

French municipal elections: A setback for President Sarkozy

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A clear swing to the left and a repudiation of the reactionary policies of right-wing Gaullist president Nicolas Sarkozy was registered in the first round of elections for the municipal councils and mayors of the country's 36,785 communes last Monday.

Some 67 percent of France's 44.5 million voters took part. Just under 48 percent voted for the Socialist Party and its allies and 45 percent for the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) and its allies. The centre right Democratic Movement (MoDem) of François Bayrou, former ally of the UMP, obtained 3 percent.

Media commentators largely agree that, while the voters had administered a rebuff to Sarkozy, this was not a landslide for the left. *Libération's* headline was: "The left resuscitated, the right not crucified"; the provincial *République du Centre* commented: "Nicolas Sarkozy certainly got a yellow card, but he avoided the red card." Nobody suggested he had received his marching orders, nor recommended it.

Estimates of left and right voting patterns were made difficult by the blurring of differences between the parties and the shift to the right of many Socialist Party (SP) figures who had joined UMP candidates lists.

In the weeks before the elections, Sarkozy's approval ratings had plummeted from above 60 percent to a low of 33 percent. His original intention of making the poll a national endorsement of his administration and touring the country to support UMP mayoral candidates in their municipalities, where 22 of his ministers were heading lists, had to be abandoned. Most right-wing lists did not stand with the UMP label for fear of being too closely associated with their unpopular president.

According to *La Tribune*: "The UMP leaders want with all their might to 'localise' the poll so as to prevent it having any anti-Sarkozy dimension. 'Let my friends forget me a while,' begs Alain Juppé [Gaullist prime minister from 1995 to 1997], whose political life depends on his succeeding in Bordeaux."

The mass of the electorate obviously did not believe Sarkozy's denial that he was going to announce a harsh austerity programme after the municipal elections, or Prime Minister François Fillon's promises to boost pensions in 2008.

The SP won several right-wing administered towns outright with over 50 percent of the vote: Rouen, Laval, Alençon and Rodez. It is well placed to take Strasbourg in the second round. It has won Lyons and is almost certain to also retain on March 16 the five large towns of over 300,000 inhabitants that they already run, such as Lille.

SP mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, 12 percent ahead of UMP challenger Françoise de Panafieu, is set to be comfortably re-elected.

However the right wing took back the Haute-Loire capital le Puy-en-Velay from the SP and UMP mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin is ahead in Marseilles.

The neo-Fascist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen has been able to stand in only half the towns it had done in the last municipal elections in 2001 and has made a poor showing (1 percent), having lost much of its electorate to Sarkozy, attracted by his anti-immigrant and law-and-order offensive. The only NF candidate thought to have a chance of being elected mayor, Le Pen's daughter Marine, standing in the northern town of Hénin-Beaumont, is in second place behind the SP with a lower than expected 28 percent.

The swing to the left is confirmed by the fact that the Communist Party (PCF) has kept some of its strongholds outright and is set to hold them in the second round, as well as winning back towns it has previously controlled. Also some of the "far left" *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR) lists have broken through the 5 percent threshold, which will permit it to merge with SP and CP lists and to negotiate with them for representation on municipal councils in return for supporting them in the second round.

In Amiens and Marseilles the LCR scored 6.5 percent and over 5 percent respectively and could tip the balance in the run-off against the right if they join with the traditional left. It is a virtual certainty that the LCR will do this. In Amiens, where the CP did not stand in its own right but in a joint list with the Socialist Party, the combined vote for the separate *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO) and LCR lists was nearly 10 percent, enough to seal the fate of right-wing mayor Gilles de Robien, if combined with the SP-CP list.

Both the Socialist Party and the UMP are in talks on electoral alliances in the second round with François Bayrou's centre-right party. Bayrou is traditionally an ally of the right. Ségolène Royal, the defeated SP presidential candidate in 2007, is the most vocal advocate of a long-term alliance with his MoDem. Other SP leaders are more circumspect, reluctant to break completely from the four-decades-long alliance with the remaining rump of the PCF.

The narrow, parochial framework of the political debate across the spectrum—most glaring with the parties of the official left, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party—has meant that the fundamental issues raised by the Sarkozy administration, which

affect the living standards and social and democratic rights of workers in every commune, have been largely ignored.

It is true that results are affected by local conditions and political relationships and ambitions, in which no small element is the financial rewards, both official and unofficial, of local office. The mayor of a commune with a population of 500 has an official remuneration of €612 a month; with 10,000 to 19,999 people, €2,343 euros per month; and with 100,000 and more, €5,227 euros per month; plus the right to combine other remunerative jobs. Mayors also award construction rights and business licences among other things, which attract all kinds of incentives and special favours from local businesses and bigwigs.

However, this does not explain the narrowness of the debate. The result is due to the role of the main opposition party, the SP. It stands in basic agreement with Sarkozy's programmatic priority of making French big business competitive within the globalised world economy by dismantling the welfare state and transferring wealth from the working class to the rich. The SP also shares the belief in the need to impose authoritarian, law-and-order measures, a key element of the party's recent presidential campaign and programme. These priorities have been rendered more urgent for the French ruling class by the catastrophic balance of trade figures, the large budget deficit and national debt, in the context of the inexorable slowing of the world economy caused by the effects of the subprime banking crisis and rising fuel and food prices.

These issues, and the collaboration of Sarkozy with the colonial-style wars being waged and prepared in Central Asia (Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran) and the Middle East (Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank) in alliance with US imperialism, have been given little or no voice by the parties of the opposition in a country with a large Muslim and Arab minority.

Despite LCR and LO claims to represent a radical left position, they provide a left cover for the SP and the CP and stand in the way of the development of a revolutionary socialist programme whereby the working class can express its interests. This has helped the UMP to keep its defeat relatively small.

The "far left" LCR and LO were both in alliances with the SP and the CP in the first round, and have said that they would support them in the second round against the right and negotiate for representation on councils by merging lists. The electoral rules allow a party list which has attained 5 percent of the vote in the first round to enter into such alliances in the second round, which takes place Sunday, March 16. An excessively critical stance might jeopardize such electoral deals.

LO fielded 186 lists in 166 towns. An editorial in the party's paper explained: "In about a third of these towns, our candidates were on common lists with candidates of the Communist Party, the Socialist Party or of other left parties. Where it has not been possible to constitute such unified lists, Lutte Ouvrière is presenting its own lists."

LO justified its collaboration with the SP arguing that the elections "provided the opportunity to disavow Sarkozy and the right wing in power.... For the moment, we must show the right that the working class have had enough of them and their policies."

The LCR fielded some 200 lists with groups and individuals with

various radical or left agendas as part of its plan to launch an "anti-capitalist party independent of the Socialist Party" by the end of 2008. Some of its lists, however, were in alliance with the local SP and CP organisations.

On March 6, Olivier Besancenot, spokesman of the LCR, issued a call to vote entitled "Let us vote on our feet!" It does not call on the working class to break with the class collaboration of the SP, but merely presents an empty defiance with no perspective: "The fact that people are fed up must be demonstrated.... On March 9, look Sarkozy and the MEDEF [employers association] straight in the eyes, vote like millions of workers and youth. Vote on your feet." Besancenot criticised the SP for being "in agreement with the fundamentals of the government's measures" and professed to reject collaboration with the SP. Nevertheless, at this very moment, the LCR is engaged in negotiations for joint lists with the SP and the CP in the second round.

The rejection of Sarkozy by broad sections of industrial and white-collar workers goes beyond the failure of his administration to address impoverishment created by inflation and low wages, pensions and benefits and the dismantling of the welfare state. It is also a reaction against his authoritarian attacks on civil rights and individual liberties such as the non-judicial detention of immigrants and the preventive detention of jailed prisoners due for release. Sarkozy's ever more open departure from the traditional secularism of the French Republic, with overtures to religious values and his recent support for fundamentalist Catholics, is antagonising broad sections of the French population.

Sarkozy has made it clear that, whatever the outcome of the municipal elections, he will push forward with his policies. As these bite into the rights and living standards of the mass of the population and resistance to the government grows, it is most likely that Sarkozy will increasingly turn to the policies that have strengthened his hold over the most reactionary elements within French society and the state.

Eric Zémour, senior journalist of the conservative daily *Figaro*, in a long article in the March 7 issue stated: "The president is preparing his counteroffensive. One can suppose that it will be on the terrain of state power, order, security, and immigration. The vast police operation in Villiers-le-Bel, under full media spotlights, against the people who had shot at the police during the riots last autumn is a taste of things to come."

As the WSWS pointed out at the time, this is an important warning to workers of the French ruling class's shift to a perspective of authoritarian rule.



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