

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article436>



France

A political earthquake

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV340 - May 2002 -

Publication date: Thursday 16 May 2002

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The first round of the French presidential election provoked a real trauma, particularly among the masses and traditional left supporters. The constitutional rules for this election mean that only the two candidates who top the poll go through to the second round. Thus the final election will be a run off between outgoing president Jacques Chirac, a particularly corrupt rightwing figure, and Jean-Marie Le Pen, representative of the racist and fascist far right. Lionel Jospin, the outgoing Prime Minister and Socialist Party candidate, got a few hundred thousand votes less than Le Pen. He was thus eliminated from the second round.

Bankruptcy of the traditional left

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/oblcrdemo.jpg>]

This unexpected situation should not hide some other lessons of the 21st April election. First of all, there was a high rate of abstention (27.8%), the highest since the introduction of direct elections for the president. Second, we saw the collapse of the Communist Party, which has been in the government led by Jospin for the last 5 years: it got just 3.7% of the vote. Third, a historic phenomenon: the CP was overtaken by two revolutionary far left candidates. Arlette Laguiller for Lutte Ouvriere got 5.7% of the vote and Olivier Besancenot, candidate of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR-French section of the Fourth International) got 4.3%, that is 1.2 million votes.

Widespread abstentionism, like the collapse of the parties that had been in government (with the notable exception of the Greens who succeeded in bringing out their differences with social democracy), bear witness to a widespread phenomenon. There is a clear rejection of the policies of austerity and social injustice implemented over the last few years, and discredit of the parties that implemented this. Opinion polls published during the campaign showed that three quarters of the electorate had difficulty in telling the difference between the political programmes of Chirac and Jospin.

The EU summit in Barcelona a few weeks before the election deepened this inability to tell the difference. Chirac and Jospin, in partnership, accepted the privatisation of the Electricite de France (a state company which still has the monopoly on the supply of electricity), the raising of the retirement age by five years, and a commitment to reduce the public deficit, which means budgetary austerity in the years to come.

This confusion, already very strong on social and economic questions, worsened with the eruption into the election campaign of the "law and order" or "insecurity" question. Chirac made it his central theme in order to highlight his difference with the left, supposedly more "lax", at least so he thought. But most of the candidates, right and left, rushed onto this slippery slope.

Jean-Pierre Chevenement was not slow to up the stakes. But very rapidly Jospin followed him. During the campaign only Noel Mamere, the Greens' candidate, and in particular Olivier Besancenot, refused to give in to this pressure and abandon the defence of democratic freedoms or criminalise young people.

What was the result? There was a huge wave of law and order demagogy under the slogan "zero tolerance", young people from the underprivileged suburbs, in particular of immigrant descent, being implicitly or explicitly held responsible. Le Pen, whose linking of law and order to immigration has been his stock in trade for thirty years, only had to pick up the winnings.

Both the elimination of the parliamentary left from the second round of the presidential election and the strengthening of the racist far right, are obviously defeats for the workers' movement in France. They will obviously encourage wide-spread soul-searching and a discussion on future perspectives for the entire left: the parliamentary left parties, trade unions, associations and the radical left: how did we get here; how can we prepare the fightback, on a political and social level; how can we regain ground?

LCR chooses its candidate

These elections also showed that, despite the failure of the free-market left, another left exists, not only in the social movements and in the electoral arena. That is the starting point for rebuilding. This presidential election also showed that the radical left, the non-free-market left, the left that defends the interests of workers and different layers of oppressed in society, exists mainly through two organisations: Lutte Ouvriere and the LCR. The LCR was always conscious of this situation and the responsibilities of activists who identify with a revolutionary perspective. This is why the LCR proposed to Lutte Ouvriere to make a political agreement on joint candidates in the presidential and parliamentary elections, to offer the strongest possible alternative for people who did not want to vote for the traditional left. Of course, this was not to deny the major differences that exist between the LCR and LO but to make it possible for them to exist in a common framework that would not harm the political struggle on major questions that clearly differentiate revolutionary left organisations from the free-market left. This was achieved in the European elections of 1999 where a joint LO-LCR list led to the election of five revolutionary MEPs.

Conscious of the popularity of Arlette Laguiller, the traditional candidate of Lutte Ouvriere, the LCR proposed that Arlette be the joint candidate. Lutte Ouvriere did not accept this proposal and made their own sectarian choice without even agreeing to a discussion. A national conference of the LCR, in June 2001, then decided to present one of its own leaders, Olivier Besancenot a 27-year old postal worker, and trade-union and global justice activist.

The goal was to have a candidate who would put forward an action programme of urgent demands against the bosses' offensive, which is also relayed by the "pluralist left" government and the European Union. The LCR also wanted a candidate who, like the members of the LCR, is a real activist of the global justice movement, unlike Lutte Ouvriere. For LO this movement is simply a diversion from the "real" anti-capitalist struggle. The LCR put forward a candidate brought the struggle against all forms of exploitation of oppression and of discrimination created and strengthened by capitalism, particularly of young people, women and immigrants to the centre stage.

Another goal was to propose the building of a new anti-capitalist party, to bring together not only revolutionaries but all those who reject the barbarism of capitalism, members of the SP, CP and Greens who no longer who identify with the governmental left and above all the tens of thousands of activists from the trade-unions and associations who today no longer have any party political reference point, after the collapse of the Communist Party and the betrayals of the Socialist Party.

Our goal in choosing Olivier Besancenot was also to bring a new element into political life, by offering millions of people the possibility to vote for someone who is not a professional politician but, like themselves, a wage worker, who has the same pay slip as they do, and who, once the elections were over, would find himself like them...back at work. It was also a question of speaking to young people, presenting somebody unknown but in step with their struggles, whether the mobilisations against capitalist globalisation or against casualised labour which are growing in France today in big retail firms such as the FNAC book and record shop chain or MacDonald's. This wager was in large part successful. It was among the youngest electors that Olivier got his best scores (13.9% of 18-24 year olds, and 6.3% of 25-34 year olds according to certain breakdowns).

This campaign, waged under the slogan "Our lives are worth more than their profits" enabled the LCR to speak to a far wider audience than usual. In a few months of campaigning, the European members of parliament, Alain Krivine and Roseline Vacchetta, and above all Olivier Besancenot, spoke at a hundred public meetings attended by more than 25,000 people, mostly workers and young people. We had not seen this for more than thirty years!

In the last three weeks, after the 500 sponsorships were deposited and Olivier was at last invited by the major television channels, this unknown candidate made a breakthrough. The numbers attending meetings reached record levels, hundreds of messages of support and encouragement and asking to join the LCR were received every day. This increased after the results of the first round were announced.

The electoral success has obviously changed the LCR's relationship with the workers' movement, the social movements and with the other organisations on the left and far left. First effect: LO has agreed to meet the LCR to discuss the possibility of an electoral agreement for the parliamentary elections in June. It is too early to know if the outcome will be positive. But the mere fact that there will be such a meeting shows that something has changed on the far left.

Building a leftwing of the left

The current situation, shaped by the crisis of the traditional left, the threat of the far right and the rise of the far left, confers new responsibilities on revolutionaries. First of all we must be the spearhead of the mobilisation against the far right, which has been growing notably among young people since the 21st April. The LCR has been at the forefront of these demonstrations. Then we have to prepare the conditions for a massive response to the offensive that is in preparation, whoever is going to constitute the next parliamentary majority, against social security, public services and democratic rights, particularly for immigrants.

Then we must develop a perspective for emerging from this unprecedented crisis, a perspective that gives a new hope to a traumatised workers' movement. Moving towards a new party capable of responding, refounding a fighting left, rehabilitating the project of revolutionary transformation of society, will not be easy. The results of the far left in general, and of the LCR candidate in particular, do not in themselves resolve this problem. But they make the conditions a lot more favourable than in the past. This is the task the LCR sets itself in the period to come.

Who voted for Olivier Besancenot ?

Young people. In the 18-24 age group Besancenot was the second most popular candidate with 13.9% of their votes to Chirac's 15.7%, and unlike Arlette Laguiller who got only 1.8% of the youth vote and scored best with 35-49 year olds, of whom 9.1% voted for her.

He did best with white-collar workers, teachers and other public service employees (around 6% in all these categories) and his electorate was fairly evenly divided between women (4%) and men (4.7%).