

After first round of French election: the contest for the “centre”

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Workers and young people confront a difficult choice in the final round of the French presidential election on May 6. Although they reject and despise the candidate of the Socialist Party, many will vote for Ségolène Royal in order to prevent a victory for Nicolas Sarkozy, the right-wing candidate of the Gaullist UMP.

There can be no doubt about the danger posed by Sarkozy. The mayor of the upper class Parisian suburb of Neuilly is the favoured candidate of the wealthy, the stock exchange and big business. He has adopted parts of the program of the extreme right National Front and promotes strict law and order policies. Should he become president, his first measures will be to limit the right to strike, restrict immigration and lower taxes for the rich. There are strong Bonapartist characteristics to his politics.

As many are aware, however, Royal represents no real alternative. Her program is substantially the same as that of Sarkozy, and during the election campaign she constantly adapted to her rival's right-wing policies. Royal is also an unconditional advocate of the interests of big business.

Should Royal win the second round of the election, she will only create the preconditions for a return to power by the right-wing at a later date. This is clear from the experiences in Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain, where the right-wing policies of social-democratic governments have strengthened the most reactionary forces. In France, the Socialist Party-led government of Lionel Jospin allowed the triumphal return to power of the Gaullists in 2002, after they had miserably discredited themselves and been driven out of office in 1997.

Ségolène Royal reacted to the result of the first round of the election with a further shift to the right. With the words, “I now no longer belong exclusively to socialist voters,” she appealed to the right-wing bourgeois UDF as soon as the result was known. The candidate of the UDF, François Bayrou, likes to describe himself as a man of the centre and was the third-place candidate in the first round with 18.6 percent of the vote.

Green Party European parliamentary deputy and former 1968 radical Daniel Cohn Bendit is currently touring editorial board offices and TV studios with the message that a left-wing campaign by Royal is “hopeless” and would sink her chances in the upcoming vote. “If Royal tries to play it on the traditional socialist card, she will lose, because France has veered right,” he told the British *Guardian* newspaper.

The same refrain is repeated ad nauseam from all sides. Voters are bombarded with the argument that they must support Royal in order to stop Sarkozy, and that Royal must shift to the right in order to win the “votes from the centre”. In other words, that acceptance of Royal's

right-wing program is the price that must be paid in order to prevent Sarkozy becoming president.

This line of argument is completely false. The “centre,” which allegedly determines the result of the election, is an abstract construct without any relation to social reality. The middle classes are anything but homogeneous. They are just as deeply split as society as a whole. Some members of the middle class have become rich and have risen into the ranks of the ruling elite, but under condition of constant welfare and social cuts, the overwhelming majority suffer the same problems and needs as the working class.

The social situation of millions of university graduates, self-employed, small businessmen and farmers is no better, and often even worse, than that of most workers. This state of affairs was powerfully confirmed by the mass protests against the first job contract (CPE) last year. The popular opposition to a law aimed at turning school and university graduates into a pool of cheap labour was supported by broad layers of both the working and middle classes.

The fact is that the broad masses of the French population have been moving to the left in recent years—even if Cohn Bendit claims the opposite. This was clear from the protests against the CPE, as well as the rejection by French voters of the European constitution in 2005, and the numerous mass demonstrations and strikes, which have repeatedly paralysed the country during the past twelve years. The high level of voter turnout in the first round of the election, which reached a record of 85 percent, is also an expression of a growing political consciousness on the part of oppressed social classes, which have remained largely passive up to now.

The “France” to which Cohn Bendit refers is the France of the wealthy and propertied, in particular the layer known in France as “Bobo”—the bourgeois Bohemians. They live in renovated former workers' districts of the big cities, wear designer clothes, eat exclusively bio-foods, have a good education and exquisite taste, and were not infrequently left-wing radicals in their youth. These elements voted overwhelmingly for Bayrou, a close friend, incidentally, of Cohn Bendit.

For his part, Bayrou appealed to conservative, predominantly rural layers of voters, who are shocked by the growing polarization of society and yearn for an idealized past. His program is a mixture of illusion and deception. This right-wing bourgeois careerist, who has occupied political and public offices for the past 25 years, poses as a revolutionary opposed to “the system”. He preaches the overcoming of differences between right and left at a time when social polarisation has never been so pronounced. He made cutting the state budget a central plank of his campaign, while at the same time promising social improvements.

Everything that Bayrou embodies is hollow and deceitful. His relatively good results in the elections are the expression of a momentary mood. He was able to win support from all those who fear that Sarkozy would only exacerbate social tensions and are at the same disappointed by the lack of any alternative from the Socialist Party. It would be completely mistaken to regard Bayrou's election result as the expression of some sort of stable "political centre". Polls prior to the first round of voting had already made clear that potential Bayrou voters were amongst the most undecided of all, and many only gave the UDF candidate their vote at last minute.

The words written by Leon Trotsky in 1934 to describe the French middle class are equally applicable today: "In accordance with its economic situation, the petty bourgeoisie can have no policy of its own. It always oscillates between the capitalists and the workers. Its own upper stratum pushes it to the right; its lower strata, oppressed and exploited, are capable in certain conditions of turning sharply to the left."

Bayrou, who plans to create a new party before parliamentary elections due in June, will back the candidate who has the best chance of victory in the second round and who promises the largest number of ministerial posts—which is likely to be Sarkozy. Meanwhile, Royal is courting Bayrou and, predictably the candidates of the radical left—including Buffet, Laguiller and Besancenot—are backing Royal. This will only help drive wavering voters of Bayrou into the Sarkozy camp—or even that of the National Front candidate Jean Marie le Pen, who lost votes this time around, but was still able to pick up 3.8 million votes.

The working class can only win over the lower layers of the middle class with a decisive political alternative. "A real alliance of the proletariat and the middle classes is not a question of parliamentary statistics but of revolutionary dynamics," Trotsky wrote in 1934. "This alliance must be created and forged in the struggle."

Royal of course is strictly opposed to any such course. For his part, Sarkozy has the advantage of pursuing his political course with self-confidence and aggression. Effective opposition to Sarkozy requires a movement of the working class, which pursues its own interests with the same degree of irreconcilability and energy. This is the only way to win over the wavering layers of the middle class, who are not looking for parliamentary manoeuvres, but a solution to the social crisis.

This task cannot be solved by means of the ballot box on May 6. It requires a fundamental new political orientation and the building of a new political party. Irrespective of whether Sarkozy or Royal win the election, the working class must prepare for violent struggles. For this it is necessary to draw a political balance sheet.

One of the most remarkable results of the recent election was the collapse in support for the Communist Party and all those organizations, which are falsely described as "extreme left".

The 1.9 percent for Marie George Buffet signals the virtual collapse of the Communist Party (CP), which, following the Second World War, was the biggest party in France. As late as 1981, when the party was already in decline, the CP candidate, Georges Marchais, was still able to win 15.3 percent of the vote. The candidate of Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière) Arlette Laguiller, who received 1.6 million votes in 2002, notched up less than 500,000 in last weekend's election.

Both organizations had set themselves the goal of inducing the Socialist Party to make some concessions, re-animating its old program of social reformism. The CP has been the most loyal ally of

the Socialist Party since the 1970s and was represented in almost every socialist led government. Buffet herself was Sports Minister in the government led by Lionel Jospin. LO campaigned on the basis that a vote for Laguiller would be a warning to Royal that she has no blank cheque to carry out right-wing policies.

The stubborn refusal by these two organizations to emerge from the shadow of the Socialist Party is the reason why they have been deserted by large sections of their electorate. As soon as the result was known, both candidates declared their unreserved support for Royal. Buffet said, "I call unhesitatingly on all men and women of the left and all democrats to vote for Ségolène Royal on May 6 and to campaign for her," while Laguiller declared, "I will vote for Ségolène Royal and call upon all voters to do likewise."

The Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, LCR) is the exception which proves the rule. Its candidate, Olivier Besancenot, won a total of 1.5 million votes, more than in 2002. He also supports a vote for Royal, while stressing that the fight against Sarkozy must be conducted jointly through the ballot box and on the streets. He has called for mass demonstrations against Sarkozy for May 1.

Besancenot remains silent, however, about the aims of such demonstrations. In fact the LCR has for some time been seeking to unite with other organisations such as the CP, Workers Struggle and various protest movements to establish a broad left front which would be available to act as a coalition partner for a possible future Socialist Party government. The role model of the LCR is Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista) in Italy, which is currently part of the government led by Romano Prodi.

A new political orientation must begin with the acknowledgment of international reality. Fundamental changes in the world economy—the globalization of production and the dominance of the world economy over every national economy—have in France, as elsewhere, stripped away the basis for any policy based on social reforms and compromise. The defence of the most elementary social gains today requires an international socialist program which unites the working class across national borders in a struggle against the capitalist system.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* is the only political tendency which represents such an international program. The outcome of the French election shows that the situation is ripe for the building of a section of the International Committee in France. This is the most urgent political task that emerges from the current presidential election.



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