Europe that will free itself from the paralysing influence of the pro-American British and eastern European states.

This is where the battle fronts between the supporters and opponents of the constitution dissolve into one another. One of the most aggressive calls for movement in this direction has come from a constitution opponent, Jacques Nikonoff, president of the French section of Attac. In a piece written for *Le Monde* that would have won the unqualified approval of General Charles De Gaulle, Nikonoff criticised the “monstrous institutional edifice of the constitution” for aiming to “strangle the French-German dynamic.”

Leaving political niceties aside, the leader of France's anti-globalisation movement launched an open attack on Britain for “sitting on its emergency seat” in the EU, blocking all initiatives and, above all, orienting itself across the Atlantic. He also lambasted “the three old fascist dictatorships (Spain, Portugal and Greece), who “owed so much to the EU,” “constantly received European finance,” but “who only regarded the EU as paymaster for their own development needs and not as a genuine community of nations.” Finally, he rounded on the new EU members from the former Warsaw Pact for orienting towards the US rather than the EU. “When the war in Iraq gave them the chance to prove their commitment to Europe, they chose the wrong camp.”

Nikonoff's article rose to a hymn of praise to “the German-French partnership and the Benelux countries”: “This is where you'll find the Union's motor, the motor that is sure to stall in the glutinous mud (of the constitution) Power of a particular kind is required for an ambitious

political project. This is something the Union doesn't possess.”

Laurent Fabius, from the right wing of the Socialist Party, argued in a similar fashion in his stand against the constitution. And when it comes to the defence of French interests such a political approach would undoubtedly find favour in Jean-Pierre Chevenement's Citizens' Movement and the Communist Party, which constantly presents itself as more Gaullist than the Gaullists.

The rejection of the constitution has raised important political questions, but it has not resolved them. The ruling circles will not accept such a defeat without a struggle. Pressure from the world economy and the growing confrontation with the US drives them to carry out new attacks against the working class.

Whereas Chirac hypocritically expressed understanding for the decision of the voters, other representatives of the governing parties defiantly maintained their support for the constitution. François Bayrou, the leader of the liberal UDF, declared that he was proud to have defended it. He demanded an immediate and fundamental change of policies.

The head of the UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, also interpreted the result of the referendum as a mandate to carry out a fundamental “reform” of the country. His first statement after the results were announced amounted to an application for the position of head of the French government. If the crisis keeps intensifying then even a resignation of the president—Chirac's acknowledged heir-apparent is Sarkozy—cannot be ruled out.

The most important advantage still enjoyed by the establishment parties is the absence of either an independent political orientation or independent party of the working class. The role of the so-called “far-left”—from the left wing of the Socialist Party to the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the French Communist Party—is to prevent any development in this direction. They spread the illusion that the ruling circles could, under pressure from below, be forced to carry out a fundamentally different policy and in this way they cling to the “left” wing of the bourgeoisie itself.

The LCR is striving to develop an alliance with the Communist Party, which for its part seeks an alliance with the left wing of the Socialist Party, which in turn winks favourably in the direction of the right wing of the party and to Laurent Fabius. There is no doubt as to the orientation of figures like Fabius, Henri Emannuelli (SP) or Marie George Buffet (CP) if they gain political influence. All of them are bourgeois politicians who defend the French state and the capitalist order.

One recalls the period in office of François Mitterrand (French Socialist Party), who made similar left noises in the 1970s until he lurched sharply to the right in 1982, just one year after his election as president. One of his prime ministers at the time was Fabius, who today reaches out to the left opponents of the constitution. Lionel Jospin cultivated his own “left” aura until, as head of the French government, he revealed himself to be a run-of-the-mill capitalist politician.

The democratic rights and social gains of the working class can only be defended on the basis of a socialist programme that challenges capitalist property relations. Only the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe can overcome the division of the continent into rival nation states and enable the utilisation and further development of its enormous wealth and productive forces in the interest of society as a whole.



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