

French by-election: National Front eliminates Socialist Party, runs close to the UMP

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In the June 23 by-election in the parliamentary constituency of Villeneuve-sur-Lot in southwest France, the neo-fascist National Front (FN) came close to winning the seat. FN candidate Etienne Bousquet-Cassagne received 46.2 percent of the vote cast in the second round, while Jean-Louis Costes, the candidate of the conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement of former president Nicolas Sarkozy) won with 53.8 percent. The candidate of the ruling Socialist Party (PS), Bernard Barral, was eliminated in the first round.

The by-election in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, a former PS stronghold, was necessary, because PS deputy Jérôme Cahuzac, a government minister, had resigned in a tax evasion scandal. This undoubtedly contributed to the strong showing of the FN and the UMP. However, the situation in Villeneuve-sur-Lot is by no means unique. Two FN deputies already sit in the National Assembly, and polls show that Marine Le Pen's FN is running neck-and-neck nationally with the UMP.

The Villeneuve by-election demonstrates graphically how the ultra-right FN has developed into a serious contender for government. It is exploiting the political vacuum created by the anti-working class policies of the PS government of President François Hollande. And it is benefiting from the craven support given by the numerous petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties to the PS.

The support received by the FN is far less impressive than the initial figures might indicate. In the first round, where 17 candidates ran, the FN was only supported by 11.4 percent of the 75,000 registered voters. This is less than the 12.5 percent necessary to enter the second round, according to French electoral law. The FN was only allowed to participate in the run-off because the PS, which came third with 10.4 percent, did even worse. More than half of the electorate, 54 percent, could not bring themselves to vote for any of the candidates and stayed at home.

In the second round, 14 percent of those who went to the voting booths voted blank or spoiled their ballot. In the end, the UMP candidate received the support of 24.2 percent of

the total electorate and the FN candidate 20.1 percent.

These figures illustrate the dangers confronting French workers. In the absence of any independent political perspective for the working class, these two utterly right-wing parties dominate the political scene with fewer than half the electorate behind them. With large sections of the UMP rapidly approaching the FN, similar figures on a national level could translate into a government involving the FN or even an FN president.

FN leader Marine Le Pen is exploiting the fact that the anti-working class policies of the UMP and the PS are virtually indistinguishable. If anything, Hollande's attacks on the social gains of the working class go even beyond those of his right-wing predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. On the very day of the first round of the Villeneuve-sur-Lot by-election, Hollande announced on television that the pay-in period for full pensions would be lengthened by 3.5 years to 44 annuities, and that social security funding would be cut.

Hollande's approval ratings in opinion polls have dropped to 25 percent since his election in May 2012. The PS has lost eight straight seats in by-elections and been eliminated by the National Front in the first round in two of them.

Since taking over the leadership of the FN from her father Jean-Marie, Marine Le Pen has sought to provide her party with a more respectable face. While maintaining its rampant racism, its xenophobia, its promotion of law-and-order and its hatred of socialism, the FN tries to present itself as an advocate of small businessmen and native French workers.

One day after Hollande announced his renewed attack on pensioners, Le Pen called on "everyone, abstainers, left voters" to vote for the FN to protest against "this totally unjust pension reform" and "against the destruction of public services in rural areas." She plays on the similarity between the UMP and PS, referring to them as the "UMPS".

This propaganda gains strength from the fact that both the PS and the Left Front—an alliance of the Communist Party and the Left Party—have called for an UMP vote in the second round of the Villeneuve-sur-Lot election. They did so in the name of a "Republican front" that supposedly defends

the values of the Republic against the FN fascists.

This is a complete fraud. The UMP and the PS, as well as the FN, are all bourgeois parties serving the needs of capital and of imperialism. Under the impact of a deepening economic and social crisis, both the UMP and the PS are rapidly throwing off their democratic pretensions and turning towards authoritarian forms of rule. The “Republican front” is not a front against fascism, but a front against the working class, aiming to block an independent struggle of the working class against fascism.

The majority of the UMP—including former president Nicolas Sarkozy, his advisor Patrick Buisson and party leader Jean-François Copé—are openly adapting the anti-immigrant, national identity and islamophobic policies of the FN. They are preparing for electoral and government alliances with Le Pen’s party on the municipal, regional and national level. Only a minority in the UMP, notably Sarkozy’s former prime minister François Fillon, still pay lip service to the “Republican front.”

Jean-Louis Costes, the successful UMP candidate in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, has long been on the far right of the UMP. However, this did not stop the PS from calling for his support. Hollande, PS first secretary Harlem Désir, and most of the PS leadership urged their supporters to vote for Costes. Hollande stalwart Rémi Brandão declared: “It’s not because the meaning of the ‘republican front’ has been confused by some UMP members that it should be given up. On the contrary.”

A crucial role in promoting the fraud of the “Republican front” is played by the Left Front (FdG) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The FdG sees its main role in providing a left cover to the PS by stirring up the illusion that it can be convinced to implement policies more favourable to the working class.

After running its own candidate in the first round of the Villeneuve-sur-Lot election, receiving 5 percent of the vote cast, the FdG supported the UMP candidate Costes in the second round. The Communist Party, by far the FdG’s largest component, celebrated Costes’s win as a victory for “all the democratic forces” in its daily, *L’Humanité*. *L’Humanité* lamented the fact that the republican front “no longer seems capable of containing the FN for long,” and that “we search in vain for the beginnings of an analysis from the PS leadership and the government”, warning the government that it “is heading for disaster if it continues to listen to those who want the left to fail”.

While the Left Front provides a cover for the PS, the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) is providing a cover for the Left Front. Eleven years ago, when a similar situation emerged in the second round of the presidential election and FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen was running against the UMP’s

Jacques Chirac, the NPA’s forerunner, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), called for a Chirac vote.

This time, the NPA concluded that an open call for a Costes vote would totally discredit its pseudo-left credentials. The local NPA statement nominally opposed the “Republican front,” stating that “the NPA will not choose between the law-and-order populism of Costes...and the fascistic ambition of Bousquet-Cassagne.... These two individuals are die-hard enemies of our social camp.”

The statement goes on, however, to call for unity with the Left Front, which was in turn supporting the PS and the UMP: “The NPA considers that the only viable line today is to rebuild a real unity of all workers and all organisations which wish to fight austerity and the government’s policies.”

In reality, the only viable line is the independent political mobilisation of the working class based on an international, socialist programme. This demands a complete break with the PS, the Left Front, the trade unions, the NPA and other pseudo-left organisations.

The NPA’s adaptation to the Left Front and the PS is not a tactical mistake. It flows from its class position and its political perspective. Representing an affluent middle class layer, the NPA is deeply hostile to an independent movement of the working class and has largely adapted to the policies of French imperialism.

This is most visible in the wars against Libya and Syria, where the NPA has insisted on an imperialist intervention and taken on the role of cheerleader for French imperialism. Last year, it called for a Hollande vote in the second round of the presidential election, taking full responsibility for his policies.

The oppression of an independent political movement of the working class by the Left Front, the NPA and other pseudo-left organisations creates the rotten atmosphere in which the National Front can thrive. This is the main lesson from the Villeneuve-sur-Lot election. A serious struggle against fascism requires a resolute break with these organisations.



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