Presidential elections in France: The nationalism of the Workers Party

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A major feature of the French presidential election campaign has been the nationalist rhetoric employed by all candidates of the political establishment to cover up social divisions, stigmatise immigrants and defend "French interests."

This has not been limited to the conservative or extreme right parties of Nicolas Sarkozy (Union for a Popular Movement—UMP) or Jean-Marie Le Pen (National Front—FN). Nor is it limited to the official "left," whose Socialist Party (PS) candidate Ségolène Royal has surprised even some of her supporters by chanting the national anthem at the end of her election rallies and demanding that every French citizen should have his own tricolour flag at home. On the misnamed "extreme left," the Workers Party (Parti des travailleurs—PT) is conducting an election campaign whose policies and vocabulary unmistakably defend the French state and French "national sovereignty."

The PT has its origins in the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste(OCI), a former Trotskyist party that broke with the Fourth International in 1971. Since then, the OCI has turned increasingly to the right and developed into a prop of the bourgeois state.

In 1992, the OCI dissolved itself into a party with the new name "Worker's Party" (PT). The PT asserts that it represents a number of different political currents—communist, socialist, anarcho-syndicalist—but remains dominated by the old cadre of the OCI, including the now 86-year-old Pierre Lambert.

One finds no mention of the word "socialism" or even the term "working class" in the election statements of the PT. The party's programme is strictly limited to bourgeois demands "for the re-conquest of democracy" and "the defence of the secular republic." The main demand raised in the PT election campaign is the "defence of the 36,000 municipalities," which are largely located in the rural areas of France.

Five years ago the PT put up its national secretary, Daniel Gluckstein, as presidential candidate. This time, the party's candidate is Gérard Schivardi, a master craftsman and mayor of the 373-strong village of Mailhac in the Aude wine-growing region of Southern France. Although his campaign is being run exclusively by the PT, he is not participating in the name of the party. Instead he declares he is the "candidate of the mayors."

According to Schivardi and the PT, the small municipalities of France represent the embodiment of democracy and are a bulwark against the dismantling of public services and social gains. These are the issues that are continuously taken up in the party's election statements.

After being granted official status as a presidential candidate, Schivardi told a press conference: "Our 36,000 municipalities with their elected local councils and the freely constituted federations between the municipalities are the backbone of the Republic. They must not disappear in the course of fusions with the large municipalities."

In a letter to all French mayors two years ago, PT Secretary Gluckstein declared: "The 36,000 municipalities are closely connected with the unity and indivisibility of the secular republic, which for its part is based on the equal rights of citizens across the entire national territory. This equality depends on the existence of national public services, which ensures that the citizens in all municipalities have equal access to energy, post office and public services, where the national monopoly guarantees uniform fees."

This glorification of the small municipalities and their mayors as bastions of equality and democracy is obviously complete nonsense.

The mayors do not represent the interests of the French electorate against the state, but are rather a significant part of the apparatus of state repression. The current Villepin government had a law on the prevention of delinquency adopted last month that gives the mayor a local sheriff's role. Families whose children are absent from school could lose their welfare benefits as a result of a mayor's representation to a judge. Article 2 authorises the mayor to maintain public order and security. He also is responsible for "repressing" disputes between neighbours. Articles 27-28 deal with powers for the forced evacuation of gypsies who are illegally parked.

In addition, many city halls, which have the task of assigning jobs, awarding contracts and deciding on other privileges, are notorious for their corruption.

It is a well-known fact that mayors are appointed by the same political parties that determine national policy. The claim by Schivardi to speak on behalf of all mayors, irrespective of party membership, is in fact an appeal for cross-party cooperation.

This tendency is also clear in a letter addressed by the PT to those mayors who supported Schivardi's candidacy with their signature. The letter states: "Was it not correct that we contacted all candidates for the presidential election and the ensuing parliamentary election to say: 'We are ready to back every step by any candidate who supports a break with the European Union, the reestablishment of democracy, the re-conquest of our public services, and the defence of the 36,000 municipalities and their privileges.' "

In other words, the PT is ready to cooperate with everyone, including the right-wing mayors, as long as they are prepared to speak out against the European Union, pay lip-service to democracy and defend the autonomy of the municipalities.

The federation of French mayors (AMF), which includes nearly all of the country's 36,000 mayors, was less enthusiastic about Schivardi's candidacy. It has undertaken legal measures to prevent Schivardi from posing as a "candidate of the mayors in their entirety." The federation insists on strict political neutrality for mayors.

The second central axis of the PT election campaign is the demand for a "break with the European Union." The criticism of the European Union raised by the PT is not made from the standpoint of a class analysis and the common interests of the European and international working class. Instead, the PT seeks to defend the French nation and develop a foul chauvinist and anti-American campaign.

The PT attributes all the social problems afflicting French society,

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including the problems of the municipalities, to the European Union and international financial capital. The latter, according to the PT, is predominantly of American origin. French big business and the French ruling class remain largely exempt from criticism.

"European directives and the Maastricht Treaty have exposed the national economy to shameful plundering by the robber-barons of big finance capital," Daniel Gluckstein writes in an editorial for the party newspaper *Information Ouvrières*.

In another editorial, Gluckstein takes up a remark first made by the French magazine *Le POINT*, which referred to the American flag flying over the Paris stock exchange. "The stars and stripes," according to Gluckstein, "flutters not only over the Palace Brongniart [the Paris stock exchange], but also over Airbus, over manufacturing and, in the final analysis, over the entire economy." He warns that should France fail to break with the European Union, what would be left would be "a heap of rubble with the 'star-spangled banner' waving overhead."

According to the PT, the alternative to the European Union is a "free Europe of free peoples." In one of his presidential campaign press statements, Schivardi actually describes himself as the candidate who defends "the free union of free peoples and the nations of Europe."

The political content lodged in this choice of words is unmistakable. Appeals to "the people" and "the nation" as an answer to the globalisation of modern economy are characteristic of extreme right political tendencies. It is no coincidence that right-wing parties in the European Parliament opposed to the European Union have united under the name "Europe of the Nations." This group includes the right-wing Italian parties National Alliance and Northern League as well as Rassemblement pour la Franceled by Charles Pasqua and the three right-wing parties that currently share power in Poland.

Such tendencies usually appeal to layers of the middle class that feel threatened by the consequences of globalisation, yearn for the protection of the national state and respond to any slogans that blame foreign powers and forces for social evils.

Such tendencies play a useful role for the ruling class. They defend capitalist property relations and divide the working class, whose existence is closely bound up with modern, global productive forces. The working class can defend its social gains and democratic rights only by uniting internationally and reorganising the world economy on a socialist basis. The class-conscious response by workers to the European Union is the United Socialist States of Europe, and not a "Europe of the Nations."

Socialist demands are entirely lacking in the election programme of the PT. It calls for the "re-nationalisation" of Airbus and privatised public services. But for the PT, this amounts to a takeover by the bourgeois state, which has the task of more aggressively representing the interests of French companies on the world market.

There have been many examples of such capitalist nationalisations in French history, but they have nothing in common with nationalisation in a socialist sense. The latter presupposes the active control and participation of workers and is aimed at reorganising all of society on a socialist basis.

The nationalist election campaign of the PT is indicative of how far this organisation has moved to the right. It has long since abandoned the working class and now identifies itself with the "national interest" the French bourgeoisie. This right-wing development has an extensive pre-history.

The student and worker protests of 1968 led to a stream of politically inexperienced forces entering the OCI, but the party reacted by breaking with the Fourth International and turning towards the social democratic bureaucracy. At the start of the 1970s, it sent a host of its members into the Socialist Party, which was led at the time by François Mitterrand. One of these OCI members operating in secret was Lionel Jospin, who rose to become a leader of the Socialist Party and in 1995 the French prime minister. Over the same period, the OCI was active in, and for a period managed to dominate, the trade union federation Force Ouvrière (FO).

The party became an instrument of the reformist trade union bureaucracy, which had in the post-war period played a crucial role in establishing a system of class compromise, ensuring the stability of capitalism and in the course of doing so gaining its own considerable rewards.

The globalisation of production has now swept away the basis for the bureaucracy's policies of social compromise. Organically hostile to any independent movement of the working class, this bureaucracy has shifted consistently to the right in order to demonstrate its usefulness to the ruling class. In so doing, it has lost much of its former influence and, like the Socialist Party, is experiencing a drastic decline in membership.

The PT was created in 1992 to assemble those dissatisfied functionaries who, for one reason or another, had been unable to make successful careers in the apparatus of the Socialist Party or the unions. At this time, the OCI disassociated itself somewhat from the Socialist Party apparatus, which in previous years had absorbed many of the party's prominent cadres. The OCI did not disassociate itself, however, from the political perspectives of the Socialist Party, and remained utterly hostile to any independent grass roots movement of the working class.

All the statements of the PT are addressed to this milieu of functionaries and bureaucrats. They are carefully formulated in an unctuous manner, with political office-holders or fictitious committees substituting for the working class. The PT hardly appears in public, unless in the form of one of its camouflage organisations. The party resembles a Matroschka, with one Russian doll hiding another in a succession of dolls: the OCI is hidden in the PT, which is hidden in a series of other committees with long-winded, bureaucratic names.

Gluckstein and Schivardi once appeared as members of a "delegation of the National Committee for the Re-conquest of Democracy." On another occasion, *Information Ouvrières* published an "appeal by the members of the support committee for Gérard Schivardi, the Parti des travailleurs-supported candidate of the mayors, to the 538 mayors who have agreed to sponsor our candidates"—signed by Gluckstein and Schivardi.

This absurd game of hide-and-seek is aimed above all at fooling the public. It is typical of the thinking of a caste of bureaucrats for whom manoeuvring and intrigues behind the scenes have become second nature.

This layer of functionaries also includes the mayors of the 36,000 municipalities. In France, the office of mayor is the basic starting point for a political career. Even those who manage to rise to the post of national minister or even head of government usually decline to give up their mayoral post. It is characteristic of the social orientation of the PT that in a "letter to the mayors," Gluckstein refers to the 36,000 municipalities and the trade union organisations as "the two pillars of democracy."

Intensifying nationalism is the response of the former reformist parties and trade unions to deepening social tensions and the growth of opposition from the working class. Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal has wrapped herself in the tricolour and dutifully sings the national anthem. At Airbus, it is the PT-influenced Force Ouvrière union that has sought to divert anger over job cuts by blaming workers at German factories. The nationalist election campaign of the PT is a concentrated expression of this development.

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