

French local elections reveal discrediting of political establishment

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The results of the second round of France's local and municipal elections March 16 were inevitably contradictory, given the increasing unpopularity of the right-wing government of President Nicolas Sarkozy and the widespread hostility to the Socialist Party (PS), which has alienated itself from broad layers of the population with its pro-big business policies.

On the one hand, the Socialist Party registered definite gains and rising vote totals for the so-called "far left" parties testify to a leftward shift in the electorate, coinciding with a collapse in support for Sarkozy. Despite this shift, however, the latter's UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) managed to maintain control of important cities and districts, in an election marked by popular disaffection and record abstention.

The PS solidified its control of several of France's key urban areas. Socialist Party lists won 12 of Paris' 20 neighborhoods, including all of the more densely populated eastern districts, and incumbent PS mayor Bertrand Delanoë won re-election with 58 percent of the vote. PS lists won seven of Lyon's nine neighborhoods, reinstalling incumbent PS mayor Gérard Collomb. In the Lille region, Lille and Turcoing both comfortably re-elected Socialist mayors, former Labor Minister Martine Aubry and Michel-François Delannoy.

The PS picked up several towns long held by the political right: Toulouse (France's fourth largest city and a center of the aerospace industry), Strasbourg (the capital of the Alsace region on the German border), Caen (a pharmaceutical and services center in Normandy) and Reims (the largest city in Champagne). It also won in Nantes, Besançon, Amiens, Metz and Blois. Of France's 37 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants, right-wing parties control only twelve.

UMP candidates held several key cities, however. Former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, who has remained in political life despite his promise to retire after his 2004 conviction on fraud charges, easily won re-election as mayor of Bordeaux, with 56 percent of the vote. The bourgeois press attributes this to Juppé's skill in obtaining state and business funding for local government initiatives.

The UMP maintained control of the key cities of France's Mediterranean Coast—Marseille, Nice and Toulon—through a calculated intervention by the national government, appealing to anti-immigrant and law-and-order sentiment and promising

limited economic measures.

The UMP's narrow victory in Marseille, a major center of the French workers' movement and which recently saw a wave of highly unusual strikes in the private retail sector, came on the heels of a personal decision by Sarkozy to boost UMP incumbent mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin's candidacy. On March 10, the government published a letter by Sarkozy to Gaudin promising to hire more police officers in Marseille, renovate its port facilities and to arrange for the Rome-Madrid high-speed train to stop at Marseille.

On March 11, Sarkozy traveled to the region and gave a speech attacking immigrants in Toulon, a city that has in the past elected mayors from the neo-fascist National Front. He called for "controlled immigration" and stressed that "France can't greet everybody." He added, "I'm in favor of [immigration] quotas." The Socialist Party, and the left in general, has no answers to the right-wing attacks on immigration.

The local elections to the councils of France's *départements* confirmed the trends apparent in the municipal elections: they represented a definite victory for the PS (51 percent of the vote) as opposed to the UMP (44 percent), but certainly not a landslide. This level of support is far less than that of opposition to Sarkozy, which rose to 61 percent in a February 29 CSA poll. Moreover, the UMP vote is much higher than the percentage of those (22 percent) declaring themselves "in political sympathy" with the UMP.

The PS' lackluster performance takes place in the context of an election with a record level of abstention—38 percent in towns with over 3500 inhabitants. Abstention was particularly strong in working-class suburbs of major cities: 60 percent in the Lille suburb of Roubaix, 58 percent in St. Denis in the Paris suburbs, and 53 percent in Villeurbanne in the Lyon suburbs.

Any serious observer would have to ask why the widespread anger and opposition to Sarkozy is not finding more powerful expression.

One major factor is the widespread public understanding that the PS, the most established opposition party, is a pro-business party with little more to offer to working people than the UMP. In the February 29 CSA poll, over 75 percent of those polled justifiably thought that the PS would do no better than Sarkozy

and the UMP at resolving the difficulties facing the nation. The PS has a long record of privatizations and social cuts while in power, and has provided top officials in Sarkozy's government—e.g., Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and Secretary for Town Policy Fadela Amara.

Another factor was the repeated public announcement by Sarkozy and Prime Minister François Fillon that they would ignore popular opinion as expressed in the election. In a March 6 interview with Sarkozy, the right-wing daily *Le Figaro's* asked "Will you continue your reforms at the same rhythm, no matter what the election result?" Sarkozy responded: "I tell all those who have trusted me, I will carry out this policy of change with the same strength, the same desire, the same voluntarism all throughout the coming four years."

Commenting after the second round of the elections, Fillon absurdly attributed the UMP's defeat to a slowdown in his government's "reforms," i.e., social cuts. Despite polls showing only 39 percent support for an acceleration of the pace of reforms, he said that the solution to the UMP's difficulties was "to accelerate the reforms and show that all our promises will be kept." The government announced only a few minor personnel changes, such as the firing of presidential spokesman David Martinon.

Broader social issues underlie popular disaffection with the elections. The international character of the problems facing working people in France day-to-day is, moreover, increasingly clear. These problems—rapid global inflation of food prices, the financial shock waves spreading from the US credit crisis, the rapid rise of the euro against the dollar and the resulting fall in the competitiveness of European industry, threatening employment throughout the euro-zone—are beyond the reach of France's local and even national authorities.

After large-scale strikes over the last six months against Sarkozy's austerity politics and amid growing threats of economic dislocation, the population is increasingly open to new political ideas. However, none of the currently existing parties in France articulate the interests of the working class.

This was discussed in passing in the center-left daily *Le Monde's* analysis of the elections, by LH2 pollster François Miquet-Marty. Miquet-Marty noted: "In general, we are seeing more disaffection towards the right than support for the left. This is why it is difficult to speak of a vote to sanction Sarkozy's politics, but rather a vote of mistrust towards him that benefits the left. ... Today, Frenchmen exclude no hypothesis in the search to improve their daily situation. However, in the current state of things, there is no more credible solution than those proposed by the executive. In other words, the left has urgent programmatic tasks to fulfill. We are witnessing a crisis of electoral supply."

The French "far left," especially the pseudo-Trotskyist organizations, *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR) and *Lutte ouvrière* (Workers' Struggle—LO), has tried in its campaigns not so

much to fill as to cover over this gaping political hole to the left of the PS. They have consistently and opportunistically acted in the spirit of short-term electoral accords with PS, despite the unprecedented crisis of political perspective that now faces the masses.

LO, which claimed to have run 5,000 candidates in municipal and local elections, instructed its candidates from the outset to join PS lists wherever the latter would allow it. In the fall of 2007, the LCR decided to field separate electoral lists in the context of its founding of a new party, ostensibly independent of the PS. It has found a definite response, with 109 of the LCR's 200 lists receiving over 5 percent of the vote and 29 receiving over 10 percent of the vote. Significantly, the LCR received 15.7 percent of the vote in Clermont-Ferrand and 17.6 percent in Saint-Nazaire.

Despite appearances, however, the LCR's new party is in no way politically independent of the PS, and its organizational independence hangs only by the narrowest of threads. Over the last several months, in repeated meetings with Socialist Party bigwigs, top LCR officials including Alain Krivine and Daniel Bensaid, have tried to reassure these officials that its new party was directed against the bourgeois right, not against the Socialist Party.

In the current political and economic situation, however, the PS is completely unwilling to make any concession to anti-capitalist sentiment, and it therefore refuses so far to make political alliances with organizations such as the LO and the LCR. They would much rather be seen by the French ruling elite to be carrying out a right-wing, pro-business policy.

In Lille, PS candidate Martine Aubry preferred to enter into an alliance with the Green Party and the small, right-wing MoDem (Mouvement Démocratique) of François Bayrou. She noted, pointedly: "This is a political, not an electoral accord, because we could easily win without that MoDem."

In Toulouse, where the LCR had obtained 5 percent of the vote, LCR voters were considered crucial to the victory of PS candidate Pierre Cohen. When asked on state-owned France2 television how the LCR would ask its voters to vote, LCR spokesperson Olivier Besancenot said, "We generally call for people to defeat the right, there's no suspense on that question." The LCR then formally proposed to merge its electoral list with the PS, but the PS refused.



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