

# French Elections: Defeat for Sarkozy, major advance for Le Pen, gains for reformists, reverses for far left

Dave Stockton Wed, 25/04/2012 - 12:18

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After his rejection in the first round of the Presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy is facing defeat on 6 May. Barring a major upset, France could well have its first Socialist Party President since 1995.

A high turnout (80.1 per cent) proved the media pundits' claims that the electorate was bored and apathetic completely wrong. In fact the greater polarisation of policies between right and left mobilised more people to vote.

Aware of his stunning unpopularity, and forced to conceal the full scale of the austerity he was planning for a second term, Sarkozy waged a viciously right wing campaign, hoping to capture a substantial chunk of its embittered racist electorate from the National Front (FN). In fact he merely fuelled a historic success for Marine Le Pen, the highest vote the FN has ever achieved, 17.9 per cent ? 6,421,000 votes.

Despite Le Pen cleaning up her act for the media, the FN still trades on racism, particularly Islamophobia, as its main attraction whilst claiming to represent the (indigenous French) working class, which it presents as a victim of globalisation and immigration.

Her policies included reducing legal immigration by 95 per cent, "national preference" in the access to jobs and social services, increased protectionism and withdrawing from the euro and even the European Union. She has advocated restoring the guillotine, abolished in 1981 by François Mitterrand.

Le Pen, with her eyes now firmly fixed on making spectacular gains in the parliamentary elections on 10 and 17 June, has firmly rejected calling for a vote for Sarkozy in the second round. He will undoubtedly steer even further right in an attempt to woo FN voters. But if he does this he risks alienating the centrist François Bayrou's voters (9.11 per cent) whom he also needs.

François Hollande received the highest share ever for a Socialist Party candidate (28.63 per cent) more than Mitterrand in 1981 and Ségolène Royal in 2007. Hollande's policies are only radical when compared to the present norm for socialist and labour parties across Europe. His promise to raise income tax to 75 per cent for euro millionaires caused squeals of indignation from the rich. He has also promised to reduce the retirement age to 60 on full pension for those who work 42 years; 60,000 jobs lost in public education will be reinstated.

He has also promised to control rent rises and force local authorities in towns and cities to provide more social housing, as well as launch a national building programme. The biggest panic in international business circles is his call to renegotiate the European Fiscal Pact.

At the same time as he makes these promises to the working class, however, Hollande also pledges to reduce France's national debt to the European Union's agreed levels by 2017. On the fiscal pact he has given an assurance that France will honour all her treaty obligations. This will undoubtedly mean social cuts down the line but at present his campaign emphasises cancelling Sarkozy's tax cuts and exemptions for the wealthy.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, candidate of the Front de Gauche/Left Front, led a rhetorically left campaign, which rallied enthusiastic crowds, with over 100,000 in Paris and Marseilles. In the end, however, he received 11.13 per cent, 3,985,000 voters, well below the 15-17 per cent that opinion polls had predicted. Thus, he failed to achieve his stated goal of pushing Le Pen into fourth place. In fact, his share of the vote is roughly equivalent to the total that the non-SP left has gained before. He has called on his supporters to vote for Hollande unconditionally, adding that;

‘We were at the forefront for a time: the next time will be that of the final conquest of power through elections and democracy.’

His real success was to humiliate the so-called revolutionary left, the New Anticapitalist Party and Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière, LO). The NPA's candidate, Philippe Poutou, received 1.15 per cent and Nathalie Arthaud of LO, 0.56 per cent, or 202,000 votes; the lowest votes for far left candidates since 1968.

In 2007, the LCR won 4.08 per cent or 1,498,000 votes and in 2002, 4.25 per cent or 1,210,000 votes. In the same years, LO received 1.33 per cent or 487,000 votes and 5.72 per cent and 1,630,000 votes respectively. In 1995, LO received 5.30 per cent or 1,613,000 votes. The humbling of the far left has seen the rise of the reformist left, not only, and not primarily, its attractive front man, Mélenchon, but within the ranks of the Front de Gauche, the old PCF and its allies in the CGT

In the first decade of the new century, the far left looked to be remorselessly on the rise, touching 10 per cent in total. The PCF on the other hand seemed in terminal decline; in 2007, the once mighty PCF gained only 707,268 votes or 1.93 per cent of the electorate.

We have analysed the reasons for this reverse before. They lie in the extreme political heterogeneity of the NPA; its failure to agree a revolutionary programme, to play an independent role during mass struggles like that of the pension reform in 2010 and, last but not least, its toleration of those within its own ranks who sabotaged its election campaign, its lack of revolutionary discipline. All these issues must be urgently addressed if it is to recover from its electoral debacle.

The League for the Fifth International and its sympathisers in the NPA agree with the party's call for a vote for François Hollande at the same time as criticising his policies. It is principled to do so because the PS remains what Leninists call a bourgeois workers' party, that is, bourgeois in its programme, preserving capitalism, the market economy and the bourgeois state, but resting on the votes and organisations of the labour movement.

It is thus seen by the great majority of French workers as the instrument to oust Sarkozy and, they also hope, to resist austerity and carry out reforms in their favour. History shows such hopes are usually dashed but, until the reformist parties (not just the PS but also the parties of the Left Front) are replaced by a revolutionary workers' party, it remains necessary to expose them by putting them into office and, at the same time, fighting for the maximum mobilisation of workers to demand the government addresses their basic needs.

Not only should workers demand that Hollande fulfil his limited promises but, if the financial markets try to

force him to abandon them, we should call for mass mobilisations of working people to resist the blackmail of the millionaire speculators. We should demand that Hollande, who says he hates high finance, take coercive measures to break their power, to nationalise their assets. We should mobilise to fight to impose workers' control on them.

All sorts of dirty tricks are possible in the coming weeks, both from Sarkozy and Le Pen. Philippe Poutou and Jean Luc Mélenchon are correct to call on their followers to mount larger and more militant demonstrations than ever on May Day with demands for no austerity, for swingeing taxation of the rich, for jobs for the unemployed, for substantial increases in the minimum wage, for the just demands of women, the sans papiers, in short, for an eruption of class struggle such as France witnessed in 1936 and 1968.

Such a mobilisation must side unequivocally with those whom Le Pen and Sarkozy stigmatise and target for repression, the immigrant communities, especially those of Arab and Muslim origin. It is vital to challenge head on the racism of the right.

To win any substantial reforms, rather than see Hollande resort to the austerity of a Zapatero or a Papandreu, will require major class struggle action and, if this unfolds, it can alter the balance of forces in favour of the working class right across Europe.

It will inevitably lead to a clash with the ruling class ? as we have seen time and time again in France in the last decades. It will pose the need for revolutionary means of struggle like the indefinite general strike; it will pose the need for the creation of action committees, self-defence organisations and their co-ordination on a national level.

To take full advantage of such a situation, the working class needs to be armed with an action programme that can lead from the struggle of the day to the struggle for power, for the creation of a workers' government, based on workers' councils and that can replace the capitalist system by a system of democratic planning.

The last decade has already witnessed more than one pre-revolutionary situation, where such developments were a real possibility. But the working class lacked a leadership willing and able to take advantage of this.

The NPA is still the force that unites many of the most militant workers and youth activists, who genuinely desire such an outcome. But in order to become such a party, the NPA has to overcome its own oscillations between reform and revolution and base itself on an unambiguously revolutionary programme.

From the statement by Philippe Poutou after the election results

?For five years the NPA has been fighting the policy of Sarkozy and his government on the streets and at the polls. It is in this sense that the NPA calls for demonstrations on May Day in all the cities of France in favour of the emergency social measures we have defended in this campaign against Sarkozy's policies and the danger of the Le Pen extreme right.

On May 6 in continuity with the campaign we have been waging, we will be alongside those who want to prevent Nicolas Sarkozy getting a second term. We say it plainly; we kick out Sarkozy and his gang by voting against him. But that does not mean support for any politics of François Hollande.

We call on those who identified themselves with our campaign to regroup, to contact us so that together we can create a living independent anticapitalist force. In the battle against the austerity of both right and

left, we turn to the Left Front, to Lutte Ouvriere, and beyond them to all the trade unionists and activists involved in their campaigns, to prepare now the counteroffensive which the whole labour movement needs.? Paris, April 22 20:00

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