

Large neo-fascist vote in French by-election: A warning to the working class

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29 March 2013

After 10 months in government, the Socialist Party (PS) experienced a serious defeat in the parliamentary by-election in the 2nd constituency of the Oise department in northern France. The neo-fascist National Front (FN) made a significant breakthrough, with its candidate advancing to the second round of voting. PS candidate Sylvie Houssin was eliminated in the first round, having failed to receive the votes of more than 12.5 percent of registered voters.

In the second round of voting on March 24, the conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) candidate Jean-François Mancel won the election with 51.41 percent of the vote. FN candidate Florence Italiani got 48.59 percent, losing by less than 800 votes.

The abstention rate—64.7 percent, after 67.21 percent in the first round—highlights deep popular alienation from the political establishment.

The result reflects deep popular hostility to PS austerity policies and the rising influence of the FN, which poses as the alternative to decades of austerity measures carried out by conservative and social-democratic parties alike, with the support of petty-bourgeois “left” parties and the unions.

After the elimination of its candidate in the first round on March 10, the PS national leadership called for a “Republican front,” i.e., for a UMP vote against the FN in the second round. However, Houssin refused to call upon voters to vote for the UMP candidate Mancel, who is notorious for having, in the past, made alliances with the FN.

Communist Party (PCF) national secretary Pierre Laurent, a close ally of the PS, called the election a “disaster” and spoke of the “social and political failure” of the government.

The media compared the result to the presidential election of 2002. The newspaper *Les Echos* spoke of

the “spectre of a new April 21”. Former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said “it is the return of the Jospin syndrome.” This is a reference to the first round of voting in the 2002 presidential elections, in which the PS candidate Lionel Jospin was eliminated by FN Jean-Marie Le Pen. The PS and the pseudo-left then called upon voters to “block the road” to Le Pen by voting for the right-wing incumbent, Jacques Chirac.

Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers Struggle), the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR, precursor to the NPA), the Parti des travailleurs (Workers Party, now the Independent Workers Party POI), had obtained 3 million votes, and rejected the call of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to lead a campaign for an active workers’ boycott in the second round. (See “No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election”)

In 2002, the FN had benefited from the massive rejection by the voters of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin’s government. The PS had been in office with the PCF and the Greens for five years, carrying out anti-working class policies, such as the privatisation of large swathes of the economy.

It has taken less than a year for the austerity policies imposed by President Hollande and supported by the pseudo-left parties to again produce a strong showing for the FN, this time in the Oise election.

These elections are object lessons in the treachery of the bourgeois “left” and its pseudo-left supporters, demonstrating that only an independent struggle of the working class against these forces can block the rise of the neo-fascists.

In 2002, hundreds of thousands of people spontaneously protested in the streets between the two rounds of voting to express their opposition to Le Pen. The PS, the PCF, the LCR, and LO sought to steer

mass anti-fascist protests into support for Chirac and the right wing. This perspective was bankrupt, as Chirac proceeded to carry out deep attacks on the working class while making appeals to anti-Muslim sentiment to divide the workers; under these conditions, the FN has grown rapidly.

The Chirac government led an anti-Islam campaign in 2002 against the wearing of the Islamic veil in schools, with support from LO and sections of the LCR. During the 2005 suburban riots, Chirac declared a state of emergency, amid escalating anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Elected president in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy went further than his predecessor. In 2009, amid protests against unemployment and wage cuts, Sarkozy passed a law banning the burqa. He had the support of the PS, the PCF, and the pseudo-left, including the NPA and LO.

He also attacked the Roma, depriving them of their right to move freely in France and the European Union in contravention of article 19 of the European Union Charter of fundamental rights. He also launched a reactionary debate on French national identity. It was in this poisonous atmosphere that he cracked down on strikes against pension reforms in 2010 and launched imperialist wars in Libya and Syria.

Once in government, the PS continued the policies of its predecessors—contrary to what the NPA and LO encouraged voters to think would happen. These parties, which now hypocritically denounce the PS, were Hollande's main supporters during his presidential campaign. The NPA and the PCF openly called for an unconditional vote for Hollande.

The PS government went to war in Mali to re-colonise West Africa whilst carrying out the austerity policies imposed by the European Union. While the bourgeoisie fears that its policy will bring about a social explosion in France, the French and European bourgeoisie are reinforcing fascist forces to prepare for repression against working class struggles.

This is the case in Greece: the conservative New Democracy, now in a coalition with the social democratic PASOK and Democratic Left Party, is using anti-immigrant laws to make overtures to the fascist Golden Dawn party, which is financed by Greek capitalists and parliamentary parties.

As in Greece, the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant politics of the UMP and the PS, supported by the

pseudo left, allow the FN to appeal to demoralised social layers who see it as the only opposition party to the EU austerity.



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