

French neo-fascists win two Senate seats amid government defeat

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Elections to the French Senate on September 28 resulted in yet another humiliating defeat for the Socialist Party (PS), President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls. The election for the first time of two National Front (FN) senators highlights the continuing electoral rise of the neo-fascist party.

After defeats in eight parliamentary by-elections, as well as municipal and European elections this year, the loss of the Senate represents another setback for the PS government, whose austerity politics and military adventures are widely hated. This setback is likely to be repeated in local and regional elections in March and December 2015, respectively.

The French Senate, designed as an undemocratic institution, has been traditionally controlled by the right wing. Its 348 senators are elected for their six-year terms not by universal suffrage, but by an electoral college made up of 87,534 local officials, principally delegates of municipal councils. Half of the seats are up for election every three years. Thus, in total, 179 seats were up for grabs on Sunday.

Given the anti-democratic character of the Senate elections, they tend to serve as a barometer of the moods of the French political elite and, currently, of its rapid shift to the right.

The combined number of right-wing senators (of the Union for a Popular Movement, the Union of Democrats and independents) rose from 171 seats to 196. The right won back the majority that the official left had briefly taken in 2011. The PS and the Left Front (a coalition of the French Communist Party [PCF] and the Left Party), which won 177 seats in the 2011 election, only retained 156.

The Communist, Republican, Citizen and Senators of the Left Party Group, led by the PCF, had 21 senators, of which five were up for re-election. Only two were re-

elected, thus reducing the group to 18 members.

Though the FN “only” won two seats, it is significant that it won support more broadly than among the roughly 1,000 elected officials who are FN members. The FN won 3,972 electors’ votes, underscoring the support that exists for the neo-fascists from electors of other parties, often “small officials” from rural communities without formal party labels. National Front leader Marine Le Pen has long targeted such figures.

The rush to the right by the political elite makes neo-fascist policies more and more acceptable to France’s elected officials. Policies that in another period would have been associated with the far right have been adopted by every section of the political establishment, including the so-called “left.”

Social austerity, repression of the Roma and undocumented immigrants and neo-colonial wars in Africa and in the Middle East provoke no meaningful opposition from any of these parties.

In this context, traditional barriers between not only the FN and the right-wing parties, but also between the FN and the PS, the pseudo-left and the trade unions are dissolving.

News magazine *Le Point* pointed to seven candidates in the March municipal elections who had passed from the ranks of the Socialist Party to the National Front: “One can cite for example Antoine Ibba, head of the FN list in Grenay, Mungo Shematsi in Saint-Martin-d’Hères, or former municipal councilor Daniel Gest at Outreau,” the magazine wrote.

The case of General Confederation of Labor (CGT) official Fabien Engelmann is well known. Engelmann spent ten years in, first, the Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière) group and then Olivier Besancenot’s New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), before becoming a FN

candidate in local elections in the Moselle region in 2012.

Another factor that doubtless played a role in the vote of many electors from various levels of France ' s local and territorial governments was the PS' decision to cut 11 billion euros from funding for territorial governments.

There will be serious cuts in community services, including in day care centers and retirement homes, centers for troubled youths, pre-school and elementary schools, libraries, museums, music schools, theaters, cultural and sports activities.

The attacks launched by the PS government allow Le Pen to present herself as a defender of the population ' s living standards, declaring with her usual demagoguery: "This shows that our proposals are in sync with the demands of elected officials on the ground. The disappearance of public services, the reform of territorial governments, immigration ... People below are suffering the consequences of policies decided upon high." It is only the worthlessness of the French "left" that makes it possible for this ultra-reactionary to posture in this fashion.



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