

French presidential election

Extreme right candidate Le Pen profits from the bankruptcy of the “left”

Peter Schwarz in Paris
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The vote for the extreme right-wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen is tensely awaited in Sunday’s first round of the French presidential elections.

During the last presidential election five years ago the success of the leader of the National Front in the first round of voting unleashed a political earthquake. None of the polls had forecast such a result for Le Pen, whose entry into the second round in 2002 represented a humiliating and lasting blow for the Socialist Party and its candidate former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

Ten of thousands immediately took to the streets to protest the election result five years ago and a few days later the number of protesters soared into the millions. The established parties were, however, able to divert this wave of spontaneous indignation into support in the second round for the Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac. In particular, the Socialist and Communist parties led the election campaign for Chirac, with the support of so called radical “left” parties. None of these organizations had the courage to challenge the legitimacy of an election that left the population only a choice between a right-wing and an ultra-right-wing candidate.

Chirac eventually won the election with a large majority. He increased his share of the vote from scarcely 20 percent in the first round to 82 percent in second. Le Pen increased his share from just 17 to 18 percent. Nevertheless, five years later, the nearly eighty-year old demagogue is still capable of running in the current presidential campaign as a serious candidate.

According to recent polls, support for Le Pen has averaged around 15 percent for some time. He has self-confidently proclaimed he will once again make it through to the second round. This appears improbable,

bearing in mind that such a step requires approximately 25 percent of the total vote. According to the same pollsters, far fewer voters are expected to vote for smaller parties this time as compared to 2002.

It is noteworthy, however, that the National Front has been able to retain a relatively large pool of electoral support. According to research this support is predominantly based amongst workers, clerical employees and poorer social layers. The political responsibility for this situation rests primarily with the parties the so-called left. They have basically left the field open for Le Pen to address social issues in his typical demagogic fashion.

In his election meetings and television spots Le Pen’s complains of the high level of unemployment, invokes the needs of farmers and small businessmen and deplores the state of the education system which means that ever fewer sons and daughters from working class backgrounds make it to university. Le Pen describes himself as the only candidate who fights against “the system.”

This does not mean that Le Pen has abandoned the themes which he has traditionally taken up—an end to immigration, law and order, chauvinism and racism—but they have shifted farther into the background. His daughter Marine, who has organized her father’s election campaign and is regarded as his likely political successor, has sought to give the National Front a more moderate image. She has even permitted a black Frenchwoman from the Antilles to appear on a NF election poster—a recruitment gimmick that was met with a hostile reaction from some sections of the party.

Marine Le Pen is well aware of the significance of her name. Her father, who first stood as a presidential

candidate in 1974, is firmly associated with xenophobia and right-wing extremism, even if he chooses not to stress such issues at this particular point of time. Instead he has left it to the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) candidate Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal, the leader of the Socialist Party, to compete with one another as to who is most nationalistic. Le Pen then poses as the original who is superior to his copies.

With detectable relish he declares in one election spot, “You will have noticed as I have that my rivals in the presidential election have placed the issues of immigration, patriotism and national identity at the heart of their campaign. For thirty years my voters and I have been defamed, insulted and disparaged for raising the same issues ... Mme. Royal has sought to drape herself in the tricolour and trot behind M. Sarkozy, who in turn has run behind me with his loud ballyhoo.”

The spot ends with the comment that each of his rivals had at one point or another been active in government and failed to carry out the policies he or she is now advancing. Only he, Le Pen claims, is ready and willing to translate his slogans into practice.

A large degree of responsibility for the continuing support for the National Front rests with the radical left parties.

The *Parti des travailleurs* (Workers Party, the former OCI of Pierre Lambert) and its candidate Gérard Schivardi are conducting their own nationalist election campaign against the European Union, which in many respects resembles the campaign of Le Pen. Like Le Pen, Schivardi blames the European Union for all of the social ills besetting France. While Schivardi has made the “break with the European Union” the central plank of his campaign, Le Pen has raised the demand for an end to the joint European currency and an increase in protectionism against foreign goods.

The candidates of *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle) and the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist League), Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot, respectively, take up social questions and criticize the capitalist system. But in the long run both provide political cover for the Socialist Party, which makes its own adaptations to Le Pen. Five years ago Besancenot went so far as to call for a vote for Chirac in the second round of the presidential election, while Laguiller appealed to voters in the first

round with the message that a vote for her could make the “left” (i.e. the Socialist Party) compliant. The latest *Lutte Ouvrière* election poster calls for a vote for Laguiller “to drive out the right and make the left submissive.”

Only an independent political movement of the working class, which breaks with the Socialist Party and its “left” hangers-on, and conducts a struggle for an internationalist, socialist perspective and offers a way out of the pressing social crisis, can break the influence of Le Pen’s National Front. It is precisely such a perspective which is rejected by the radical left parties in France.



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