

Aix-en-Provence students speak on French presidential elections

Alex Lantier, Johannes Stern in Marseille
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World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed students yesterday outside the Literature School at the University of Aix-en-Provence, north of Marseille, France.

Most students who spoke to the WSWs were following the elections and were concerned about the future facing youth in France and across Europe. The deliberate inciting of racism by President Nicolas Sarkozy—with the complicity of the bourgeois “left” parties led by the Socialist Party (PS) and its candidate François Hollande—has provoked opposition and anger.

Many were also frustrated with the character of the official political debate, sensing that there is little to choose between the major candidates. They were eager for political discussion.

Asked what she thought of the elections, Aline said: “It’s a big mess. There is a profusion of information, but nothing concrete for young people. For the youngest, there is no training or information ... There is a real lack of confidence in politics. There are so many candidates that you have to have a substantial political background to know why to pick one or the other.”

She added that, as a first year student in anthropology, “We always are told that we will not get jobs.”

Aline said one of her main concerns in the elections was the situation facing immigrants in France: “There are a lot of people who come from other countries. These people face real problems ... I know people who don’t have papers, they can get into trouble.”

Most students cited problems of unemployment and social inequality as the central issues in the elections, as well as racism and the threat of war. Several students mentioned the catastrophic cuts in wages and the increase in unemployment that European Union (EU)

austerity measures have created in Greece. They anticipated similar problems would arise in France.

Ainache, a student from Djibouti, said: “Sarkozy has to go! He made false promises. The entire election campaign is racist and bizarre. Racism is used to hide the problem of social inequality. Especially after the events in Toulouse [the shooting of seven people, allegedly by Algerian-origin Frenchman Mohammed Merah], Sarkozy intensified his racist campaign. He attacks Islam and halal foods and all of that.”

Ainache said that he liked the Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whose program includes calls for increases in the minimum wage and health care coverage, because “the problem here is social inequality.” Asked if Mélenchon, a former PS minister, would carry out his program, he answered: “I am not sure.”

He continued, “Politicians are at the mercy of the financial markets. It’s the crisis, and globalization. I do not find this good; it’s total pauperization. The gap between rich and poor grows each day. [Former Greek Prime Minister George] Papandreou was a Socialist, but in fact socialism has nothing to do with capitalism.”

WSWS reporters pointed out that Papandreou was a big-business, social-democratic politician, not a political representative of the revolutionary proletariat. Ainache responded, “I’m from Africa, and we have had many revolutions there, but nothing has changed. We do not have democracy or social equality. Politicians who led revolutions always bought into the system. They betrayed the revolutions.”

Ainache added that he opposed French interventions in Africa, citing the example of the recent Tuareg separatist movement in northern Mali, where France is threatening to organize a military intervention: “Take the situation of the Tuareg in Mali. It’s also what

people are experiencing in Niger and Algeria. They are poor and frustrated ... France bears substantial responsibility for their situation; it has carried out too many dirty deals in Africa.”

Ibrahim, a sociology student from Mali, also opposed French intervention: “We can see the situation in Afghanistan, if the West intervenes afterwards it is usually worse.” He said that his relatives in northern Mali could no longer travel to the south of the country.

Comparing Hollande to Papandreou, Ibrahim added: “I don’t think [Hollande] will really do what he says. Maybe it’s the same thing here as in Greece; I don’t think he is better. It’s sort of usual that politicians promise one thing before the elections and do the opposite afterwards.”

Ibrahim said social conditions facing foreign students were very difficult: “It is hard to find work, it is hard to find an internship, and there are not enough scholarships.... We are here, and we suffer. The rents here are very high.”

Significantly, most students did not plan to vote for the petty-bourgeois “left” parties, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Workers Struggle (LO). Sylvain, however, said he believed a larger NPA vote would shift the PS’s policies. Asked what he thought of the elections, he said: “I don’t think much of them, they piss me off. It is just play-acting to become head of state. I will vote for the far left, to change people’s attitudes.”

He said he planned to vote for the NPA “by default” to pressure the PS: “From Hollande, I would like measures to improve the situation on pensions, unemployment, and temp work.” He said he would leave France if Sarkozy were re-elected.

WSWS reporters also spoke to three Portuguese language students—Sarah, Cindy, and Jessie. Asked what they thought of the candidates in the elections, they said: “It’s tweedle-dee, tweedle-dum. With the crisis, we fear we won’t get jobs. Candidates promise us the moon, they say they will get us jobs at €1,600 (US\$2,100) a month. But this would mean we would earn more than our parents, and in fact we won’t even earn a full-time minimum wage. We’ll get at most €1,000 per month.” They said they would probably find work in tourism or airport jobs.

Marion, a literature student, commented: “It’s the second election in a row we are completely at sea.

There are a lot of candidates, and even when one has some sympathy for the political tendency they represent, it turns out the candidate does not represent those ideas. All the parties are evolving—even LO. Now they have [Nathalie] Arthaud as their candidate [instead of long-time LO presidential candidate Arlette Laguiller]. In the last election the PS ran Royal, now it is Hollande.”

She continued, “Everyone knows only who they do not want to win, so one tries to vote by elimination. ... At one point I said, OK let’s go, let’s try voting for the ecologists. Protecting the earth is a fine goal, but then a Green president, that seems impossible. Ecology is nice, but their stuff is impractical in a capitalist world. It’s utopian, in fact.”

Asked what she thought of the PS and LO candidates she had mentioned, Marion said: “They are on the left, but they are not socialists or humane. They do not represent what one reads in school books about socialism. ... Socialist is something really social, it’s for the workers. But that is not what the parties in France are about, they say things just to be for or against someone. They’re pulling ideas out of a grab bag. But we don’t know what can be done over the long term, we do not have a party to adhere to.”



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