

# Neo-fascist vote rises amid mass abstention in French local elections

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The March 27 second round of elections in France to select local councilors confirmed popular rejection of the ruling Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) of President Nicolas Sarkozy. Under conditions where no political appeal was made to working-class opposition to Sarkozy's policies, the election was marked, above all, by massive abstention and the rising prominence of the neo-fascist National Front (FN).

The campaign highlighted the sclerosis of the political establishment and its imperviousness to the interests of the working class. Though Sarkozy launched a war of aggression against Libya on March 19, the day before the first round of the local elections and there is deep-seated opposition to Sarkozy's social cuts, these issues were not mentioned in the campaign.

Of the voting population, 55.2 percent abstained and a record 7.1 percent spoiled their ballots.

Of the councils in France's 104 *départements*, only four changed hands: the Jura, Réunion Island, and the Pyrénées-Atlantiques went to the Socialist Party (PS), and the Val d'Oise to the UMP. In two *départements*, Loire and Savoy, negotiations on forming a majority in the local council are not expected to end before tomorrow.

Bourgeois "left" candidates received a bare majority (50.2 percent) of the vote, with the big-business Socialist Party (PS), the Communist Party (PCF) and various smaller-party or non-party candidates taking 1,213 councilors' seats.

The role of the petty-bourgeois "far left" parties, such as Olivier Besancenot's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), was to call for support for the PS and its satellites. They ran candidates for several hundred seats but did not advance to the second round, in which they received only 273 votes nationwide. The NPA called for a second-round vote for the PS in all constituencies where it was facing an FN candidate.

The UMP, smaller right-wing parties and non-party,

right-wing candidates received 35.6 percent of the vote and 753 councilors' seats.

The PS's victory was largely by default, as its policies are not significantly different from those of the UMP. The party's general secretary, Martine Aubry, declared that she would not oppose Dominique Strauss-Kahn—a prominent PS member and the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—were he to return and run for the presidency.

A banker and former corporate consultant and PS heavyweight, Strauss-Kahn has been instrumental in imposing devastating austerity policies in Latvia, Hungary, Greece, Romania, and Ireland in the aftermath of the global economic crisis.

The main political phenomenon of the campaign was the rising prominence of the FN. It obtained only two councilors' seats—having previously had none—though it had hoped to win several dozen. It increased its vote total from 621,837 to 915,506 from the first to the second round of the local elections. This was fully 35.5 percent of the vote in the districts where it stood candidates, though only 11 percent of the nationwide vote.

The FN's new leader, Marine Le Pen, has been widely presented as a more acceptable public face for her party than its previous leader, her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, since her election as FN president in January. The mass-circulation daily *Le Parisien* led its coverage of the local elections with a front-page picture of Marine Le Pen and the caption, "She makes herself at home."

A BVA poll carried out for *France Info* and the financial paper *Les Echos* on March 28 found rising support for the FN after the local elections. For the first time, a majority (52 percent) of French people consider that the FN should be considered as "a party like the others," versus 47 percent who disagreed. Last year, the population had split 57 percent versus 42 percent in the other direction.

The poll found that, as Sarkozy makes slashing social cuts without any effective opposition from the trade unions and their supporters in the “far left” parties, growing numbers of voters support ethnic discrimination to protect their access to social spending. It found that 40 percent of the population supports preventing immigrants from bringing family members to France and barring them from access to social programs.

A March 25-26 poll released the day of the elections found that Sarkozy would be eliminated in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections, were they to be held today, setting up a run-off between Marine Le Pen and the PS candidate.

Media attention has focused on the bitter debates shaking the UMP, particularly over the policy of trying to appeal to the FN vote through racist policies, as it attempts to fashion a strategy to stay competitive in the presidential race. There is rising discussion of the possibility that the UMP might split, with certain “centrist” sections allying with the PS and others continuing to appeal to the FN.

Sections of the UMP are trying to distance themselves from Sarkozy. Ex-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin claimed that Sarkozy should not have “poached on the terrain” of the FN. Jean-Louis Borloo said there was a “problem in going to the right,” though he added that “the legitimacy of the President of the Republic is not in question.”

There have been public spats between Prime Minister François Fillon and UMP leader Jean-François Copé over Fillon’s recommendation for voters to vote PS in PS-FN runoffs, and Fillon’s comment that he was “very uncomfortable” with Sarkozy’s “debate on secularism.”

Blaming the rise of racism in official French politics on Sarkozy, *Le Monde* wrote: “The UMP’s defeat in the local elections ... arises from a strategy decided upon at the Elysée” (the presidential palace). This strategy, it noted, “has consisted in trying to capture the FN vote by legitimizing its favorite themes: law-and-orderism, immigration, Islam, as the neo-fascist party tried to carry out a hostile takeover of the nationalist right by stressing the Republic and the nation. In this double movement, the FN has won positions while Sarkozy has lost them.”

It is indubitably true that the increasingly far-right character of the invocations of the Republic and of secularism has played a major role in boosting the FN, allowing Marine Le Pen herself to come out during the campaign in defense of “secularism” and “Republican values.” However, this only points to the complicity of

the entire political establishment, including, above all, the bankruptcy of the bourgeois “left” parties.

In fact, if Sarkozy was able to launch far-right campaigns—on anti-Muslim “secularism” measures, the banning of the burqa, and debates on national identity—this is largely because there was no opposition from the PS, PCF, or the “far left” parties. Indeed, PCF deputy André Gerin helped launch the campaign to ban the burqa, which was supported with varying degrees of enthusiasm by all the so-called “far left” parties.

The rising popular support for the FN arises from its ability to monopolize the language of opposition to the political system and to the deteriorating economic position of wide layers of working people. This is a devastating indictment of the “far left” parties, now widely and correctly seen as organizations that will not fight and are politically tied to the PS—a pro-austerity, big-business party.

They have come out in support of the humanitarian justification presented by the French government for its war of aggression against Libya.

These parties have also slavishly supported the trade unions, as they sold out every significant movement of opposition to austerity policies by the working class. Thus, during last autumn’s oil strike, the NPA echoed the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union in demanding that there be only “symbolic” resistance to police strike-breaking.

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