

Class issues in the French presidential election

The Editorial Board
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The French presidential election, which goes into its second and final round this Sunday, is dominated by a deliberate campaign to block any expression of the independent political interests and struggle of the working class.

This is what lies behind the claim that the contest between Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy represents a choice between two very diametrically opposed political models. An atmosphere of hysteria is being whipped up, as if France were immediately threatened with a fascist seizure of power should Sarkozy enter the Elysée palace. This hysteria is aimed at suppressing any critical reflection on the causes of the current situation and the consequences of an election victory for Royal.

In reality, the working population has been left without a choice in this election. It signifies the end result of the decades-long decline of the official workers' movement. The differences between Royal and Sarkozy are tactical, not fundamental. Irrespective of who emerges as victor on Sunday evening, the election augurs a profound lurch to the right and violent class confrontations in the near future. The working class can prepare for such confrontations only by developing its own independent, socialist politics.

What does Royal stand for?

Royal and Sarkozy are in agreement with the heads of big business that France requires a fundamental change of political course. They have no dispute about the necessity for this course, merely over the best methods to implement it. As the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* accurately noted, "They may put forward different proposals in their programs, but both are united in the fundamental analysis: that France in 2007 is a country in crisis."

Economic growth is below the European average, the foreign trade balance shows a 30 billion Euro deficit, national debt has more than doubled in the last 15 years, the ratio of government outlays to GDP is the second highest in Europe at 54 percent, while one in twelve citizens is employed in the public sector.

Big business is demanding the streamlining of the state budget, the dismantling of public service jobs, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, cuts in pensions and social security benefits and the growth of the low-wage sector. But attempts to implement such policies have repeatedly met with bitter resistance during the past twelve years.

A series of major strikes have paralysed the country for weeks at a time. The Gaullist head of government, Alain Juppé, faced such a situation in 1996. In 2002, his Socialist Party successor, Lionel Jospin, who carried out more denationalisations than his three right-wing predecessors combined, was hammered in the presidential elections, losing out to the extreme rightist Jean Marie Le Pen. Three years later the French population rejected the European constitution in what was a resounding rebuff to the entire political establishment. Again last year, students and young workers took to the streets in huge protests lasting for weeks to

force the withdrawal of the despised First Job Contract (CPE).

Sarkozy and Royal agree that this situation is untenable and has to be changed. Sarkozy is intent on using the methods of intimidation and confrontation. He has whipped up xenophobic fears and exploited the issue of crime to pose as the "hard man," who can take tough action. Royal considers such a strategy to be too risky. She promises to achieve the same goals as Sarkozy without risking confrontation. She invokes a France of "harmony" based upon on co-operation with the "social partners", i.e., the trade unions and business associations. She is walking in the political footsteps of such figures as Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Romano Prodi, who all proved to be far more effective "reformers" than many of their conservative colleagues.

Behind Royal's social rhetoric lurks the vision of an authoritarian France. For example, she calls for locking up juvenile delinquents or handing them over to the army for training. Her few social promises—an increase in the minimum wage, more money for education and jobs for young people—are merely bait to attract voters. She will ditch such promises as rapidly as her role model and mentor François Mitterrand did following his election as president in 1981, when the international financial markets demanded he jettison reformism in favour of austerity.

Royal shifted even further to the right after the first round of the election ten days ago. She is intent on building an alliance with the right-wing bourgeois UDF and has suggested that UDF leader François Bayrou could fill the post of prime minister in a Royal-led government. She announced that as president she would stand above all social classes and would not be bound to any party. This represents a clear threat to anyone who dares to step out of line and disturb social "harmony".

Why Le Pen calls for abstention

The petty-bourgeois radicals of the so-called extreme left are the most energetic in calling for a Royal vote.

Barely had the polling stations closed on April 22, and Olivier Besancenot of the Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), Arlette Laguiller of Worker's Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière), José Bové (Alter-mondialists), Marie-George Buffet (Communist Party) and Dominique Voynet (the Greens) united in calling for a vote for Royal in the second round. None of them posed any demands or even raised any questions before throwing their support to Royal. Together they had achieved a combined vote of over ten percent of the electorate—Besancenot alone won one and a half million votes—but, nevertheless, they are supporting Royal without any conditions.

Their slogan, "Anybody but Sarkozy," is aimed at intimidating anyone who is not prepared to follow Royal and is seeking an independent political orientation. The Green, Noël Mamère, was most explicit when he justified his participation in an election meeting for Royal with the words, "With the prospect of a coalition between Sarkozy and Le Pen, the house is burning. This is not the time to ask questions."

In reality, there is absolutely no basis for the argument that a victory for Royal would serve to undermine the influence of Le Pen, and the leader of the National Front is very well aware of this. He has called for abstention in the second round, which, bearing in mind the closeness of his voters to Sarkozy's camp, can only be interpreted as backhanded support for Royal.

Anyone with some understanding of French history knows that the growth of the National Front is a direct consequence of widespread demoralization and disillusionment created by the right-wing policies of the Socialist and Communist Parties. A number of the current strongholds of the National Front were former centres of influence of the French Communist Party.

It was the reactionary policies of Mitterrand and Jospin, together with the servile support of the Stalinist Communist Party, which has allowed Le Pen to exploit social tensions to advance his own reactionary agenda. It is a fact that the chauvinist agitation against immigrants—which is at the heart of National Front policy—was first initiated by the Stalinists. In 1981 Robert Hue, who was later to become Secretary-General of the FCP, headed a racist mob that besieged the home of a Moroccan immigrant family in Montigny-les-Corbeilles.

Jean Marie Le Pen's share of the vote rose rapidly to 15 percent during the presidency of François Mitterrand. In 2002 following the period anti-working class policies pursued by the government of Lionel Jospin, Le Pen recorded the biggest success of his political career with his entry into the second round of the presidential elections. Should Royal take over as president, the National Front can count on a new lease on life. The party thrives on and exploits the demoralization that invariably results from the betrayals of the Socialist Party.

Whoever understands the calculus of politics will comprehend this; only the frightened reformists of the LCR and LO with their petty calculations about gaining influence in a Socialist government hope that Royal will prevent the worst and cling to her coattails.

What has strengthened Sarkozy?

Sarkozy is also a product of the disastrous policy of voting for the lesser evil, which invariably results in the emergence of an even greater evil. This pompous, obsessively ambitious and often inept careerist draws his strength from the absence of any independent working class policy. A bold political offensive would rapidly cut him down to size.

Five years ago the petty bourgeois radicals reacted to the defeat of Lionel Jospin by calling for a vote for Jacques Chirac in order, as they claimed, to stop Le Pen. They thereby played a major role in the triumphant victory of Chirac—a thoroughly discredited Gaullist, who failed to gain the support of even a fifth of the electorate in the first round. Chirac then lost no time in uniting the diffuse right wing to form the UMP, which has now become the launching pad for the presidential ambitions of Monsieur Sarkozy.

Now Besancenot and Laguiller declare that French working people must elect Royal, in order to stop Sarkozy, while claiming that later they can oppose her on the streets. This, however, is a lie. If it is necessary to support Royal against Sarkozy today, then it will be a thousand times more necessary tomorrow, when the right wing threatens sharp attacks to unseat her. Support for Royal at the ballot box excludes any serious mobilization that rises above purely symbolic protest.

Ample proof of this political reality can be found in Italy. There, a party that has long served as a role model for the French petty-bourgeois radicals, Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), has supported bourgeois governments for years on the basis of stopping the

right-wing forces assembled around Silvio Berlusconi and Gianfranco Fini. Today, Communist Refoundation sits in the Italian government, tacitly or openly supporting social cuts and international missions by the Italian army, and attacks anybody who opposes such policies—all in the name of the “struggle against the right.”

The policy of Rifondazione has politically disarmed and demoralized the working class. It has created conditions whereby Silvio Berlusconi—a man who has been driven out of office on two occasions and has one foot in a prison cell—now has a good chance of taking a third bite of power. At the same time the neo-fascist Gianfranco Fini is regarded as the up-and-coming figure in Italian politics.

Opportunism—the lessons of French history

There is a proverb in France: “Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”—“the more things change, the more they remain the same.” The arguments now being used by the petty bourgeois radicals to drum up support for Royal are by no means original.

In 1899, using the argument of defending the Republic against the right and the anti-Semitic opponents of Dreyfus, Alexandre Millerand became the first socialist to enter the French government. At the time, Millerand's actions attracted international attention. It was in a certain sense the original sin of opportunism. For the first time in history a socialist had joined a government representing the capitalist ruling class.

The revolutionary Marxist Rosa Luxembourg graphically described the consequences of this step in her article, “The socialist crisis in France” She wrote, “The Republic is in danger! That is why it was necessary for a socialist to become the bourgeois Minister of Commerce. The Republic is in danger! That is why the socialist had to remain in the cabinet even after the massacre of the striking workers on the Island of Martinique and in Chalon. The Republic is in danger! As a result, inquiries into the massacres had to be blocked, the parliamentary investigations of the horrors perpetrated in the colonies had to be discarded, and the amnesty law accepted. All acts of the government, all positions and votes of the socialists are based upon a concern for the threatened Republic and its defence.”

These words, written more than a hundred years ago, have lost none of their veracity. The opportunism espoused by Millerand led to the support of the First World War by international social democracy. Millerand, who in the meantime had broken with the socialists, became the French War Minister when hostilities broke out.

The French Communist Party chose a similar path in the midst of the social and political crisis of the 1930's. It concluded a Popular Front alliance with the Social Democrats and the bourgeois Radicals with the justification that this constituted an alliance with the middle classes against fascism.

At the time Leon Trotsky warned, “These men see nothing but parliamentary shadows. They ignore the real evolution of the masses and chase after the ‘Radical Party’ which has outlived itself and, which in the meantime, turns its back on them ... A real alliance of the proletariat and the middle classes is not a question of parliamentary statistics but of revolutionary dynamics. This alliance must be created and forged in the struggle. The whole meaning of the present political situation resides in the fact that the despairing petty bourgeoisie is beginning to break from the yoke of parliamentary discipline and from the tutelage of the conservative ‘radical’ clique which has always fooled the people, and which has now definitely betrayed it. To join in this situation with the Radicals means to condemn oneself to the scorn of the masses, and to push the petty bourgeoisie into the embrace of Fascism as the sole

saviour.”

Trotsky’s warning was soon confirmed. The Popular Front government under Léon Blum suppressed the French general strike of 1936 and isolated the Spanish revolution. This meant the extinction of any possibility of stop the march to the Second World War and opened the way for the emergence of the Vichy regime under Marshal Pétain.

It is necessary to break out of the vicious circle of a policy, which, in the name of supporting an allegedly lesser evil, simply ignores the past and sacrifices the future. The working class must draw the lessons from these experiences. This is the only way to prepare for future class conflicts—conflicts, which, under conditions of rapidly growing social polarization all over the world and growing rivalry between the major imperialist powers, are absolutely inevitable. The only way forward lies in the building of an new independent party of the working class on the basis of an international, socialist perspective.



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