

What is behind the growing influence of the National Front in France?

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In France, the neo-fascist National Front (FN) has for the first time ever taken first place in a poll on voting in a presidential election. The election is scheduled for next year.

An Internet survey by the Harris polling institute, conducted on behalf of the newspaper *Le Parisien*, questioned 1,618 people about their voting intentions in the next French presidential election. Twenty-three percent declared their support for FN chairperson Marine Le Pen. Current French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the leader of the Socialist Party (PS), Martine Aubry, received just 21 percent each.

The figure for Le Pen substantially exceeds the 17 percent received by former FN Chairman Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election in 2002. Marine Le Pen replaced her father as head of the party in January of this year.

The growing influence of the extreme right is above all an indictment of the policies of the trade unions and the so-called “left” parties—the Socialist Party (PS), Left Party (PG), French Communist Party (PCF), and the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot. Under conditions of mounting class tensions and social distress, they have consistently worked to disarm and defuse working class struggles. They have thereby ceded the language of social protest to the far right.

The global economic crisis has had a devastating impact in France, with layoffs and waves of plant closures in auto, textiles and other industrial sectors. The official unemployment rate is close to 10 percent and up to one quarter of young people are out of work. Rising prices, workplace stress and cuts in social and pension benefits take a mounting toll.

The working class has protested repeatedly against this state of affairs. For the past 15 years there has

hardly been a year in which workers and youth have not demonstrated *en masse*. Just last autumn, millions participated in several one-day general strikes against an increase in the retirement age.

On every occasion, however, the unions and the “left” parties insisted that there could be no political opposition to attacks on the working class, which had to limit itself to allowing the unions to negotiate deals with anti-worker governments. Last autumn, the unions limited the opposition to harmless one-day protests and isolated powerful strikes by dock and refinery workers. Even when the police used force against the strikers, the unions refused to lift a finger in the workers’ defence.

The bourgeois social character of the PS is most clearly expressed in the identity of the man considered to be its most likely presidential candidate in 2012: Dominique Strauss-Kahn. As head of the International Monetary Fund, he is responsible for introducing austerity programs in European countries like Greece and Hungary and in other countries around the world.

The “left” organisations that operate in the orbit of the PS do not represent the working class, but rather an affluent section of the middle class, whose social interests are divorced from those of the workers. Despite their occasional radical-sounding phrases, they defend the union bureaucracy and the PS against any pressure from the workers. They are, however, willing to extend such support even to right-wing parties.

This process was exemplified during the presidential election of 2002. When Jean-Marie Le Pen—then the leader of the FN—stood against the Gaullist Jacques Chirac in the second round, millions took to the streets all over France to protest against the neo-fascists. All of the “left” parties lined up behind Chirac, calling him the “lesser evil” and even hailing him as the defender

of the republic. They categorically opposed a workers' boycott of the second round—an initiative proposed by the International Committee of the Fourth International to mobilize the working class independently and in opposition to the entire political establishment.

It is under these conditions that the FN has been able to exploit the anger and political disorientation of layers affected by the economic crisis. Marine Le Pen has deliberately sought to translate social anxieties into anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant prejudice and national chauvinism. She combines demagogic attacks on economic liberalism and the European Union with the call for a powerful national state.

Commenting on the coming to power of Hitler and German fascism in 1933, Leon Trotsky wrote: “The victory of the party of despair was possible only because socialism, the party of hope, proved unable to seize power. The German proletariat was sufficiently strong in both numbers and culture to obtain this goal, but the workers' leaders proved to be incompetent.”

A genuine socialist perspective is capable of mobilising the energy of the masses to build a better society, arousing their best instincts and promoting solidarity. Fascism, on the other hand, appeals to backwardness in the masses and seeks to divert their anger into the abyss of ethnic hatred and chauvinism.

France in 2011 is not Germany in 1933. The rising poll figures for the FN do not mean that France is on the brink of a fascist takeover. However, they are an unmistakable warning that in the face of a challenge from the working class, the French ruling class will not hesitate to defend its rule with authoritarian and fascist methods, as it did under the collaborator Marshal Pétain 70 years ago during World War II.

The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have further pushed the French bourgeoisie towards far-right methods. These events have staggered the French ruling class, which has close ties with the ruling elites of both countries and fears the spread of mass working class struggles from North Africa to Europe. The French bourgeoisie has responded by promoting the National Front and granting it extensive coverage in the media.

The FN, with its promotion of anti-Muslim bigotry, is a particularly useful tool for the ruling class as it seeks to divide North African and European workers. Recent years have seen a succession of anti-Islamic campaigns in France, supported not only by the bourgeois right but

also by the bourgeois “left”.

Legislation to ban the Islamic veil—a fundamental violation of the right to religious freedom—was sponsored and supported by the ruling Gaullist UMP as well as by the Socialist Party and the “far left” Lutte Ouvrière organisation. The NPA was split on the issue and voiced no opposition.

The absence of any opposition from the “left” to the promotion of anti-Muslim bigotry has helped create a fertile breeding ground for the FN.

Only an independent working class movement can stop the ultra-right. This requires the international unification of all workers—regardless of race, religion or skin color—in the struggle for workers' governments and the building of a socialist society. Such a movement of the working class will be able to mobilise all other oppressed sections of society behind it.

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