

Loss for Socialist Party expected in French local elections

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Two rounds of elections for councillors in France's 101 departments, on March 22 and 29, are expected to produce a new humiliating defeat for the ruling Socialist Party (PS) of President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls. The neo-fascist National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen is expected to make significant advances.

These projections follow big losses for the PS in the 2014 municipal and European elections and historic gains for the FN amid record abstention rates.

Opinion polls show over 30 percent of voting intentions going to the FN, 28 percent for conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement of former president Nicolas Sarkozy) or UDI (Union of Democrats and Independents), and 20 percent to the PS.

The Left Front coalition of the Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon obtained 8.6 percent, the Greens 4 percent, and the pseudo-left New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and LO (Workers Struggle) 1.5 percent. This is a far cry from the combined 10 percent vote of the two pseudo-left parties in the 2002 presidential elections, reflecting broad disillusionment with their support for Hollande in 2012.

Discredited by their support for the PS and terrified of anger in the working class with the PS, the Left Front is proposing an alliance with the Greens in the departmental elections, trying to cover the longstanding alliance of both the Left Front and the Greens with the PS.

Once elected, the department councils will have to oversee savage cutbacks in school and social housing, benefits for the aged and unemployed, sport and culture dictated by the PS. The national government's annual contribution to local governments of €34 billion is to be cut by €11 billion. Estimates are that these cuts,

including €3 billion in cuts to health budgets, could lead to the axing of 60,000 construction jobs and 22,000 health jobs.

With the PS implementing austerity policies with the support of the pseudo-left parties, in the absence of a party speaking for the working class, the far-right FN can demagogically posture as the only opposition to austerity. In this surreal environment, escalating working class discontent with capitalist policies leads to mass abstention and is reflected in elections by the rise of the FN.

The UMP/UDI coalition could take control of up to 60 departments, while the PS and its allies are expected to lose 20 of the 60 departments they now run. FN-PS run-offs are predicted in 300 cantons, with 1,000 UMP-FN and 700 UMP-PS run-offs. The various parties are therefore discussing whom they will endorse if their candidates are eliminated in the first round.

Prime Minister Valls is attempting to steer voters back behind the PS by denouncing the FN. He said he feared "that my country will be smashed by the National Front," which is "on the verge of power." France, he claimed, needs "an awakening of consciousness," because an FN victory would be "a disaster for the country and ruin for French people."

Valls cynically hopes this fear mongering will mobilise voters for the PS candidates, even though he is trumpeting that the PS government will continue its unpopular, anti-working class policies.

The PS has made it clear that they will ask their voters to transfer their votes to the UMP/UDI in run-offs against the FN, the so-called "Republican Front" against the FN. Valls has asked the UMP to similarly call for a PS vote in PS-FN run-offs.

The issue already created a split in the UMP when it came up in a legislative by-election in the Doubs

department last month. The PS had been beaten to second place by the FN, and the UMP eliminated. UMP leader Nicolas Sarkozy was put into the minority in the UMP national committee when he called for a vote against the FN. He threatened to expel any member of the UMP if they ally with the FN, but it is widely expected that many will do just that.

It remains unclear how many departments could go to the FN, which to date has only one councillor. A figure of 100 FN councillors elected has been suggested, with possible FN majorities in the Vaucluse, Aisne, Oise and Var departments. It is likely that there will be several hung councils where the FN could cast deciding votes on the election of the executive.

Marine Le Pen stated last week that the FN would set “four or five conditions—points of programme—for possible alliances to obtain an executive.”

Le Pen is not only seeking to create a network of councillors to establish the FN on a national basis, but is approaching UMP members and voters to form alliances in a bid for power in the 2017 presidential elections.

Last month, emeritus FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen offered to build alliances between the UMP and the FN in the departmental elections, though Sarkozy rejected it.



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