

New defeat for Socialist Party as neo-fascists rise in French local elections

Antoine Lerougetel
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The 21.85 percent poll for the ruling Socialist Party (PS) in the first round of France's departmental elections on Sunday is a stinging rebuke to the PS government of President François Hollande and its policies of austerity and war. The 25.19 percent poll for the neo-fascist National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen, like the 50.17 percent abstention rate, testify to the bankruptcy of the French political establishment and its alienation from broad masses of working people.

The Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) of former conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, allied to the centre-right Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI), took first place with 29.4 percent of the vote. This dashed the FN's hope of again leading after the first round, as it did in municipal and European elections last year. The total vote of the UMP and associated conservative parties was 36 percent.

Through its participation in local elections, however, the FN has achieved its aim of establishing itself throughout France, including in many areas where it had no presence previously. The FN is in the lead in 43 of the 98 departments up for election and will be present in the second round in 1,100 of France's 2054 cantons—the administrative level below the departments. It can hope to enjoy a majority of seats in departmental councils in the Vaucluse, Gard, and Aisne departments, and even in one former PS stronghold, the Pas-de-Calais.

The vote of the PS combined with its longstanding political satellites, such as the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), the Greens, and the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, was 36 percent, as well. It testifies to the deep unpopularity of the PS and of Hollande personally that these longstanding defenders of order felt compelled to run independently from the PS in certain areas.

Elsewhere, however, they ran together with the PS, belying the pretense that they represent an alternative to the PS government—a pretense which has increasingly little influence over working people, which are deeply disillusioned not only with the PS but with its allies.

The second round of elections in the cantons, to determine the make-up of the departmental councils, will take place on Sunday. PS chairman Cambadélis has called for unity with the UMP to “block the FN everywhere,” as did the national secretary of the PCF, Pierre Laurent.

Each canton inside the department elects to the departmental council a pair made up of a man and woman, who can be of two different allied parties. A pair is directly elected on the first round if it receives at least 50 percent of the vote. Otherwise, the two pairs with the highest number of votes go forward to the runoff, together with any other pairs that have received votes amounting to 12.5 percent of the total electorate. This means that they need 25 percent of the vote to advance if only 50 percent of voters actually vote.

On this basis, the PS was eliminated in 524 cantons, over one quarter of the total. It stands to only win control of some 20 of the 61 departments it currently administers and lose some 15 of its historical strongholds—including the Nord, the Pas de Calais, and Seine-et-Marne.

The incoming departmental councils, whatever their political complexion, are set to impose massive cuts in the coming period. Due to budget cuts imposed by the PS at the national level, some €11 billion (US\$12 billion) of state subsidies to local government are to be eliminated. This will have a devastating effect on infrastructure and health care, including layoffs of thousands of construction and medical workers.

The outcome of the election reflects the class gulf

separating the workers from the PS and its political and trade union satellites. These forces have worked constantly to suppress mass opposition in the working class to the austerity agenda of the PS and the European Union (EU), including mass sackings and tens of billions of euros of cuts to social spending. It is this political suppression of the working class that allows the FN to grow by posing as the only oppositional force, with demagogic criticisms of the PS' record and appeals to anti-immigrant chauvinism.

PS officials sought to put the best face on the defeat by claiming they were relieved by the FN's failure to come in first—that is, by the first-place finish of the conservative UMP.

"The far right is not the leading political organization in France ... I am proud of that, because I personally fought hard for it," Valls declared. His office informed the media that he lit a cigar to celebrate the election results, upon hearing them.

Valls' cry of victory amid a catastrophe for his party is absurd, and the claim that he has been carrying out a political struggle against the FN is a fraud. The entire political establishment in France—the UMP, which Valls sees as a barrier to the FN, but also the PS and the pseudo-left parties—are promoting ever more right-wing, law-and-order and authoritarian conceptions.

In the final days of the election campaign, Sarkozy made a sharp turn to the right, adopting racist themes favoured by the FN. In line with the FN's call for "national preference," he called for banning substitute meals respecting children's religious beliefs, such as kosher or halal recipes, and called for a crackdown on immigration.

An unpopular president voted out of office after one term in 2012, Sarkozy is straining to hold together the UMP's feuding factions, many of which favor alliances with the FN.

As for the PS, it has endorsed bans on the burqa and on Muslim veils in public schools and carried out mass ethnic deportations of the Roma, thus helping legitimize the FN, with the support of the PCF and the pseudo-left parties. These forces are now seeking to minimize the electoral disaster facing the PS by rallying around it.

Benoît Hamon, a leader of the "rebel" (*frondeur*) faction of the PS that at times postures as an opponent of austerity, advised the government: "Unite the left."

Patrick Apel-Muller in the *Stalinist* ~~daily~~ said that the PS had made "attractive promises which have been sadly betrayed," and encouraged his readers to wait for a shift in the PS' policies, since "the ruling duo [Hollande and Valls] cannot ... turn a deaf ear to the message."

In fact, Valls has arrogantly insisted that the PS will continue with its unpopular policies, "whatever the outcome of the second round next Sunday."



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