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Setback for plural left

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Recent french rail stoppage

Yet its defeat was not really a victory for the right, who suffered a symbolic defeat in losing Paris and Lyon. Certainly, the electoral system, which advantaged the lists which came first, assuring them nearly three-quarters of councillors, and marginalized minorities, meant that after the second round the "plural left" took the two biggest cities. And it also allowed the right to claim victory in that they now control 139 towns of more than 30 000 inhabitants (23 more than before March 18th, of which 6 have more than 100 000 inhabitants) against 114 controlled by the governmental camp. [1]

However, beyond these institutional results, the novelty lies elsewhere.

The first round was marked both by a high rate of abstention and a significant breakthrough of critical left votes bearing witness to a growing discontent with government policy. In the second round the transfer of these votes to the candidates of the governmental left was more limited than in the past; indicating a strong rupture of the progressive electorate with a left installed for the past 20 years in governmental alternation with the right, and within this framework implementing a policy of management

of capitalist interests.

A "social fracture"

Barely ten days before the scrutiny, the first wave of accounts published by the 12 biggest companies registered a significant rise in profits in the year 2000: whereas in 1999 the 30 biggest French firms accumulated 121 billion francs in profit, in 2000 the 12 biggest French groups totalled 126.7 billion in profits. [2] The first clear signal if one was needed that prime minister Jospin's government has in no way redistributed wealth.

On the day after the municipal elections the annual study by INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) on "incomes and wealth of households" was published and its results drew the headline in *Le Monde* (March 23rd), "Since 1997, growth has not reduced poverty".

While the number of unemployed has fallen from a million under the Jospin government, benefiting from a favourable conjuncture, "from January 1996 to May 2000, the rate of poverty stabilised": 7.3% of households, or 4.2 million people, live below the poverty threshold. [3] The rate of poverty is at its highest among youth of less than 25 years old, reaching nearly 20%, and among the households of immigrant workers originating from the Maghreb, of whom a quarter live

below the poverty threshold.

"Nearly all jobs created by the private sector since the beginning of the legislature seven eighths, in fact have been at a wage lower than 1.3 times the SMIC (minimum wage), that is 7 400 francs net a month. By way of comparison, wages lower than 1.3 SMIC represent 40% of wages in the private sector in France" in the year 2000. [4] Note again that in 1999 32.5% of wage-earners received a wage lower than 1.3 times the minimum, thus in one year the share of low wages has grown by 7.5%.

In the course of the same period there has been a significant growth of temporary jobs: the number of such jobs grew by 33.8 % in 1999 and again by 20.2% in 2000.

In short, contrary to the affirmations of Lionel Jospin, the creation of jobs 1.5 million since June 1997 does not amount in itself to a policy of redistribution, above all when we are talking about temporary and poorly paid jobs while at the same time profits are taking off, supported by an increased rate of exploitation.

The law on the 35 hour week, another source of pride for the government of the "plural left", has favoured the creation of jobs but has also led to a deregulation of the labour market favouring an increased rate of exploitation. [5]

The 'social question' has been central in France at least since the 1995 strike movement. Jacques Chirac won the presidential election of 1995 promising to heal the "social fracture", a promise whose non-fulfilment led to his defeat at the parliamentary elections that he himself called in 1997. Lionel Jospin, whose discourse of self-satisfaction is increasingly dissatisfying to those who hope to see change, is in the process of learning his lesson too.

An impatient combativity

Whereas for the past 20 years in a context of mass unemployment the number of strike days in the private sector has fallen continuously, 1999 (the last year for which figures are available) saw a considerable increase.

Stimulated notably by conflicts around from the application of the 35 hour laws and wage struggles, the number of individual days lost through strike action in the private sector went from 353 600 in 1998 to 573 560 in 1999, an increase of 62.2%.

A phenomenon all the more remarkable in that we are for the most part talking about local conflicts, with national actions called by the confederations hitting an all time low in 1999, accounting for only 1% of total strike days. Even if the rise was more modest in the public sector, nonetheless 68,300 more days were lost than in the previous year. According to René Mouriaux "there is every reason to think that the phenomena observed in 1999 will continue in 2000". [6]

This combativity is apparent also in the survey carried out by the CSA institute for the CGT. [7] Thus in autumn 2000, 67% of wage-earners said they were ready to demonstrate to defend their interests, 66% to go on strike and 36% to occupy their workplace. In comparison with the similar survey carried out in 1996 (under the Juppé government, after the huge strikes and demonstrations of December 1995), willingness to demonstrate increased by 6 points, to

strike by 11 points and to occupy by 3 points.

In total, if one builds an index of combativity starting from the three modes of struggle, 62% of wage earners have a high index rating (at least two of the three criteria mentioned).

This militancy is widely diffused in society, among women (56%) and men (66%), intermediary professions (77%) and blue-collar workers (65%), private sector (61%) and public (63%).

Finally a phenomenon indicative of the pressures felt by the low paid it is much higher among the highly paid (those earning more than 20,000 francs a month) than the low paid (less than 7,500 francs a month): 56% of the former said they were ready to resort to at least two of the forms of struggle mentioned, whereas only 46% of the second replied in the affirmative.

Finally, an element which indicates the social diffusion of discontent and militancy, 49% of higher managers have a high index of combativity and 54% of them are ready to resort to strike action to defend their interests.

Social conflict enjoys, moreover, a great popularity: commentators had a lot to say in 1995 on "the strike by proxy", when despite the propaganda efforts of the Juppé government, the strike movements (which affected public transport in particular) were popular with the public.

Since 1995, of 26 broad social conflicts, one alone the rail workers strike in 1999 against the agreement on 35 hours, called by a part of the unions only met with more disapproval than approval from the public.

Over the whole period, on average, 41.4% of French people have supported the conflicts or protests, 28.2% have sympathised, 10.9% have said they were indifferent and only 16.7% were opposed or hostile. [8]

What is more, despite all the efforts of propaganda aimed at presenting public sector workers as privileged, private sector employees' support their strikes. And, evidence of a recomposition of the very identity of

the wage-earning class, "managers are now on the side of the social movements" [9] - 57% (support and sympathy combined) were against the freezing of public sector wages in October 1995 as against 82% in March 2000.

There has been a "new phase of social contestation" since 1995, according to René Mouriaux, or the development of a "critical vision of society synonym of more pressure on workers and the effects of globalisation" according to Jérôme Jaffré.

All of this provides the basis of an interpretation of the municipal elections of March 2001, since a willingness to defend one's interests in struggle also indicates a taking of distance in relation to the government.

Thus, whereas in the course of the 'Mitterrand years' the sympathisers of the left were ready to allow time for the great man, today they are even more willing to strike than in 1995 under the Juppé government (66% against 63%). As for the sympathisers of the right, only 25% said they were ready to strike under Juppé, as against 54% today under Jospin.

It is as if 20 years of neo-liberal policies, carried out in the name of the "left" as well as the "right" have led to the rediscovery on a mass scale of the old slogan "the emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves"!

Diverse critical left votes

"It is possible to think", wrote the editorialist of the bourgeois daily *Les Échos* (March 26, 2001), commenting on the studies mentioned above, "that the strong showing of the Green and far left lists in the first round of the municipal elections confirms this revival and radicalisation of social combativity".

The results of the first round of these elections confirm a displacement of votes towards candidates who in various degrees appear opposed to the governmental left. Unsurprisingly,

27% of people polled at the end of January 2001 replied "there is no difference" to the question, "Who would you have more confidence in to manage the affairs of your commune, the plural left or the right?" and 22% said they desired neither the victory of the (plural) left nor the right at the municipals. [10]

The Greens

This is partly the case for the Greens, who are nonetheless present in the government with two ministers, but in a subordinate position. Where they opposed the lists of the "plural left" they improved on the already significant score of the list headed by Daniel Cohn-Bendit at the European elections of 1999 (9.72%).

It is as if some at least of the electorate who voted this time for the Greens hoped to encourage their gesture of independence and so that they would show more insubordination towards the ruling social democrats.

The Greens averaged 12.3% in Paris (making them the second biggest left group on the city council, with 23 councillors and control of one district); 15.5% in Lille; 18% in Talence; 16% in Morlaix; 16.31% in Evreux; 14.19% in Manosque; 12.5% in Montpellier; and 12.37% in Pau.

In the Parisian suburbs, they scored 24.42% in Pierrefitte; 23.53% in Mureaux; 23.06 % in Villejuif; 20.53%

in Bagnolet; 20.17% in Montreuil; 15.95 % in Epinay-sur-Seine; 15.85% in Nanterre; 14.19% in Vincennes and 13.67% in Creil.

Their electorate is mainly young and employed and if some sections of the media present support for the Greens as a form of "bourgeois bohemianism", studies on the evolution of consciousness of wage earners and the radicalisation which also includes the better paid, cited above, allow the Green vote to be interpreted otherwise.

While a survey by IPSOS published in Le Monde (March 21, 2001) shows that more than half of Green sympathisers desire a government which pursues a policy "neither more nor less left" than the previous one, for many young rebels "a left policy" is that of Mitterrand-Jospin, the only one they have known under this name, and there is no doubt that a policy of "more Mitterrand-Jospin" would not be acceptable.

Yet, the mobilisation of the electorate by the Greens ultimately- served to prop up the governmental lists and it would be to say the least one-sided to think that all Green voters are critical of the government in which the Green party participates.

The more so in as much as the Greens were also an integral part of the lists of the "plural left"; the most high profile of its lists, that headed in DÃ

by [their leader] Dominique Voynet, did not equal the score of the combined Union of the Left and the Greens in 1995, losing more than 500 votes and nearly 4%.

The Green vote appears then as a very composite vote, both in favour of the government (a vote that the press characterises as "liberal-libertarian") and critical of the government for its social and environmental policy. However, it is this critical dimension of the Green vote particularly in the former bastions of the Communist Party (PCF) - that is partially responsible for the good scores achieved by the party when it stood alone.

The "citizens' lists"

To the left of the governmental left other lists were able to capture the discontent. Thus in Toulouse, the list Motiv  -e-s (set up around the Tactikollectif, an association whose best known members are the musicians of the group Zebda and who had previously collaborated with the Ligue Communiste R  volutionnaire), clearly positioned to the left of the governmental left, scored 12.38% of the votes, well ahead of the Greens (6.15%), the LCR and LO. [11] Similar lists did well in Bondy (Rebondyr, 12.89%), in Rennes (where Motiv  -e-s obtained 8.22% in a campaign very hostile to the far left) [