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France

Rejection and passivity

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The results of the European elections in France partly confirm those of the regional elections in a context of a remarkable rate of abstention.

The 57% abstention rate was much higher than had been the case for the cantonal and regional elections of this March. Defeat for the ruling right, victory for the socialist opposition, lower scores than expected for the various lists stressing national sovereignty, a setback for the attempt by the LCR-LO lists to build a fourth pole in political life [1] - these are the main lessons of an election which took place in a very difficult context for mobilization and social resistance in the face of an unprecedented neoliberal offensive.

This is the first paradox of this political situation. The right wing government was punished on two fronts. In spectacular fashion it lost nearly all the regions last spring with 20 regions out of 22 falling to the left. That defeat was confirmed at these European elections. The party of prime minister Raffarin, the UMP (Union pour une Majorité Populaire), only won 16% of votes cast or less than 7% of the electorate as a whole!

Created in 2002 in exceptional circumstances, the UMP had set as its objective overcoming division of the reactionary camp into two distinct families. The right in France is traditionally divided into two formations of variable size, one of Gaullist tradition, the RPR, the other more liberal and European, the UDF. For a section of the French bourgeoisie, this division, artificial in political terms since the Gaullists were won to the project of European construction and economic liberalism, was seen as responsible for the electoral defeats of the right at the hands of the left. Profiting from a unique opportunity, the quasi-plebiscitary election of Jacques Chirac in May 2002 in opposition to the far right candidate Le Pen, the new party was created and won the parliamentary elections. Two years later, its defeat is patent. The unification of the right has not been achieved; the UDF led by François Bayrou enjoyed an electoral success and the electoral reverse for the UMP was such that it undermines the legitimacy of the government.

President Jacques Chirac, elected in the context of an anti-Le Pen referendum, has pursued a very harsh neoliberal policy over the past two years, assisted by his Prime Minister Pierre Raffarin. This policy dictated by the MEDEF (the powerful employers' organization) has challenged pensions and health systems, privatized public companies like the EDF (Électricité de France), brutalized education, research and culture through a succession of deep cuts, and increased inequality still further through a particularly unjust tax policy. The arrogance and contempt for any form of social resistance adds to a particularly reactionary picture reinforced by a "law and order" discourse and practice affecting youth and immigrants in particular. It is this policy that was punished at these elections.

But for now, despite these setbacks and the announcement of a "plan of social cohesion", the government's roadmap remains the same. The particularly unpopular prime minister remains in place. And the counter-reforms relating to health insurance or the EDF are now redoubled by a new and very ambitious offensive by the economy minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, to challenge the 35-hour working week.

This upping of the ante in a context of unpopularity and great weakness of governmental legitimacy is a factor of political crisis exacerbated by the contradictory ambitions of the leaders of the right in the run up to the presidential elections of 2007. The main leader and founder of the UMP, Alain Juppé, has been implicated in a scandal concerning the illicit financing of the Chiracian formation. As former mayor of Paris, Chirac is largely implicated also but will escape justice thanks to his presidential immunity. The presidential ambitions of economy minister Sarkozy add to the confusion and represent another factor of crisis.

In the reactionary camp, the divided nationalist lists did not gain the scores expected of them, in contrast to the tendency observed in other EU states. The Front National (FN), at 10%, was down in relation to its scores in March and in 2002. Lists critical of European construction, whether right or left wing did not do particularly well. It seems that abstention is the refuge of those who reject the policy and projects of the EU, as these sentiments have largely enjoyed majority support among the masses. Nearly 80% of youth from 18 to 25 did not vote! This disenchantment in relation to Europe is accompanied by a certain resignation in the face of the opacity of the European political system and the absence of an identifiable and clearly global alternative. Europe was moreover very little present in the debates and it was virtually impossible to put the European constituent treaty at the heart of the campaign.

A hegemonic PS

This rejection is undoubtedly what explains the victory of the socialists, who, with 30% of the votes, became the largest party with an electoral hegemony on the left. The Parti Socialiste capitalized on the rejection of the right but did not take a stance on the basics (it was, for example, divided on the European constitution) and it led a campaign around the slogan “tomorrow the social Europe” without precise commitments as to the practicalities or timetable for this. The PS leaders are extremely prudent and they know that this victory expresses more a vote “against” than a broad adhesion to a programme which is still largely inspired by neoliberal ideas. They are happy to wait for 2007, the year of the next presidential elections, counting on the problems of the right but also on the fact that a great part of the adaptation of society to the new necessities of capitalism will be accomplished by then. A cynical choice, but they will nonetheless have to take a position on some decisive questions: whether or not to commit themselves to undoing the work of social demolition carried out by the right; and deciding a position on the European constitution when the natural instinct of the main socialist leaders is to ratify it (even though this is in perfect contradiction with the commitment to the construction of a social Europe).

The partners of the PS did not benefit much from the anti-right wave. The Greens, with 6.5% did not match their scores at the preceding elections although they still have six deputies. The spectacular and rather courageous initiative of one of their leaders, Noël Mamère, who, as mayor, presided over a gay marriage, didn't do the party much good and tended rather to highlight its divisions. The French Communist Party, which lost four European deputies out of six, reached the symbolic threshold of 5% and beat the far left, poor consolation for a party which continues its electoral decline; it won nearly 7% in 1999 at the preceding European election.

With 2.5%, the LCR-LO lists experienced a setback in relation to 1999 where the same alliance received more than 900,000 votes (double what it got this time) and, with 5.3%, elected five deputies. It was a setback also in relation to the regional elections, with half the score and a loss of 600,000 votes. This situation merits a profound discussion. Without exhausting the subject, it seems that abstention, which was particularly strong among workers, employees and youth, hit the far left especially hard. The difficulty experienced by struggles and social resistance as a whole and the defeat of the strike movement of 2003 over pensions provide another explanation. Then again the trauma of April 21, which saw Jospin, prime minister and socialist leader, eliminated from the second round of the presidential election by Le Pen, led to additional pressure for a “useful” vote.

A scattered resistance

In this context, we need to review the social situation and our tasks in the period after the elections. If the right is confronted with an internal crisis, it will nonetheless pursue its counter-reforms. And despite a result which reflects the opposition to this policy on the ground, mobilizations are not up to the level required. The reform of social protection could be a defeat without a fight; numerous collectives against the reform of social security have been

created but there unitary perspectives of mobilization have not been put forward by the trade union federations opposed to reform, notably the CGT and FO. On the privatization of EDF (the state-owned electricity provider), the main union organization involved, the CGT, has been late in making clear appeals for mobilization. Proposing days of action, it has ended up being overtaken by its rank and file and that has obliged it to harden its tone. The employees have shown their combativity by determined actions - interruptions of electricity supplies to symbolic places of power and reconnections for families who had been cut off.

That shows that it was and is possible - the combative potential exists - to create a real force to counter the neoliberal reforms. However, for several months there have been no slogans for a convergence of struggles. Entertainment artists and technicians, campaigners for the unemployed, research scholars, hospitals, EDF, education... - scattered days of action, mostly without perspective, have been proposed by the union federations. The defeat of the mobilization around pensions weighs heavily on the consciousness of wage earners and underpins the caution of the unions.

Yet the objective of a new test of social force, which alone can defeat the policies of the right, remains. That requires the broadest unity of action on social objectives like maintaining public ownership in electricity and the postal service, and defending the social security system against any opening to the appetites of speculative capital.

Unitary appeals exist, like the appeal to solidarity with the employees of EDF by the Fondation Copernic, signed by political personalities including the PCF, the Greens and the LCR but also activists from the associative and social movements. This type of initiative could link up with the workers' movement and be a signal for a broadening of political confrontation.

The PS and its allies flee from all this and wait for 2007. The score at these elections can encourage the PS in this position but its contradictions will increasingly come to light, whether on Europe or on the social questions. The new right wing offensive led by Sarkozy against the 35 hour week - the key reform of the preceding "plural left" government - should pose the question of an immediate riposte to the initiators of this law. But once again that enters into contradiction with their objective of doing nothing before 2007. On the European constitutional treaty, the LCR has approached all the organizations, associations and parties with a view to a unitary campaign for a referendum that will allow wage earners, youth, those involved in social struggles and the movement for global justice to build for a left "no" to a neoliberal Europe.

For the LCR, another objective remains, the construction of a new force, a radical and anti-capitalist left. To clarify our contribution to an alternative on the big questions (analyses of the way the world is developing, main contents of an anti-capitalist policy, the main strategic questions), the LCR has begun drawing up a manifesto which should be available as a public document at the beginning of next year.

[1] The Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) and Lutte ouvrière (LO) are the two main far left organizations in France. In the first round of the presidential election of April 2002 their candidates won respectively 4.25% and 5.72% of votes cast, or 1,210,562 and 1,610,045 votes, overtaking for the first time the candidate of the French Communist Party (Robert Hue, who received 3.37% or 960,480 votes).