

The resistable rise of Le Pen

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Fascism is on the rise in Europe, and the workers' movement and the left is responding with useless pacifism and complacency. The LRCI's section in France has taken up the fight. In an article edited from this month's edition of *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, Emile Gallet explains the background to the rise of Le Pen's Front National. We also reprint (right) the *Pouvoir Ouvrier* leaflet to the abortive anti-Le Pen demo on 1 May.

Every election, in street demonstrations, in attacks on immigrants and their homes, Front National (FN) supporters make their presence felt. Le Pen, the shady führer of these racist troops, has put himself on the walls, on our TV screens and in the press. His message of racial hatred with its undercurrent of fascism has spread everywhere. Le Pen has arrived.

Le Pen and his organisation threaten us all—French or immigrant workers, women, youth and black people. The better we know our enemy, the better we will be able to fight it.

The origins of this menace lie in the austerity measures carried out by the various 'socialist' governments in the last decade in order to prop up capitalism. The breakthrough for the FN came at the time of the 1984 European elections. Le Pen himself announced that 'Everything begins today'. The FN electoral list achieved 10.95% of the vote: 2,204,961 people voted FN.

The story since then is well known. On the electoral front the FN has made steady progress. In the 1986 legislative elections, it won 9.9% of the vote and got 35 deputies in the Assembly (Parliament). On the same day, the FN entered 21 of the 22 regional councils, with 140 regional councillors overall, and 9.65% of the vote. In the 1988 presidential elections, Le Pen polled 4,375,854, totalling 14.4% of the vote.

Even though the FN didn't reach its target of 20% in the last elections—it won 13.9%—it now has a presence in every regional council, with 239 local elected representatives. Far from an end to the FN's growth, the elections show that the FN has entrenched itself at local level, bringing a credibility that Le Pen has sought for so long.

It is vital to understand that, contrary to Le Pen's declaration, everything did not begin in 1984. The FN has a history, more than twenty years of it, with its roots deep in the undergrowth of French fascism.

At the start of the 1970s, the various far-right organisations in France went through a downturn and were looking for new inspiration. The revolutionary events of May 1968 had countered the influence of fascism. In June 1971, the fascist organisation *Ordre Nouveau* (New Order), proposed the formation of a 'national front'.

Organisation

This project's aims were no less than the creation of a mass organisation for Nazism. On 5 October 1972, the FN was formed as a unified national federation. The Nazi sympathisers present were agreed about one thing: they had to regroup, despite ideological differences, in order to get out of their ghetto and reclaim

their 'rightful' place amongst the nationalists, as in the collaborationist era of Marshal Petain.

The new organisation contained a large proportion of the French fascists: Ordre Nouveau, the royalists, a few small groupings such as the inappropriately named 'Justice and Liberty', the Party of French Unity and various other fascist militants, as well as Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The young Le Pen had become a deputy of the reactionary populist Poujadist party in the late 1950s. Known as a street brawler who gained notoriety for issuing records of Hitlerite marching songs Le Pen showed he was capable of disguising this past and sticking to the 'modern' fascist method of concentrating on anti-immigrant racism. Thus after a three day conference he was elected president of the new party.

From the start, Le Pen aimed to construct a mass fascist organisation. But he also knew the need for using different tactics to build it. Like his predecessor Hitler, Le Pen has known periods in the wilderness. It was not until 1983, in a shock by-election in Dreux where the FN received 16.72% of the vote, that it became known at a national level.

Many organisations of the far right disappeared in the years 1970 and 1980. Some were consumed by their own sectarianism. Others were integrated, then assimilated, into the mainstream right wing parties. The FN succeeded not because of its superior abilities but because of its political strategy?building a fascist organisation on the basis of a racist, populist programme whilst hiding the Nazi 'ag for the time being.

The traditions the FN does refer to are many and various. The FN places itself in the tradition of the Italian MSI?note that the emblem of the FN is a straight copy of that of the MSI with the replacement of green by blue. The FN uses the old slogan of Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Francaise (PPF):

'You owe everything to the party, the party does not owe you anything.'

More significantly, the programme of the FN is inspired by the all too familiar Vichy French collaborationist slogan 'Work-Family-Country'.

Preconditions

The preconditions for the FN's success aren't difficult to find: the fuse was lit by the austerity measures of the PS-PC government. All the reforms promised by Mitterrand, the PS and their PCF allies turned to ashes in the face of the orders of the IMF at the end of 1982. The reformists spinelessly carried out the dictates of the French and foreign banks. The FN used the depth of the economic crisis and the disillusion created by the government's actions to fuel an anti-immigrant offensive.

This remains at the centre of the FN's politics, the source of its popularity. Last November FN leader Bruno Megret drew up his infamous, racist 'fourty propositions' on citizenship rights in France for foreigners. The author made clear that the measures 'obviously do not apply to those citizens of the EC and beyond who are of our own European culture, religion and civilisation'. In plain language, this means 'these proposals do not apply to whites'.

Once we have understood the racist card the FN is playing then there is no mystery about its politics. From the call to 'combat anti-French discrimination', through the pledge of 'fidelity and service to the national community', through to its challenge to French naturalisations (citizenship rights) granted since 1974: all can be summed up in the old slogan, 'Les francais d'abord'?'French (whites!) first.

Absurd

Despite the absurd nature of many of the proposals in the catalogue of hate, the FN has achieved its first objective: the terms of political debate in France have changed.

We saw the spectacle presented by the right in Autumn 1991, when Chirac and Giscard—both good republicans—competed with racist speeches to recover some of the voters lost to Le Pen.

Worse still, the workers' movement has also been infected by racism.

The French Communist Party (PCF) allowed a petition against immigration to circulate clandestinely during this year's Humanité festival.

Socialist Party premier Edith Cresson bragged about her policy of 'expulsions by charter jet'.

The PS government has also given in to the 'necessity' of setting up detention centres in ports and airports, using the excuse that it will lessen racism!

The ideas of Le Pen, far from being fought, are systematically echoed by politicians from the right to the so-called left. Today, immigrants are targets for them all. The way that racism has become acceptable and commonplace is terrifying; more than 40% of the population are not afraid to call themselves racist. If this situation is not reversed, there will be dangerous consequences for the whole working class.

We also need to understand that behind the anti-Arab and anti-African politics there also lies anti-semitism. If the FN does not yet openly advocate the extermination of the Jews this does not mean it will never do so.

The backdrop to all this is the frenzied nationalism of the FN. Invoking all the symbols of the traditional right—the tricolour, Joan of Arc, anti-communism—the FN unceasingly makes its appeal to 'the nation'.

Long before Maastricht, the FN declared:

'Europe is now in danger and there is hardly any time to stop the process which is leading us straight into a bloody racial war'

We were thus warned of the way that the FN will act if the occasion arises. We have already seen that these were not empty words, from the attack on immigrant neighbourhoods in Sonacotra and Nice, and from all the other racist attacks carried out by Le Pen's followers.

While racism has been the main element of the FN's politics, it is also based on other political positions, and always seeks to exploit the similarities of the 'respectable' right and fascism.

Oppression

The 'defence of the family'—that is to say the oppression of women—occupies a central role in the FN's propaganda. Like the Algerian FIS, the FN is in favour of the 'family vote' and for 'a special benefit for mothers of children under two who choose not to take paid work'. The role of women in society is reduced to childbearing.

Consequently one of the big campaigns of the FN since 1974 has been against abortion. Their argument against the Veil law (legalised abortion) is summed up in the slogan: 'Kill the infant and you kill France!'.

The populist politics of the FN oscillate between the classical corporatist model, the defence of the small businessman and attempts to appeal to the less class conscious workers.

A year before the FN's foundation Le Pen was on record as saying:

?The right to strike is doubly sacred. But no more so than the rights of the public.?

The next year however he was launching a campaign under the the slogans:

?Against the right to strike? and ?the strike is a weapon against the workers?. In this campaign he demanded that, ?the right to strike should be limited . . . and in any case should be forbidden to state employees?.

However Le Pen has not taken his anti-trade union rhetoric as far as organising systematic attacks on the unions. There are two principal reasons for this. Neither indicates any ultimate lack of intention or will.

First, the working class has been in retreat for the last ?fteen years.

This retreat, despite the continuation of some struggles, started before the rise of the FN. So that even the most vicious sections of the bourgeoisie as yet have had no need of the brown shirts.

Secondly, when the workers have been able to take a step forward, as at the time of the RATP (Parisian railways) strike in Autumn 1988, the Mitterrand government itself smashed the strike by sending in the army as scabs. The French bourgeoisie has both the workers? misleaders and the of?cial state machine to use as weapons against the workers.

Thus the hour of a classic fascism, like that of Mussolini or Hitler, has not yet arrived. But the organisation exists and the danger is great. It is necessary to act now.

For the most part, the 15% of electors who voted for Le Pen are not themselves fascists.

The FN appeals to the insecurity and fear of the petit bourgeoisie and the unorganised or unemployed workers. These strata provide the shock troops of classical fascism. The conversion of the FN?s present racist base into a mass organisation of fascism is undoubtedly possible if the social conditions continue to worsen sharply. The prolonged passivity of the workers? movement is only increasing the menace.

Like the fascist movements in Italy and Germany, the FN concentrates its intervention around a main leader, a demagogue.

Aware of the bloody struggles in the German Nazi party, Le Pen has split the national structure in order to avoid any challenges to his power or the emergence of a serious competitor. General Secretary Karl Lang and the Delegation Generale Bruno Megret co-exist as a joint second tier of command.

Level

At a lower level the same rule predominates: there are two departmental secretaries, two regional secretaries. To be nominated by the f?hrer one must also be reliable: think as little as possible, transmit and carry out all the president?s directives, explain the different political lines decided by Le Pen. The FN?s internal regime is a cross between fascism and feudalism!

Launching the FN?s national electoral bid meant the creation of a real national political organisation. Karl Lang admitted, ?the organisation of the movement did not exist before. We were only an electoral machine not a politically implanted movement?.

The creation of this organisation was a dangerous step towards turning the mass base of the FN into a mass fascist organisation.

What is the real strength of the FN? It is dif?cult to know. Today it claims around 100,000 members as

against 65,000 in 1986. Nevertheless according to one researcher in 1989, 'at its base, the FN does not have more than 15,000 active members'. It is true that on the FN demonstrations on 1 May 1992, it never turned out more than 30,000. But this is 30,000 too many.

The FN is a growing threat to workers. Le Pen and the leadership of the FN have been able to win the first round of their gamble: they have been able to weld together a strong organisation of tens of thousands of members and sympathisers, of which the most important sections are also convinced fascists.

Furthermore, on the basis of extreme racism it has systematically gained the votes of millions of electors, some of which came from the mass workers parties. All this was achieved without significant opposition from the workers' movement.

The history of our century provides too many examples of political inertia in the face of fascist threats. We must not provide another.

The leaders of the PS and PCF are in danger of leading us to the abyss: by their politics at local and national level, by the way they themselves play with racism and nationalism, by their cowardly refusal to physically confront the FN on the street. Those left wing militants who refuse to unite in action against the FN bear the same responsibility.

Worse, when these forces dare to go onto the streets, it's more often to seek out a good bourgeois 'anti-fascist' of the style of Tapie or Noir (liberal politicians). Of course there is a difference between Le Pen and these gentlemen. But there is also a point in common between them: the small question of class.

Noir, Tapie and Cie are only ready to combat the fascist on the basis of respect for bourgeois law and order. It is after all this order from which they take their profits.

They will refuse to support decisive physical action against the FN. They are useless as allies. To create a movement which depends on their participation is to condemn it to defeat from the start

On 1 May, Le Pen was able to demonstrate unhindered for the fifth year in succession. As Pouvoir Ouvrier explained in our leaflet, reproduced above, only physical confrontation will stop Le Pen. Each time that the mass organisations of the class—indeed the far left organisations—refuse to take up and lead this essential struggle, the FN takes another step towards its goal

We cannot say it too loudly or too often: Le Pen intends to create a mass fascist organisation. He has already completed the first stage. It is not too late to stop him. But for that, decisive action is necessary. Tomorrow may be too late.

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