

Bourgeois “left” wins plurality in first round of French legislative elections

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Bourgeois “left” parties led by the Socialist Party (PS) of newly elected French President François Hollande won a plurality in the first round of legislative elections yesterday, amid a record abstention of 43 percent of voters. Runoffs will be held in most of France’s 577 legislative districts next Sunday, June 17.

Projections of voting results showed the PS and the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) both receiving 35 percent of the vote, with the neo-fascist National Front (FN) winning 14 percent. The PS will also receive the support of two long-standing allies, Europe-Ecology-the Greens (EELV) and the Left Front, which received 5 and 7 percent of the vote, respectively. This adds up to a 47 percent plurality for the bourgeois “left” parties.

The right-wing MoDem (Democratic Movement) collapsed, receiving only 1.6 percent of the vote, while the petty-bourgeois “far left” parties—the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Workers Struggle (LO)—received 1.1 percent.

PS Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, reelected in the first round in the Loire-Atlantique district, called for a large PS vote in the second round. “This is only the first round,” he said. “Everything depends on what happens next Sunday. Either the president will have a [parliamentary] majority and change is possible, or it will not be the case... I call on the French to give a large, solid and coherent majority to the president.”

The FN is projected to advance to the second round in 55 to 65 districts, including some 25 to 35 three-way runoff races. This was less than the target of 150 to 200 districts for which it aimed, though the FN’s result is its second-highest vote in legislative elections, exceeded only by the 15 percent it recorded in 1997. The FN can hope to win several seats in the National Assembly for the first time since the 1980s.

Several UMP officials indicated that they would not pull their candidates, including in close races between the PS and the FN. Former Prime Minister François Fillon explained: “I will never call on voting for candidates that propose crazy solutions like the end of Europe, leaving the common currency, turning in on oneself, but I will not accept either calling for a vote for PS candidates who are openly allied with the Left Front.”

FN presidential candidate and party leader Marine Le Pen advanced to the second round in the northern former mining district around Hénin-Beaumont, defeating Left Front leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. She received 42 percent of votes cast against 23 percent for Philippe Kémel (PS) and 21 percent for Mélenchon.

As during the presidential election, Le Pen relied on the political bankruptcy of France’s bourgeois and petty-bourgeois “left” parties. “We are fighting the archaic left... We are confirming our position as France’s third political force. I’m convinced we will send deputies to the Assembly,” Le Pen said, adding that her priorities were “stopping immigration, security, economic protectionism, and giving priority to the nation.” She said Mélenchon’s defeat showed his “total disconnect with popular voters.”

Mélenchon addressed his supporters at a rally in the rain, telling them he was “afraid you are a bit disappointed... Unfortunately that is not enough, our left-wing competitor is still ahead of us, though he lost 8,000 voters or 5 percent, he will be on the second round, not me.” Mélenchon added that he was leaving the rally with an “untroubled heart.”

The failure of the PS and its allies to win a majority in the elections and the record low turnout reflect broad popular distrust and lack of enthusiasm for Hollande—elected on May 6 with only 51 percent of the

vote against the deeply unpopular incumbent, Nicolas Sarkozy.

Though Hollande announced a series of limited measures to give himself “left” credentials during the legislative campaign, they had little credibility. After five years in which the minimum wage was not increased, his administration promised to increase it—but by no more than 5 percent. He announced the revocation of Sarkozy’s pension cuts, returning the pension age to 60 from 62, but left the required pay-in period at 41 years. As a result, his measure applies only to 20 percent of retiring workers.

While Hollande announced that French troops would begin leaving Afghanistan early, this July, he also has demanded regime-change in Syria, threatening to embroil France in a war throughout the Middle East.

It is widely expected in ruling class circles that—whether the PS wins a legislative majority in the second round of elections or the UMP pulls off an upset victory—Hollande will shift to the right after the legislative elections. (See: “Incoming French president signals budget cuts, handouts to banks”). His policy will be dictated primarily by international class questions: France’s falling competitiveness on world markets and the growing divisions between the European powers over the debt crisis, under conditions where the banks are pressing for more attacks on the working class.

These plans place bitter struggles on the agenda in France, even as social crises in Greece and Spain threaten an explosion of class struggles throughout Europe. The main obstacle to the development of an independent movement of the working class, in France as throughout Europe, is the support given to the bourgeois “left” by Stalinist and petty-bourgeois pseudo-left forces. In France, the Left Front, the NPA and LO are all working to block the emergence of opposition to Hollande from the left.

Polling institutes are issuing competing projections of the outcome of the second-round vote. These typically show the PS winning between 300 and 350 seats, though some estimates put the PS as low as 275—below the 289 seats required for a majority in the National Assembly.

PS officials hope to avoid such a scenario, in which they would need to formally include Left Front forces in government to get a majority. “We cannot be every

day in the fine points of negotiation,” Jean-Christophe Cambadélis explained to *Le Figaro*. “We must act fast. We must bring France back and that means having striking power in the National Assembly.”

The PS would prefer to maintain forces like the Left Front and the NPA, which endorsed Hollande during the presidential election campaign, as a loyal opposition—acting as a lightning rod to divert opposition into safe political channels. These parties have, for their part, repeatedly indicated they are willing to play such a role.

During the legislative election campaign last week, Mélenchon said that he had told Hollande “the day that resistance will be necessary, we will be there. We will not be absent when called. In the same way, we will not bring down a government of the left. We will make critiques, we will play our role as parliamentarians, but we are not political adversaries.”



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