Ruling party routed in French local elections

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On March 20 French voters participated in the first round of polls to select general council members, the officials who administer the country's 101 *départements*. The second round will take place March 27.

The election was marked by voters' profound alienation from a bankrupt political system, with record abstention and the electoral advance of the neo-fascist National Front (FN). President Nicolas Sarkozy's ruling conservative Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), which barely surpassed the FN's score in the elections, erupted into a bitter public debate over second-round voting and the UMP's broader future. Numerous commentators are discussing the possibility that the UMP could split apart.

The day before the poll took place, Sarkozy launched French fighter-bombers in an unprovoked attack on Libya.

Less than 45 percent of the electorate voted in the first round March 20, a record low. The abstention rate is the highest in such elections for 50 years. In comparison with the 2004 local elections, every party except the Greens received significantly fewer votes.

The bourgeois "left" Socialist Party (PS) led the poll, with its candidates receiving 25 percent of the vote. Sarkozy's UMP came second with 17 percent, closely followed by the neo-fascist National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, with 15 percent. The total number of votes cast for each of these parties was significantly smaller than in 2004.

Voting took place in half of France's 4,000 *cantons* (local constituencies), where half the seats on France's 101 departments' councils were being contested. Despite the local and partial character of the elections, the results are being taken as an expression on a national scale of the popularity of France's political parties.

Candidates obtaining votes in the first round equaling 12.5 percent of the electorate (not of votes cast) are advancing to the run-off on March 27.

In 206 localities there will be run-offs between FN and PS candidates, and the question is posed as to whether the UMP will ask its voters to side with the PS in a "Republican Front," as requested by the PS leadership. In such a "Republican Front" plan, each of the two leading parties of the French bourgeoisie would ask voters to vote for the other party in areas where their candidates did not advance, but the FN did. Such an arrangement, supported by all tendencies inside the PS, would allow the UMP candidates to hang onto 89 seats, with the PS keeping 206 seats.

The UMP's poor showing on March 20 was no surprise. An Ipsos poll on March 14 put Sarkozy's approval rating at 29 percent. Several surveys of voting intentions for the 2012 presidential elections have had him beaten in the first round by the neo-fascist Le Pen or by various possible Socialist Party candidates.

The Ipsos poll put IMF director general Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the PS's most likely candidate, at 33 percent, Le Pen at 19 percent and Sarkozy at 18 percent. This would result in the UMP being eliminated from the second round of the presidential election.

Nadine Morano, UMP minister of apprenticeship, expressed the position of Sarkozy and UMP chairman Jean-François Copé, who are not calling for a PS vote in PS-versus-FN polls on March 27. She insisted that a call to vote for the PS "would give credibility to the idea pushed by Marine Le Pen that 'the UMPS'....exists in France"—that is, the widely-felt sentiment that the UMP and the PS are two wings of the same big-business establishment.

However, the official UMP position only underscores the fact that the right-wing party depends politically on an appeal to the FN, and that its voting base increasingly overlaps with that of the Le Pen party itself.

Certain members of the UMP, however, fear the risk of an open approach to the FN, implied by Copé's "neither a call

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for a vote for the PS nor for the Republican Front."

On March 24 the conservative daily *Le Figaro* commented that many UMP members felt politically threatened by Sarkozy's chauvinist and anti-Muslim policies, which have played a key role in strengthening the FN: "Debate on national identity, then on Islam and secularism, or the Grenoble speech stigmatising Roma ... For several months, a number of moderate UMP personalities have felt uneasy, as is illustrated by hesitations in the party on the issue of voting recommendations faced with the FN."

Prime Minister François Fillon publicly broke with Sarkozy's policy this week, calling for a vote against the FN in the second round. Valérie Pécresse, minister for higher education, and Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, minister of the environment, have recommended voting for PS candidates in order to prevent the election of an FN candidate—as has Jean-Louis Borloo, president of the Radical Party, until recently tipped to be picked by Sarkozy as prime minister.

Borloo is reported to be considering taking his parliamentary group out of the UMP. He stated that to stop the FN "it is necessary to vote PS."

Socialist Party spokesman Benoît Hamon and Harlem Désir, the PS's number two, both have called for a Republican Front vote deal with the UMP.

For its part, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot is calling for a PS vote against the FN. Besancenot called on voters of the NPA (formerly the Revolutionary Communist League, LCR) to vote for the "left candidate if he remains in a race against a National Front" candidate. Besancenot said he opposed "the constitution of a Republican Front and does not call for a vote for the UMP candidate against the FN."

There is nothing principled in this position, In 2002 the then LCR participated in a voting bloc with the right, supporting President Jacques Chirac in the second round against FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The NPA released a statement claiming to be disappointed by its election results. The NPA reported, "The NPA supported candidates in about 200 cantons out of a total of 2,000 up for election. It stood on its own in 80 cantons and it participated in 120 in united coalitions."

This is part of a broader decline in the results and activity of the so-called "far left" parties. In the 2004 local elections, the "far left"—*Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle, LO), the *Parti Ouvrier Indépendant* (POI, Independent Workers Party) and the then-LCR—stood a total of 1,543 candidates. This year they fielded 368 candidates.

The NPA report admitted: "The results are disappointing for the NPA committees which stood candidates. Half of our candidates scored between 2 and 4 percent."

The results testify to the profound sclerosis of the French political establishment, and above all to the vacuum that exists on the left. It is widely sensed that the "far left" parties do not represent an alternative to the PS, and both the main ruling parties are deeply discredited by their anti-worker, free-market policies. Under these conditions, only the neo-fascist FN—a highly unpopular party with the broad majority of the population—has progressed.

Several reports suggested that the crisis in the UMP and of the broader political system played a role in Sarkozy's decision to launch the attack on Libya. The *Guardian* noted that "some in the president's inner circle [are] wondering if Operation Odyssey Dawn might just save the skin of a man who, a matter of days ago, seemed destined for electoral humiliation. Ever so discreetly, they will be hoping Libya can do for Sarkozy what the Falklands did for Margaret Thatcher—anoint a successful war leader deserving of re-election."

The *Guardian* cited an anonymous diplomat in Paris as saying, "A good crisis might just be what Sarkozy needs."

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