

France: Near win for neo-fascists in Hénin-Beaumont by-election

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The near victory on July 5 of the neo-fascist Front National (FN) in the municipal by-election in Hénin-Beaumont, a town of 26,000 people in northern France, is a serious warning to the working class. Under conditions where masses of people see no credible alternative to the discredited Parti socialiste (PS) and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and are broadly alienated from political life, the FN can attract significant support.

This development is all the more disturbing, as the FN has never had large-scale electoral support in the north, a former coal-mining basin and long a stronghold of left-wing popular opinion. Hénin-Beaumont has had Socialist and Communist Party mayors since the First World War. The 46-day miners' strike at nearby Anzin in 1884, which prompted Emile Zola to write his famous novel *Germinal*, led to the passage of the Waldeck-Rousseau law legalising trade unions in France.

However, the social democrats and Stalinists have progressively exhausted their political support, presiding over the destruction of the economy. A coal-mining town from the middle of the 19th Century, Hénin-Beaumont's last pit closed in 1970. Today, it faces a 19 percent unemployment rate.

The circumstances of the by-election, triggered by the April 7 jailing of the PS mayor, Gérard Dalongeville, for misappropriation of public funds, underscore the immense social gulf separating PS officials from working people in this industrially devastated region.

Hénin-Beaumont was looted by a team of businessmen and elected PS officials. Press accounts described, in the words of Rue89, "a vast system of fake billings, run by a network of elected officials who exchanged bogus invoices for nonexistent services."

A striking example of municipal corruption was the mayor's decision to pay for travel in private planes of his associate, businessman Guy Mollet, who was selling-off municipal property to finance the fraud.

Police estimate that at least €900,000 were misspent, although estimates of the total stolen are as high as €4 million. Lacking financial reserves, the town is virtually bankrupt. When the police searched Dalongeville's office on April 7, they found a strongbox with €13,000 in small bills. On April 9, he was charged with "misappropriation of public funds, falsifying

documents, and cronyism." He was placed in custody, and his former deputy mayor for finance and contracts for public works was also jailed.

In the first round of the by-elections, on June 28, the National Front list, actively supported by national FN leaders such as Marine Le Pen, received the most votes, 39 percent. The FN ran on a populist platform, denouncing Dalongeville and the PS while carefully downplaying its anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The PS, which ran with the PCF and smaller right-wing parties such as the MoDem of François Bayrou, was beaten into third place by the "independent left" candidacy of Daniel Duquenne, with 17 and 20 percent respectively. The ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) polled 4 percent and the Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot, 2 percent.

In the second round, the minority lists formed a "Republican Front," calling on voters to vote for Duquenne's list. From the UMP to the NPA, they couched their call in the same terms: anything to stop the National Front from winning. With higher voter turnout, the NF increased its vote by more than 7 percent, with 48 percent of the vote. Duquenne received 52 percent.

The French political establishment greeted the victory of the "Republican" coalition with cries of victory. UMP minister Xavier Bertrand, who had called for a vote for Duquenne "in order to bar the way" to the National Front, applauded a victory of the "left." Martine Aubry, PS first secretary, hailed the "victory of the Republican Front" and asserted: "It's a win for democracy."

Marie-George Buffet, national secretary of the PCF, said, "The PS must draw the lessons from this election," calling for a united left "capable of carrying forward a bold project for unemployment and to put it into action." The NPA declared that "voters of Hénin-Beaumont avoided the worst by preventing the far right from taking over the municipality" and expressed "relief."

Such judgments are as stupidly complacent as they are politically bankrupt. While the FN's defeat reflects the democratic and historical instincts of Hénin-Beaumont's population, the policies of Duquenne—a former associate of regional PS officials—will only deepen the popular alienation that resulted in the FN's support.

The Regional Chamber of Accounts has made it clear that the town's budget deficit, and its €39 million municipal debt, will be repaid by the population at large. During his campaign, Duquenne promised to cut expenditures and temporary staff. He has recently handed control of the city budget to the préfet, the local representative of the national government, and ended subsidies to community organizations.

More broadly, the claim that one can fight the FN by supporting the PS or its satellite parties is absurd. Their right-wing policies set the stage for the emergence of the FN, and today they actively promote the law-and-orderism and anti-immigrant resentment that helps the FN to grow.

The rise of the populist-racist FN began in 1983, as President François Mitterrand of the PS embarked on his "austerity turn," embracing the capitalist market, cutting social spending, and gutting basic industries like textiles, coal, and steel. The FN's greatest electoral success was its score in the 2002 election, when popular disillusionment with the free-market policies of PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin splintered the left vote. The FN received 17 percent in the first round, eliminating Jospin and progressing to the second round.

The response of the PS, the PCF, and the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (the NPA's predecessor) was to call for a vote for the right-wing candidate, Jacques Chirac. Having backed Chirac, they joined in the conservatives' campaign to stimulate nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment. They all supported the 2004 law against girls wearing Muslim headscarves in schools.

This summer, conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy worked with the "left" parties to prepare another racist campaign against Muslim women wearing the burqa or the niqab. He is backing a parliamentary mission led by André Gerin, the PCF mayor of Vénissieux, preparing legislation to ban the wearing of this clothing in public in France. Eleven PS deputies are also participating in the parliamentary mission.

Such parties' promotion of the most virulent forms of chauvinism is not, moreover, a purely French phenomenon, but extends across Europe. In Hungary, the Socialist Party is setting up right-wing "village guard" militias (See "Hungary: Socialist Party establishes right-wing militias"). In Spain the ruling PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Spanish Socialist Workers Party) is setting quotas for immigrant expulsion and launching anti-immigrant raids in working-class neighbourhoods.

This is further proof of a basic political reality, underscored by social democracy's recent defeat in European parliamentary elections and the PS's criminality at Hénin-Beaumont: the ideological and moral collapse of the social-democratic and Stalinist parties.

In Hénin-Beaumont as elsewhere, moreover, the NPA has faithfully played the role of a political satellite of these parties, under a cover of pseudo-left rhetoric. Prior to the Hénin-Beaumont elections, it called for an alliance to create "a left of

combat parties against the crisis." It absurdly proposed to form this alliance with such long-established ruling personnel of the French bourgeoisie as the PCF and the Left Party of ex-PS minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Reprising their role between rounds of the 2002 presidential elections—where they called for a Chirac vote under the mantra of keeping neo-fascists out of office—the NPA issued a brief communiqué before the second round at Hénin-Beaumont, calling on electors to "keep the National Front from carrying Town Hall." After Duquenne's victory, the NPA issued another statement calling on workers to "regroup and act around a program of rupture with this system, which would defend their interests to the very end."

Such elliptical appeals are completely worthless, however, representing at best a verbal fig leaf for the NPA's headlong rush to get positions in the French state apparatus. It stood in joint lists with the PCF and the Left Party of ex-PS minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the recent Aix-en-Provence by-election. It is also in discussions with these parties to form joint lists in the March 2010 regional elections. They have agreed to combine lists with the PS in the second round, in case this could prevent the conservative parties from taking over regional administrations.

The hypocrisy of such political appendages of the PCF and PS plays a critical role in producing crises like the Hénin-Beaumont by-election. Frustrated and disillusioned by the criminality of the PS and seeing no credible political alternative, more confused layers of the population see no other option besides an FN vote.

The problems of communities like Hénin-Beaumont cannot be solved without a massive program of investment and public works to rebuild infrastructure and industry. Carrying out such a program would depend, however, on a movement of the working class to eliminate the profit system as the guiding principle of global economy and to overthrow the parasitical political establishment dominating Europe. The International Committee of the Fourth International sets itself the task of building a party in France that can fight for such a perspective.



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