

The French “far left” learns nothing from the presidential election

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Initial statements issued by the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR—Revolutionary Communist League) and *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle), components of the so-called “far left” in France, indicate that these organizations have neither understood nor learned anything from the presidential elections.

On Sunday right-wing candidate Nicholas Sarkozy of the UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*—Union for a Popular Movement) defeated the Socialist Party’s Ségolène Royal by a 53-47 percent margin. Voter turnout reached a record 85 percent.

Both the LCR and *Lutte Ouvrière* supported Royal in the second round of the presidential election. Indeed hardly had the results been announced on April 22, which propelled Sarkozy (with 31 percent) and Royal (26 percent) into the second round, before Olivier Besancenot of the LCR and Arlette Laguiller of *Lutte Ouvrière*, their parties’ respective presidential candidates, announced their endorsement of the Socialist Party candidate.

Besancenot, who received 4.1 percent of the vote April 22, or some 1.5 million votes, declared that the upcoming second round had “the look of an anti-Sarkozy referendum.” Laguiller, running in her sixth and final presidential election, saw her percentage of the vote fall from 5.7 percent in 2002 to 1.3 percent this time around (nearly half a million votes). The evening of the first round, Laguiller called for workers to vote for Royal, explaining that she did so “without reserve” and “without illusions” in what the Socialist Party candidate and her colleagues “would do if they came to power.”

Neither Besancenot nor Laguiller waited to see on what program and policies Royal would contest the second round. Neither could point out how Royal’s

program differed substantially from Sarkozy’s. Royal ran the most right-wing campaign in the history of the French Socialist Party, embracing flag-waving, anthem-singing and national identity as her own. She made no significant effort to shift the campaign from the terrain of authority, “discipline,” law and order, security and patriotism and offered nothing to the youth, the unemployed, the immigrants.

Royal vied with Sarkozy in her enthusiasm for the need to make France and Europe “competitive,” which means eliminating workers’ rights and driving down living standards. She declared that “Europe must fight for an industrial policy following the example of the United States and the emerging nations.” She advocated involving the military in establishments for delinquent youth and agreed with Sarkozy that youth should be obliged to perform a six-month period of civic service, which could be carried out in the army. On the question of social benefits, echoing the Reagan-Thatcher politicians of the right, Royal said, “every new right goes together with duties.”

She neither attacked nor proposed repealing the various anti-terror and anti-democratic measures that have been introduced in recent years, many of them sponsored by Sarkozy. In general, there were minor differences between the programs of the two candidates.

Why should the working class give their support to such a candidate, whose program speaks to and defends the interests of the French ruling elite? There is nothing “Socialist” about the French Socialist Party except its name, nor anything especially “left” about its program. It is one of the country’s leading bourgeois parties, which has been safely entrusted with the affairs of the French state periodically over the last two and a half decades.

The LCR's Besancenot used Sarkozy's victory Sunday night as the opportunity to propose a further shift to the right in his party's policy. Just as Royal declared that her defeat required new moves toward the "center," toward François Bayrou's UDF (*Union pour la Démocratie Française*—Union for French Democracy) and other bourgeois parties, Besancenot asserted that "faced with the ultra-liberal and ultra-law and order program of a Sarkozy, a united front of all the social and democratic forces must immediately be ready to organize the response."

By this he means, although he did not say it openly, "unity" with the Stalinists of the Communist Party, the Greens and disaffected sections of the Socialist Party. Precisely the policy that has left the French working class in the present predicament, its subordination to the rotten Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies, is to be continued, as though nothing has happened.

Besancenot maintained the LCR demagoguery about fighting Sarkozy "in the streets as at the ballot box."

Lutte Ouvrière's Laguiller admitted in her April 22 statement that Royal, as much as Sarkozy, belonged to the "camp of capital," "the camp of speculators, of exploiters" and others of the same ilk. Neither Royal nor Sarkozy would "do anything but favor the big bourgeoisie." Then why on earth should anyone vote for either of these individuals?

After the fact, on Sunday, Laguiller acknowledged that "the program of Ségolène Royal would have done nothing" to change the fundamental problems of the working class and added that "a ballot is nothing but a shred of paper." Coming from someone who has collected hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of such 'shreds of paper,' this is rather cynical. When Laguiller goes on to speak of the "struggles" to come, it is entirely devoid of political content.

After the first round, Laguiller claimed that she was endorsing Royal out of solidarity "with the wishes of those who are no doubt in the majority in the world of labor," i.e., with working class voters for the Socialist Party.

However, unlike Laguiller, few workers apparently saw much difference between Royal and Sarkozy. Approximately 46 percent of blue-collar workers cast ballots for Sarkozy, and 44 percent of people with modest means in general. Was this a dramatic turn to the right? No. The French population was confronted

with two right-wing candidates, two representatives of big business determined to prosecute a war against living standards, workers' and democratic rights and social programs.

It would have been absolutely appropriate for the "far left" to call for a working class boycott of the second round, explaining the need for a genuine socialist party. Instead Laguiller and Besancenot threw in their lot with one wing of the French establishment.

This is nothing new. In 2002, after Jacques Chirac and neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen finished first and second in the opening round of the presidential election, the French left in its great majority endorsed Chirac in the second round. The Socialist Party, Communist Party, the Greens and the LCR openly advocated a vote for Chirac, the corrupt and well-tested representative of the French bourgeoisie. Laguiller and *Lutte Ouvrière* abstained and, politically speaking, ran away and hid.

Lutte Ouvrière, the LCR and the *Parti des travailleurs* (the former OCI of Pierre Lambert) received nearly 3 million votes between them in the first round in 2002. Their supporters, who believed they were voting for genuine social change, were then channeled into the pro-Chirac movement in the second round. This time, many took the logical step of voting for "the lesser of two evils" in the first round.

The French "far left" largely got what it deserved in 2007. In the long run, organizations that do not take themselves seriously are not taken seriously by the population. The combined total of ballots cast for the LO, LCR and PT fell by nearly a third (from 2.97 million to 2.11 million) and their percentage of the popular vote dropped by nearly one half (from 10.44 percent to 5.7 percent).



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