

Large neo-fascist vote shakes French presidential race

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24 April 2012

The large vote for neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen in Sunday's first round of the French presidential election has shaken the campaign, which continues towards the May 6 run-off between Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande and incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Le Pen received 17.9 percent of the vote, coming in third behind Hollande (28.6 percent) and Sarkozy (27.2 percent). She beat Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who received only 11.1 percent of the vote after having vowed to put Le Pen in fourth place.

The Le Pen vote highlights the dangers posed by the political vacuum on the left, which enables the far right to capitalize on widespread social anger over the austerity policies of both the PS and Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). As petty-bourgeois pseudo-left forces—such as the Communist Party, the New Anti-capitalist Party and Workers Struggle—work to channel popular opposition behind the PS and the trade union bureaucracy, Le Pen's National Front (FN) is given a free hand to posture as the anti-austerity and anti-establishment party, appeal to popular hatred of the European Union and the bankers it represents, and combine phony populism with anti-immigrant racism and rabid nationalism.

The campaign of Mélenchon's Left Front—an alliance between his Left Party and the French Communist Party (PCF)—rallied little support outside the roughly 10 percent of the population who regularly vote for the Stalinist PCF and “left” parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). It was clear, notwithstanding Mélenchon's left rhetoric, that the Left Front was serving as a stalking horse for the PS campaign.

Both Sarkozy and Hollande referred to Le Pen's showing in their campaign speeches yesterday. Sarkozy made an unabashed appeal to protectionist and anti-

immigrant sentiment.

He said, “National borders work to protect people. If we look at the world as it is, the countries that succeed are those that respect the nation and their national identity. All you have to do is see the number of American flags in the US to understand that there, people love their country.”

He echoed his earlier campaign threat to pull France out of the Schengen border treaty if the European Union did not adopt tougher anti-immigrant measures. “If Europe does not work to protect its borders,” he declared, “France will do so unilaterally.”

Hollande, for his part, promised a “new decentralization law.” As he has pledged to cut €115 billion (US\$152 billion) from the budget deficit, this can only mean slashing public services as they are transferred to overworked, underfunded regional and local administrations.

Hollande again thanked Mélenchon and Europe-Ecology-The Greens (EELV) candidate Eva Joly for “announcing, without haggling, their support for my candidacy.” Mélenchon, Joly and NPA candidate Philippe Poutou have called for a Hollande vote, either explicitly or by calling for a vote “against Sarkozy,” without placing any demands on Hollande. The Left Front, EELV and the NPA have all given the PS a blank check to carry out its right-wing policies.

Hollande then tried to place the entire blame for the rise of the far-right vote on Sarkozy. He said, “The person responsible for the rise of the far right is he who sometimes used its vocabulary. The person responsible for the rise of the far right is he who shattered in the course of five years a number of fundamental rights.”

While Sarkozy has undoubtedly appealed to neo-fascist sentiment, Hollande's attempt to blame Le Pen's electoral successes on Sarkozy is absurd and

disingenuous. Rising support for the FN reflects the deep social crisis in France and the reactionary policies of the entire political elite, including the PS.

Le Pen's vote was particularly high in the Northeast and along the Mediterranean coastline, where unemployment is amongst the highest in France. In these areas, the fascist candidate consistently received over 20 percent of the votes in electoral districts, in many cases finishing in second place.

In the south, she came in first in the Gard department, with over 25 percent of the vote. Gard is part of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, where the unemployment rate of 12.9 percent last year was the highest in France.

In the northern region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais she won over half a million votes. In the department of Pas de-Calais she finished second after Holland, polling over 25 percent. In Nord, she took third place with over 21 percent. Nord-Pas-de-Calais ranked second in last year's unemployment statistics, at 12.8 percent.

As in the Mediterranean south, the region was once a stronghold of the Socialist and Communist parties. The FN's rise began in 1983, when Socialist Party President François Mitterrand and his PS-PCF government imposed brutal austerity measures on the working class. Contrary to Hollande's claims, it was his own party and the French bourgeois "left" that prepared the ground for the right-wing populism of the FN. It slashed social spending and destroyed most of the region's coal, textile and steel industries. The last coal mine in Nord-Pas-de-Calais closed in 1990.

This record of austerity policies by the bourgeois "left" allows Le Pen to pose as a champion of little people. In March, she declared: "Unlike him [Jean-Luc Mélenchon], I didn't wait 25 years for a seat as a senator before I got interested in the working class. Anyway, the voters of Jean-Luc Mélenchon are not the working class, but an electorate of 'bobos' [bohemian bourgeois]."

The rise of the neo-fascist vote reflects not only the social crisis facing the population, but the entire political establishment's shift to the right. Its continual promotion of anti-Muslim racism—under the banner of the "war on terror" or "secularism" (the banning of the burqa)—allowed Marine Le Pen to rebrand the FN as part of the mainstream after she took over leadership of the party from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen last

January.

A BVA poll last month found that 52 percent of Frenchmen considered the FN to be a "party like the others." The pollsters said this response was particularly common (63 percent) among poorer layers of the population.

The most significant shift to the right was that carried out by the petty-bourgeois "left" parties—often in the guise of combating the neo-fascist parties. In 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen and conservative candidate Jacques Chirac reached the second round of the presidential elections, the PS, PCF and Revolutionary Communist League (LCR—precursor of the NPA) campaigned for a Chirac vote against Le Pen.

They opposed a call issued by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) for an active boycott of the elections to prepare an independent political struggle of the working class against the Chirac administration.

The subsequent decade saw these forces emerge as a critical support for social reaction in France and throughout Europe. They backed the trade union bureaucracy's negotiation of pension cuts and other social attacks with Chirac and Sarkozy, just as petty-bourgeois "left" parties supported unions that were negotiating attacks on the working class in crisis-hit countries like Greece, Spain and Ireland. Nor did they issue any criticisms of toothless protests the unions called against measures they were helping to implement. They also supported Sarkozy's anti-Muslim policies and French imperialism's wars—against Libya last year, and Syria today.

Now they are supporting Hollande, who is preparing free-market attacks on the working class and famously assured London bankers earlier this year that he is "not dangerous."



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