

New defeat for Socialist Party in second round of French local elections

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France's ruling Socialist Party (PS) suffered yet another major defeat yesterday, losing badly in the second round of departmental elections. Initial projections last night showed the PS winning 30 to 37 of France's 101 departments, meaning it will cede control of up to half of the 60 departments it held before the vote.

The right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) is set to control the councils of 64 to 70 departments, with the far-right National Front (FN) in contention to control one department. The abstention rate was approximately 50 percent, similar to the first round of the elections.

This marks the fourth straight defeat in mid-term elections since PS candidate François Hollande won the May 2012 presidential elections and the PS won legislative elections a few weeks later. Hollande is widely hated for presiding over a sharp rise in unemployment and blocking wage increases. His policies of austerity and war have made him France's most unpopular president since World War II. The PS even lost the Corrèze department, Hollande's own.

Over a week before the departmental elections began, Hollande insisted he would not modify his austerity policies, no matter how overwhelmingly voters rejected them at the polls. He told the business magazine *Challenges* there would be "no change, either of line or of prime minister."

Arrogantly dismissing mass anger with his policies, he said: "Why should I change the political line when it is clear and it is beginning to bear fruit?"

The PS reacted to its defeat by sending out Prime Minister Manuel Valls to baldly announce that the PS would continue with its unpopular policies. "The economy is doing better thanks to the reforms we carried out in the interests of our businesses," Valls

blithely declared, adding that the various PS factions and their Green and pseudo-left allies were "too dispersed" and should all have campaigned together.

Deputies from the so-called "rebel" faction of the PS, which left the government last autumn to call for a financial policy more independent of Germany and the European Union, are pressing for closer collaboration with the government. (See: French government collapses amid mounting anger over austerity policies). Last night, they posted a manifesto on their web site proposing a "contract to bring us together."

Echoing these calls for PS unity, Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem said there could be no let-up in PS austerity. "Waffling now would mean ruining all the efforts we have made since 2012," she said.

UMP leader and former one-term president Nicolas Sarkozy celebrated his party's victory, declaring: "The pro-democracy right and the center have obviously won the departmental election. Never under the 5th Republic [which began in 1958] have we won so many departments... It's lies, hiding from reality and impotence that have been punished today."

In fact, despite its election victory, the UMP has no broad support for its right-wing policies, which are virtually indistinguishable from those of Hollande. Sarkozy himself is a highly controversial figure. His policies left him France's most unpopular president in history until Hollande defeated him in the 2012 elections and then plunged even further in the polls than Sarkozy had.

Once the UMP councilors take office, they will be obliged to implement billions of euros in unpopular cuts, since the PS cut €11 billion in subsidies from the national state to the local authorities.

The similarity of the records of the UMP and the PS benefits primarily the far-right FN. Due to the

reactionary and bankrupt character of France's pseudo-left parties, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), which are aligned with the PS, the FN can demagogically pose as France's sole opposition party.

Last night, FN leader Marine Le Pen denounced the "class disdain for our candidates" in the rest of the political establishment, hailing the FN's winning of approximately 30 departmental councilors across France as "the basis of the great victories of tomorrow."

"I lead the only true movement of opposition to the existing government," she said. She called for cutting state officials' pensions to relieve the tax burden on poorer taxpayers and for banning the Muslim headscarf in day care centers.

The local elections appeared to produce a slight setback for the FN, which some media had tipped to control as many as five departments—the Vaucluse, Gard, Aisne, Oise, and Pas-de-Calais. Nonetheless, the far-right party is clearly continuing its ascension, passing from having one departmental councilor in all of France to having 30, and demonstrating its widening influence across the country.

Appearing on France2, Le Pen adviser Florian Philippot noted that in the 1,100 of 2,054 cantons where the FN survived to the second round, it got on average 40 percent of the vote, underlining the growing electoral strength of the neo-fascists.



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