

# Sarkozy's electoral victory and the bankruptcy of the French "left"

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The election of right-wing Gaullist politician Nicolas Sarkozy as French president has shocked many people in France and Europe.

One recalls the mood of euphoria two years ago when French voters rejected the European constitution. The same population forced the withdrawal of the unpopular "First Job Contract" (CPE) through a series of protests and demonstrations just one year ago.

At the time various petty bourgeois "left" organisations declared that these movements had rendered the policies of the the government of Jacques Chirac "illegitimate and disavowed." Now was the time to develop "a common movement which is able to take on the employers directly and question the entire neo-liberal policy" (Statement by the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* [LCR—Revolutionary Communist League]).

Now, less than a year later, a man is taking over as president whose right-wing convictions are beyond dispute—he is an ideological ally of US president George W. Bush and the former Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar. Sarkozy wants to revive the values of order, performance and reward, and regards himself as the man to deal once and for all with the heritage of the 1968 protest generation. The international business press has enthusiastically welcomed his election. They expect him to finally dismantle the French welfare state, slash the jobs of many of the country's five million civil servants, cut pensions, make the labor market more 'flexible'—and contrary to his predecessors—not give way to pressure from the streets.

How was it possible for this noxious politician to collect 19 million votes and emerge as the victor in an election characterized by an extraordinarily high voter turnout?

For the Socialist Party (PS) and media the answer is clear: French voters are to blame. The latter, so goes the argument, have moved to the right and Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal did not follow them fast and far enough. As former Finance Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn put it on the evening of the election, the Socialist Party had so far missed its chance to carry out a "social-democratic renewal" along the lines of the German Social Democratic Party at its notorious Bad Godesberg conference, (in 1958-59, when the German SPD officially repudiated socialism). In particular, the PS had neglected voters from the "centre".

This explanation ignores social reality and fails to identify the profound social contradictions behind the election result. The "voters of the centre" are an abstraction. The middle classes in France, as elsewhere, are enormously polarized. For a long time

they constituted the social glue which bound together social extremes. However, under the effects of the globalization a majority has descended into the proletariat, while a small minority has been able to climb its way upward.

The classic member of the middle class—the craftsmen, farmer, landlord and little businessmen—confronts many of the same problems today as the average worker. The same applies to the urban middle class. The days when a university degree guaranteed a career and a regular income are long gone. Now it is common in France to encounter the temporary worker with a university degree, or the academic who moves from a work placement center to a part-time job and then a short-term contract.

There is no reflection of this social polarization in official politics. While broad sections of workers and young people have been radicalized and have protested time and time against social ills, the Socialist Party and its allies have intervened to sabotage their struggles, spread disappointment and demoralization and thereby paved the way for Sarkozy. His success has far less to do with his own strengths than it does with the bankruptcy of the "left," its abject inability to present a progressive social alternative.

Strauss-Kahn notwithstanding, the French Socialist Party has long since put its 'Bad Godesberg conversion' behind it. It is a bourgeois party, which defends the capitalist order. Into the 1970s, it did this through the means of social compromise, or rather, the promise of social compromise.

Since then, however, pressure from international financial markets and the effects of globalization have wiped out the basis for any policy based on social compromise. Under the presidency of François Mitterrand and the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin one promise after another was broken Social gains were slashed, unemployment stagnated at around ten percent, incomes sank and living conditions in the suburbs became increasingly intolerable.

The first to profit was the extreme right National Front led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. With the help of an electoral reform introduced by Mitterrand, his party was regularly able to notch up two-digit election results.

The recent election campaign of Ségolène Royal represented a new low-point for the Socialist Party. Groomed by her public relations advisors, the PS candidate posed as a mixture of a female version of Sarkozy and Alice in Wonderland. She competed with Sarkozy when it came to professions of loyalty to national identity

and tough action against juvenile offenders, while at the same time making all sorts of windy promises. She began every second sentence of her speeches with the words “I want”: “I want France tomorrow to be calm country, which believes in itself, where all Frenchmen have a place, and love it,” “I want to take the best from each epoch, to reinvent the France of tomorrow,” and so on.

Royal did not care to explain how her wishes were to be fulfilled. Why should anyone have believed her? 1.6 million unfilled voting cards from a total of 36 million voters indicates that many took part in the election, though they doubtless found it hard to decide between the candidates. Some chose to elect Sarkozy, whose program was not attractive, but at least promised change.

According to election analyses Sarkozy received the same number of votes from workers as Royal, with 53 percent of workers in the private sector voting for the Gaullist candidate. He also won 57 percent of those between 25 to 34 years. He had the support of 77 percent of all self-employed, as well as 68 percent of pensioners over the age of 70.

Royal, on the other hand, was only able to win a majority amongst young voters under 24 (60 percent) and those voters who will be directly affected by Sarkozy’s election. In the public sector, where Sarkozy has announced plans for substantial job cuts, 57 percent voted for Royal, who also had the support of 75 percent of unemployed persons. Some 58 percent of students also voted for the SP candidate.

Do the millions of votes from workers and young voters for Sarkozy mean agreement with his program? It would be absurd to draw this conclusion. The election was characterized by a fundamental contradiction. On the hand, there is a broad interest and urge to participate in political life—expressed in the well-attended election meetings and the high voter turnout. On the other hand, the electorate was confronted with two candidates with right-wing bourgeois programs, who differed from one another much more in style than in substance.

The bankruptcy of the official “left” has created a dangerous situation. Sarkozy is the most reactionary politician to assume the post of French president since the end of the Vichy regime in World War II. There can be no doubt that he takes the threats he has made seriously. This is not just bound up with his notorious fiery temperament, but also the enormous pressure being exerted by the employers’ federations and financial circles.

Sarkozy has already announced that he intends to reintroduce the rejected European constitution in a slightly modified form and without a new referendum. On May 17 he is expected to name the former labor minister François Fillon as his prime minister. Fillon’s attempts to ‘reform’ the French pension system four years ago brought millions of public and private sector workers into the streets in protest. Two years later, in his role as education minister, Fillon provoked renewed protests from students.

According to the head of his election campaign team, Claude Guéant, Sarkozy is also contemplating bringing “left” ministers into his cabinet to draw the Socialist Party into his attacks on the working class.

For its part, the working class must prepare for inevitable clashes with Sarkozy and his government by drawing the lessons from the bankruptcy of the Socialist Party and its allies. It must take up the

struggle against Sarkozy on the basis of an international socialist program, which proceeds from the incompatibility of the existing forms of capitalist relations with the basic needs and requirements of working people. To this end workers require a new independent socialist party.

The French left radical parties—the LCR and *Lutte Ouvrière*—systematically seek to prevent such a development. Both organizations called for a vote for Royal in the second round and have now reacted to her defeat in the manner of shocked opportunists. Both act as if nothing significant has happened, refuse to make a political balance sheet of the elections and return to business as usual.

In her statement on the election result, Arlette Laguiller of *Lutte Ouvrière* blithely declares, “For the next five years the broad masses will have to put up with the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy and one or more governments, which carry out social policies in line with those of the government of the last five years.” She does not dream of questioning the legitimacy of a presidency who owes his post entirely to the bankruptcy of the official left.

She calls upon her supporters to “Keep their heads up,” and comforts them with the thought that “we would have had to fight if Ségolène Royal had been elected, to ensure that things perhaps changed even a little in our favor. It will be the same with Nicolas Sarkozy and the struggle will be the same.”

On election night Olivier Besancenot (LCR) made the call for a “united front of all social and democratic forces” In the name of unity such an alliance—in reality, the LCR in a pact with the Communist Party, the trade unions and other reliable props of the bourgeois order—would sabotage any struggle against Sarkozy and his government. Any serious confrontation would inevitably develop into a struggle for power and such a struggle is firmly rejected by both LO, LCR and the trade union bureaucracies they support.



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