

The European elections in France - The many shades of nationalism

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At the beginning of his term of office, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, announced that his election heralded a "new world", no less. The outcome of the recent EU elections certainly shows that France is entering a new political order, or perhaps disorder, would be more correct.

The two governing parties of the last fifty years, the Socialist Party, PS, the heir of François Mitterand, president from 1981-1995 and Les Republicains, heirs of Charles de Gaulle, president from 1959-69, scored just 6.7 percent and 8.2 percent respectively.

Their derisory scores leave them terribly weakened. Another former giant of post-war French politics, the Communist Party, PCF, that, from 1945 until 1978 never fell below 20 percent in parliamentary elections, scored only 2.49 percent, roughly the same as the Animalist Party, with 2.16 percent.

As for the "revolutionary left", Lutte Ouvrière, which, back in 2003 scored 5.6 percent and 1.6 million votes in the presidentials, scored an insignificant 0.78 percent and a grand total of 176,339 votes.

Overall, the situation is characterised by a turn to the right, a severe weakening of working class consciousness and the rise of "classless" populism, all in conditions of greatly increased social and political instability.

This is the result of two recent developments. The first is two years of Macron's presidency, continuing and reinforcing the attacks of "Socialist" François Hollande, in which he has implemented further neo-liberal measures, attacked the working class, most notably the railways and the state sector, and reduced the taxes on the super-rich. The second development is the uprising of the Gilets Jaunes, the Yellow Vests, that has polarised political life, in a peculiar way, in the last six months.

While this movement is violently opposed to Macron, it does so not on a class basis, but on a confused ideology that lacks any coherent project. Indeed, it refuses to create any organisational structure, to elect representatives or to propose any programmatic platform. It relies instead on the myth of "the people", who have been dispossessed of power and freedom by "the elite", rather than (mis-) represented by political parties. If they have a positive solution it is to govern "directly", through Citizens' Initiative Referendums, RICs.

If many on the left, and many on the far right, too, supported the GJ movement, this was because it was trying to oust Macron. But few of its left enthusiasts realised that it was bringing a sharp change in the relations between the working class and its traditional trade union and party organisations. More precisely, it is pushing millions of workers away from class-consciousness and towards populist ideas of all kinds. This was clear from the last Mayday demonstrations, where the traditional contingents of organised workers were joined by thousands of yellow vests, demonstrating as a motley collection of individuals for a

variety of demands including RICs, which are regarded as a magic alternative to the corrupt politicians, Frexit and 'Power to the people', a slogan also used by Marine Le Pen and the RN, all accompanied by numerous tricolors and regional flags.

To make the temptation of populism even greater, it unfortunately must be said that the yellow vests with their rioting on the Champs Elysées did win some concessions from Macron, while the trade unions' tactic of widely separated days of action, failed to win anything. Such symbolic 'days with no tomorrow' have been shown to be a total dead end over many years, capable only of bring defeat on top of defeat, but acting as a safety valve for the bureaucrats at the head of the unions.

The two main winners of the EU parliamentary election were the Rassemblement National, RN, the new name of the reactionary Front National of Marine Le Pen, and 'La République en marche', LREM, the recently created party of Emmanuel Macron.

RN, with 23 percent, is now the first party in France, confirming its result from the previous EU elections and gaining even more votes. It was able to capitalise on the hatred of Macron, the ruling elite and of neoliberalism in general. According to a poll, 36 percent of the people supporting the yellow vests voted for RN. But its Euro-manifesto saw a significant change from the demand for 'Frexit', that is, leaving the EU and the eurozone, that Marine Le Pen stood for only two years ago. Responding both to the mess of Brexit and the rise of the right in Italy, Hungary, etc. RN now proposes a "European alliance of Nations", a loose and rather undefined grouping of strong national states.

Many pages are devoted to an economic policy based on strengthening 'national champions' within the European market. Presumably this is a way to make the RN programme more palatable to the bourgeoisie, an idea that is getting more and more realistic, as the recent results of Le Pen's allied party in Italy, the Lega of Matteo Salvini, show.

As expected, a large part of the RN programme was focused on the all embracing obsession with security: 'Faced with mounting threats on all fronts, financial as well as migratory, terrorist as well as criminal, Europe must give to the States all the means to protect their population, their markets, their borders?.'

Protectionism, at the EU's external borders and/or at the national borders, sovereignty, security, defence were indeed the keywords of the campaign, and not only of RN. Different shades of these ideas could be found in the programmes of most parties, from RN to France Insoumise.

Echoing the RN, the LREM believes 'in a Europe that protects both its values and its borders?'. While LREM pretends to be the main bulwark against the RN, in reality it proposes just another version of fortress Europe under siege, with the EU borders the main walls. While Macron and his government are hated by many, two years after its founding, his party has stood the test of the elections with 22 percent. It did so by disrupting both the traditional Gaullist party and the traditional left parties. A good part of the bourgeoisie has voted for him because they think he will be able to deliver neoliberal reforms with a similar agenda to that of other European leaders like Schröder, Blair and Renzi years ago. His record of successful attacks against the working class, his strengthening of the repressive state, his policy of support for the French corporations, and even his choice of PM and other key ministers from the ranks of the right-wing party, all speak for him.

The electoral success of the Greens, with 13.4 percent and 3 million votes, is part of a general rise across Europe, as seen in the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion. The hundreds of thousands involved in actions across Europe have helped the Greens electorally, but they also demonstrate the failure of the far left and the labour movement to address these issues with vigour.

Macron's rise and consolidation has also disrupted the left parties. The main loser of the EU election is Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise, FI, which claimed that "2019 will be a referendum against Macron, against his Europe, the Europe of money, of austerity, of Merkel". If so, then this referendum showed that the FI is not one of the real contenders.

Mélenchon's attacks against the EU; "The German right-wing, the oligarchy and the lobbies have free reign in the European institutions", have a strong undertone of French nationalism, reminiscent of his violently anti-German pamphlet *The Bismarck Herring: The German Poison* which claimed that Germany is once more a major danger and the EU is effectively its new empire.

Mélenchon's project is to obliterate the old parties of the left, the PS and PCF, with a new populist party, similar to Podemos, in the process abandoning any reference to the working class, its movement and its historic symbols. Instead, "people", "citizens" and "nation" are the new buzzwords. Obscene slogans like "Defend French independence" or "Make of the outre-mer [the French colonies] the advanced point of human progress" shows his will to champion French imperialism, a position that is not too far from RN's chauvinism. However, with a meagre 6 percent, Mélenchon has clearly failed to make his party the hegemonic force on the left.

A similar movement away from any reference to the working class is clear in other left forces. The PS joined forces with Raphaël Glucksmann, an isolated bourgeois intellectual who shared for a period the Atlanticist opinions of his father, an intellectual from 1968, before crossing the class-lines as many other Maoists did. Glucksmann-fils has supported the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe including the Euro-Maidan and served as special counsellor to Georgia's later ousted president Saakashvili.

The programme of their list made no reference to the unions, the working class or even any serious reforms except the promise of a European minimum wage, a point lost among a lot of green-washing and other liberal demands. Among these appears again "the reinforcement of European defence and of the security of Europeans" that was in fact the leitmotif of the campaign. While PS has not disappeared, the fact that it rejoices over the 6 percent it obtained speaks volumes about its diminished ambitions. Indeed, even a possible evolution towards a Democratic Party on the Italian model seems unlikely, as Macron's LREM already represents those ideas in some way.

The New Anticapitalist Party, whose founder, Olivier Besançon, gained 1,498,581 votes, or 4.08 percent, in the presidential elections of 2007, and went on to found the NPA in 2009, is so weakened today that it was unable to put forward a list. Even its proposal for a joint campaign with Lutte Ouvrière, LO, was brusquely rejected. Instead, it had to call for a vote for LO.

LO stood on a series of demands, reasonable in themselves, though hardly an action programme for the class struggle. LO is against protectionism, for banning layoffs, for increasing wages by at least 300 euros, and indexing wages and pensions to inflation. It also denounced the nationalism of the right and advocated freedom of movement for those fleeing war and poverty, but did not go so far as to raise the call to "open the borders". It did call for a "Socialist United States of Europe".

But LO's well-known tendency to a narrow workerism and economism that downgrades struggles against gender-based oppression and the environment as diversions from, rather than contributions to, the class struggle, was on view once again. Thus their perennial candidate, Nathalie Artaud, refused joint campaigning with the NPA, because "the NPA does not make the interests of workers its priority", and she added;

"By wanting to be the sounding board for all the struggles that can be fought, from ecology to feminism,

they put everything on the same level to speak to everyone and therefore to anyone."

How far this is from Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* with its statement that the model for socialists should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects?

Thus, a vote for LO needed to be a highly critical one. With their sect-like methods, that have hardly changed in over half a century, they are not likely to play a positive role in resolving the crisis of leadership of the working class. LO will fail to mobilise workers to build any significant workers' party.

The great threat facing the French working class today is that it could lose any sort of political representation, any workers' party, even a pro-bourgeois reformist or bureaucratic Stalinist one: a fate that has already befallen the Italian workers.

Thanks to the combined effects of the collapse of the Socialist and Communist parties, the accumulated defeats, due to the misleadership of the main trade union federations, and the abject failure of the far left to build a rallying point, the level of political class consciousness has fallen. Although the many struggles of the past years have offered enough chances to the left to lead a recovery, it has frittered them all away.

The very serious threat, then, is that the struggles ahead will be derailed by petty-bourgeois or bourgeois populist forces in reactionary directions. While this has not happened yet, the first task of revolutionaries is to correctly analyse the impending danger and to put forward a European action programme that can guide the building of new workers' parties, linking the struggles across the continent.

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