

Political issues in the French presidential election

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The first round of the French presidential election on Sunday starkly exposed the political crisis in France and throughout Europe and the immense dangers facing the working class. The main political beneficiary of four years of global economic crisis, imperialist war in the Middle East and collapsing state budgets was the neo-fascist National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen.

The FN received 18 percent of the vote, its highest-ever total, coming in third behind the two candidates, François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS) and conservative incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy, who advanced to the May 6 run-off.

The election revealed enormous popular discontent with the austerity policies carried out by Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) government. However, this discontent can find no progressive expression because any independent, leftward movement of the working class is blocked by the PS, the trade union bureaucracy and middle-class pseudo-left parties that spout radical phraseology while remaining tied to the main bourgeois parties.

Under these conditions, the most reactionary forces in the political establishment are able to pose as "anti-establishment" and "anti-austerity" and divert popular anger behind anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism and rabid French nationalism. The rightward lurch of the official "left" and its so-called "far left" allies has enabled the FN to emerge strengthened from the crisis.

A second round run-off between the PS and the UMP offers nothing for the working class. The PS and the various right-wing tendencies that make up the UMP have traded the presidency and the premiership for 43 years, since Charles de Gaulle stepped down from the presidency after the 1968 general strike. The critical task facing the working class in France is to develop a politically independent movement against the next

president, whether Sarkozy or Hollande, and against European capitalism.

There is nothing socialist about the PS except the name. Fashioned into an electoral vehicle for the ex-Vichy collaborationist politician François Mitterrand after its foundation in 1969, the PS combined a layer of bourgeois functionaries with personnel from petty-bourgeois "left" parties. This included figures like Lionel Jospin, a member of the ex-Trotskyist Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI), who served under Mitterrand and then as prime minister from 1997 to 2002.

Elected in 1981 based on an alliance with the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), under conditions of a radicalization of the working class, Mitterrand soon abandoned his reform program under the pressure of rising trade deficits and capital flight engineered by the banks. He then made his "austerity turn"—a ruthless drive to dismantle uncompetitive industries such as steel and mining that had been centers of working class radicalism in the 1970s.

Aiming to split the rising right-wing vote, Mitterrand helped inflate the FN's media profile. The neo-fascist party rose out of obscurity, benefiting from the attacks on the working class by the bourgeois "left" and repeated sellouts of working class struggles by the trade union bureaucracy, assisted by the bureaucracy's petty-bourgeois "left" allies.

The 1997-2002 Jospin government came to power after the 1995 railroad strike against pension cuts had forced out the right-wing government of Alain Juppé. Jospin's attacks on social programs and working class living standards laid the basis for the FN's biggest presidential vote prior to last Sunday's poll. In the current election, Hollande alluded to Jospin's privatization policies when he reassured the banks that

the PS had nothing to do with socialism. “Today there are no more communists in France,” he said. “The left liberalized the economy and opened markets to finance and privatization. There is nothing to fear.”

In 2002, FN presidential candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen narrowly edged out the unpopular Jospin in the first round, advancing to a run-off against the right-wing Gaullist incumbent Jacques Chirac. Though they had won millions of votes and captured a combined 11 percent of the total by presenting themselves as radical socialist parties, the petty-bourgeois “left” groups—the LCR (forerunner of the New Anti-capitalist Party), Workers Struggle, and PT (successor organization to the OCI) did not attempt to mobilize the working class against an election that was widely viewed as illegitimate. They preferred to function as pressure groups on the bourgeoisie, lining up behind Chirac and calling for a defense of the French bourgeois republic against Le Pen.

The International Committee of the Fourth International issued a call for an active boycott of the presidential election as a means of preparing an independent political movement of the working class against the social cuts Chirac would carry out. All three petty-bourgeois “left” groups rejected the ICFI’s call. As the ICFI had warned, their capitulatory policy of tail-ending the main bourgeois parties, far from blocking the FN, only strengthened it, allowing the neo-fascists to pose as the only oppositional tendency.

Armed with this support from the petty-bourgeois “left,” Chirac and then Sarkozy pressed ahead with austerity measures. Working class resistance was repeatedly sabotaged by the union bureaucracy, whose treachery was covered up and facilitated by the pseudo-left organizations. These same groups (or their successor organizations) supported attacks on immigrants and Muslims, such as the ban on the veil and the burqa. They backed France’s bombardment of Libya last year and currently support its imperialist intervention against Syria.

In this election, dominated by a desperate social crisis, the petty-bourgeois “left” offered nothing to the working class save the demagoguery of Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. His “citizens’ revolution”—which he defines as “rooted” in trade union protests, but “set off and carried out at the ballot box” and reflecting the “general interest” of the

nation—combines hostility to a revolutionary struggle for power by the working class with reactionary French nationalism. He pushed this so far as to endorse in his writings a French expansionist program in Belgium aimed against Germany.

The petty-bourgeois “left”—drawn largely from privileged layers that are hostile to the working class, including the state and trade union bureaucracies—thus works to blur the lines between socialism and right-wing, even fascistic tendencies. Now, with the choice between Sarkozy and Hollande, they are endorsing the PS candidate and further ceding the mantle of opposition to Le Pen, who is posing as a critic of the status quo and may call for a blank vote.

This situation poses serious dangers to the working class. In France—as in Greece, Spain, Italy and other countries targeted by the banks—the working class faces historic attacks and no means to defend itself through the existing political organizations. The critical question in France and throughout Europe is the construction of a revolutionary party—that is, a Trotskyist party and section of the ICFI—without which the reactionary policies of the social democrats and the petty-bourgeois “left” will lead to new defeats for the working class and the further growth of a neo-fascist movement.

The ICFI rejects with contempt the argument that a vote for Hollande is necessary to defeat the right. One can safely predict that if he comes to power, Hollande will provide further political ammunition for France’s neo-fascists.

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