

French regional elections: Socialist Party splits in Languedoc-Roussillon

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The first round of voting in the French regional elections will take place on March 14. The Socialist Party (Parti socialiste, PS) has decided not to support the slate of candidates headed by the former president of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, in the south of France, following his controversial remarks. Georges Frêche said that former PS prime minister Laurent Fabius, who is Jewish, had a “non-Catholic mug” (*une tronche pas très catholique*), which in normal parlance would mean strange looking.

Martine Aubry, the PS first secretary, called upon all the PS local organisations in the region to support instead Hélène Mandroux, the mayor of Montpellier (the region’s capital) and former supporter of Frêche. Mandroux announced her candidacy on January 29.

Although Frêche had been previously expelled from the PS for other racist remarks, the PS had given its official support for the list of candidates he led for the upcoming regional elections. The PS national leadership has separated itself from Frêche, not because it opposes his racist statements, but for fear of a reversal of public opinion against the policies carried out by the PS at the national level.

In a speech given at the PS headquarters in the Rue de Solferino in Paris, Aubry declared, “There will not be two lists of socialist candidates” in Languedoc-Roussillon, inferring that those who stay with Georges Frêche would place themselves on the margins of the party. She also called for “all the partners of the left and environmentalists to constitute a broad movement for the first round of voting” on March 14. This decision was adopted by the national secretariat by a vote of 40, with 5 voting against and 5 abstentions.

Georges Frêche has decided to lodge a legal appeal with the Paris High Court to protest the PS decision to remove his slate. The five local leaders in the departments (sub-districts of regions) on Frêche’s slate of candidates, as well as the leaders of the PS federations in Languedoc-Roussillon, have reasserted their “full solidarity with Georges Frêche, who has been so shamefully attacked.” They criticised the “base manoeuvres” conducted “with the tacit complicity of the

Greens.”

The controversy surrounding Frêche is also dividing the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). The PCF national secretary, Marie-George Buffet, has denounced Frêche’s remarks. However, a former PCF government minister, Jean-Claude Gayssot (PCF vice-president of the Languedoc-Roussillon regional government), has remained on Frêche’s slate.

In an interview with *Le Monde* (February 19), the former second in command in the PS and current mayor of Dijon, François Rebsamen, said he had decided to give his support to the “Socialists” present on Frêche’s ticket. He declared, “To these candidates who are elected officials, mayors, local government councillors and deputies [in the National Assembly], we are not going to give lessons on socialism from Paris.”

Rebsamen, a close collaborator of Ségolène Royal (the PS presidential candidate in 2007), opposed the expulsion from the PS of socialists present on the Frêche ticket. “We will not betray our convictions in supporting Mr. Frêche,” he said.

Vincent Peillon, also a close aide of Royal and “personal friend” of Frêche, said that the PS “was shooting itself in the foot,” and that “the joking around should stop.”

On February 24, the 58 candidates on Frêche’s list were suspended from the PS for a two-year period.

If the PS has now decided to organise a campaign against Frêche—who has occupied high offices in Montpellier and the Languedoc-Roussillon region for decades and who has continued to work with PS elected officials since his expulsion in 2007—it is because the PS fears a reversal of public opinion that is becoming more and more hostile to the racist anti-Muslim campaign on “national identity” conducted by President Nicolas Sarkozy’s government.

With the help of the French bourgeois left, this campaign is aimed principally at making illegal the wearing of the burqa and niqab by Muslim women in France. These measures are an attempt to foment anti-Muslim racism by dividing the working class and promoting a fascistic political

climate. The parliamentary commission tasked with the issue of the burqa and niqab ban was composed of parliamentary deputies of the Greens, PS, PCF and UMP (the ruling Union for a Popular Movement of Sarkozy) and presided over by its instigator, André Gerin, the PCF deputy.

Georges Frêche represents a layer of “left” politicians who appeal to pro-colonialist sentiments, and who are in favour of a rapprochement with the centre right. Georges Frêche is a former Maoist who joined the PS in 1969. He was a member of its national secretariat and national council until 2006 and has held high office in Montpellier and Languedoc since 1973.

In February 2007, Frêche attacked a group of *Harkis*—former Algerian members of the French Army during the Algerian war, who were exiled to France after Algeria gained independence.

Frêche could not tolerate the fact that the Harkis, who had fought for keeping Algeria French, supported the UMP party that originated from the movement of General Charles de Gaulle, and which had accepted Algerian independence in 1962. He shouted to them, “You are the allies of the Gaullists...they massacred your own people in Algeria, and yet you lick their boots!... You are sub-human, you have no honour!”

Frêche was fined €15,000 by the Montpellier Tribunal for his comments, before launching an appeal. In 2009, the final Appeal Court confirmed his acquittal by the Montpellier Court.

A March 1 article on Frêche in *Libération* painted a portrait of an archetypal local PS baron, similar to the former PS mayor of Marseille, Gaston Defferre. The article explained the racist tirade against the Harkis as a comment opposing disloyalty, “because they were guilty of not supporting him after he had helped them through his normal vote-catching activities.” It adds, “In vote-catching as efficient as it is flagrant, he subsidises communities and elected officials of all persuasions.”

It quotes an article from *L'Express* that, in relation to Frêche’s “non-catholic mug” remark, said that “this was a phrase he wanted to be known,” because Frêche is targeting the Le Pen voters [of the neo-fascist National Front] that he needs in order to win. “He’s crazy about electioneering. In order to get votes, all means are justified,” *L'Express* wrote.

Frêche was expelled from the PS in 2007 for having said there were too many black players on the national football team. During the 2007 presidential election campaign, the PS feared that this would harm the chances of its candidate, Ségolène Royal.

The anti-Frêche tactic of Aubry is also connected to factional calculations against her rival Royal.

The Languedoc-Roussillon federation of the PS is a large

section of the party, whose majority is pro-Ségolène Royal. Georges Frêche has declared publicly that he had an agreement with Royal allowing him to come back into the PS. Martine Aubry is seen as a potential presidential candidate, but she wants to ensure she has the votes of this federation of 15,000 members when the nomination for the presidential candidate takes place.

Since the defeat of the PS in the presidential election of 2007, several rival factions are contesting for the leadership in order to determine the future role of the PS. Ségolène Royal preaches cooperation with MoDem (Democratic Movement) of the centre right politician François Bayrou. She has declared that the old socialist model of the party is “outlived” and that she aspires to “modernisation.”

At the last primary elections to select the PS leader, Royal obtained a strong vote, but Martine Aubry became secretary in the autumn of 2008 thanks to an alliance of two other factions of the party led by Benoît Hamon and Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris. The election result was contested by Royal, who accused Martine Aubry of vote tampering.

Georges Frêche shares the ideas of Ségolène Royal, who considers that the PS cannot win elections through its traditional party coalitions with allies such as the PCF, which is discredited in the working class. He argues for forming a government coalition with Bayrou’s MoDem, as he explains in his book, *Il faut saborder le PS* (The PS must be scuttled). This would provide the ideological justification for more open attacks by the PS on workers’ living standards.



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