

Far-right National Rally backs Le Pen as 2022 French presidential candidate

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Last weekend, France's neo-fascist National Rally (RN) assembled for its congress in Perpignan, which endorsed Marine Le Pen as the RN's presidential candidate and president of the party. Le Pen, the only person standing for either position, won 98.35 percent of the vote.

Le Pen's unopposed landslide victory notwithstanding, she came to the RN congress under pressure, after an unexpected setback in the June regional elections. Polls had shown the RN carrying six of France's 12 regions, but its candidates failed to win a single region.

Amid mass disillusionment and anger with European governments' stubborn refusal to carry out a scientific fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to over 1.1 million deaths from COVID-19 in Europe, voters overwhelmingly ignored the election. Abstention topped a record level of 65 percent. With voting largely driven by retirees, all 12 incumbent regional presidents, seven conservatives and five social democrats, were re-elected.

On election night, as journalists spoke of a crisis of French democracy, Le Pen, visibly frustrated, blamed her voters. She said: "The distance between voting intentions as measured by the polls and the actual vote, I say this gravely and solemnly, has only one explanation: our voters did not go vote. That is why I call upon them to wake up. All of those who oppose this government, which is taking our country to the edge of catastrophe, have a duty to react. If you want things to change, you must vote. If you do not vote for your ideas, your voice is no longer heard."

The media discussion that unfolded in the lead-up to the Perpignan congress testified to the utter degradation of official public life in France. Since Socialist Party (PS) President François Hollande invited Marine Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace in 2015, after Islamist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, the RN has been entirely integrated into mainstream politics. Moreover, broader layers of the ruling elite now adopt fascistic positions, like

President Emmanuel Macron's hailing of Nazi-collaborationist traitor Philippe Pétain as a "great soldier."

A substantial faction of the capitalist media attacked Le Pen's "de-demonization" policy. Le Pen renamed the old National Front (FN) the National Rally and demanded the RN avoid hailing the Holocaust and other crimes of 20th-century European fascism. Instead, parts of the right-wing media demanded that Le Pen react to her defeat by taking a more "radical" line, with harsher denunciations of Islam or the European Union, and a more explicit defense of her party's historic ties to Pétain's Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II.

A prominent supporter of this view is Eric Zemmour, the influential former *Le Figaro* journalist and promoter of the Vichy regime, who has also been convicted for inciting racial hatred. Zemmour, who now works as a lead commentator for billionaire Vincent Bolloré's far-right CNews television channel, mocked Le Pen as indistinguishable from mainstream conservative politicians, like Xavier Bertrand or President Jacques Chirac, or current President Emmanuel Macron.

"We heard RN officials, with Marine Le Pen in the lead, berating voters, it was mind-boggling. They looked like stockholders demanding their dividends," Zemmour said, adding: "In truth, there is nothing separating her line from Emmanuel Macron or Xavier Bertrand. ... People are saying that she is abandoning everything, betraying everything, becoming like Chirac, and she is paying heavily for it."

Former social-democratic libertarian writer Michel Onfray, now on the far-right, similarly criticized Le Pen for "Chirac-izing herself," observing: "She writes in *L'Opinion* that the euro, Europe, the free market, all of that is fantastic, she is going all over the place. ... She is telling herself, 'How can I get power? What can I say to get there?'"

At the congress, however, the RN rejected the advice of Zemmour, Onfray and others. In her address to the congress, Le Pen made clear that no profound differences separate her positions from theirs, by saluting the RN's fascist heritage. However, she rejected calls to adopt a more explicitly fascist political line. She said: "We will not go backwards. With all the respect that we have for our history, we will not go back to the National Front. We must continue to open ourselves up to all those French people who do not simply want to remain spectators."

Le Pen insisted that the RN has concentrated on making the changes necessary to prepare to govern France. She applauded the RN for having supposedly become "a party that represents political change and that, more than ever, must be ready to take on the highest office. ... This healthy and necessary evolution takes shape in what the RN has become, a party open to all, creative and audacious, responsible and demanding towards itself."

Le Pen's report was endorsed by the congress, which also named Jordan Bardella as temporary party president while Le Pen runs in next year's presidential elections.

The rise of a far-right, authoritarian regime is a serious danger in France and across Europe. Its election setback notwithstanding, the RN can still win the 2022 elections and take power, especially given the unpopularity of Macron, the incumbent, the "president of the rich." Le Pen's decision to continue with a "de-demonization" strategy seems clearly aimed at avoiding alienating workers who might vote for Le Pen in a disoriented expression of political frustration, but who might not vote for a tendency more aggressively endorsing fascism or the Holocaust.

Ultimately, the rise of the French far-right can only be fought based on the political perspectives that the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has developed over the entire period since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991.

In 2002, FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father, advanced to the second round of the presidential elections alongside Chirac, due to the elimination of Socialist Party (PS) candidate Lionel Jospin. A former student protester and member of Pierre Lambert's ex-Trotskyist Organisation communiste internationaliste (OCI), Jospin was discredited by the right-wing policies of his 1998-2002 Plural Left government. Faced with the false choice between Chirac and a neo-fascist, millions of people descended into the streets in mass protests.

The ICFI advanced the call for an active boycott campaign, to build an independent political movement in

the working class against the policies Chirac would pursue once in office. On the other hand, petty-bourgeois groups like the Pabloite Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and the Lambert tendency campaigned for a Chirac vote, claiming this was necessary to keep Le Pen from coming to power.

Nearly 20 years later, the petty-bourgeois groups' perspective stand utterly exposed. The fascist danger cannot be fought simply by tactically opposing Le Pen's party. In the course of two decades of wars and escalating attacks on social and democratic rights, especially after the 2008 Wall Street crash, the entire French bourgeoisie has turned sharply towards fascist policies. Indeed, after Macron endorsed Pétain in 2018 while riot police violently attacked "yellow vest" protests, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin attacked Le Pen in a public debate for being "too soft" on Muslims.

The fact that political trash like Zemmour or Onfray can play leading roles in the French media further underscores that the fascist evolution of the ruling class affects not only its political personnel, but the cultural and media establishment. The dangers this poses were further underlined by the recent coup threats made by French active-duty soldiers in the far-right magazine *Current Values*.

Opposing this threat requires the revolutionary political mobilization of the working class. There have been many strikes and protests internationally and in France in recent years, like the "yellow vests" and the 2019-2020 rail strike. The Socialist Equality Party, the French section of the ICFI, stresses the necessity of developing a left-wing, Trotskyist opposition to the PS and the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left groups, uniting workers—both those who have voted RN out of confused frustration, and those who have not—in a movement against capitalism and authoritarian rule.



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