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France

The crisis is not over

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In less than two months, France has experienced four nationwide electoral contests that have shaken the country. Political crisis combines with social crisis. Indeed, far right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's qualification for the second round of the presidential elections revealed a system on the verge of implosion.

Massive abstention, rejection of the governing party, the breakthrough of the far right, and the upsurge of the far left spilled into open crisis. The eruption of the mass movement to block the Front National also reflected, in its way, the sharpness of political tensions. Resting on the institutions of the Fifth Republic, Chirac was re-elected as President. Then, through a mechanical sequence, the right won a majority in the national assembly, giving the appearance of a return to stability. However, the crisis is not over.

The meaning of abstention

Massive rates of abstention have been the major feature of these recent elections. Abstention, which has been growing for a decade, reached a peak at these recent elections. It has been an underlying tendency of the French and European political situation in recent years. That does not prevent, in some cases, a massive participation when the electorate senses something is at stake, as for example in the vote against Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election, but in general recent elections indicate a growing distancing of citizens from their system of political representation.

There is a first basic explanation for this phenomenon: the confiscation of democracy by the logic of the concentration and 'financialisation' of capital. The economic powers — multinationals and financial markets — increasingly domesticate the states and their institutions. In a period of neo-liberal counter-reform, what matters is increasingly less likely to be decided by governments and parliamentary assemblies. The process of neo-liberal construction in Europe has aggravated this tendency. Hence millions of citizens are excluded from political life. They consider that politics can no longer change their living conditions. The political line of the dominant classes thus empties the institutions of representative democracy, which are increasingly less representative of citizens, of their substance. At the root of the phenomenon of abstention there is this tendency of neo-liberal capitalism that confiscates democracy.

It is one of the fundamental features of the 'American model' where half the citizens — workers, employees, poor, black, Chicano — are excluded from the electoral process in a bipolar system where 'Democrats' and 'Republicans' face each other in a theatre of shadows. In short, universal suffrage is progressively and cynically replaced by a suffrage of the 'poll tax' type from which the poorest are excluded.

In France, 20 years of neo-liberal policies have led to massive abstention and the breakthrough of the Front National, to which we will return. The institutional mould of the Fifth Republic gives a specific form to this general tendency of the transformations of capital. The original Bonapartist form of the Fifth Republic had already significantly reduced the perimeter of parliamentary democracy. The election of the president of the Republic by universal suffrage gave exorbitant powers to a single person, 'a permanent coup d'état' as Mitterrand described it before himself taking command of the state and using its institutions to his own profit. The mode of election on a majority basis over two rounds excluded a whole series of political currents from legislative representation, increasing majorities and reducing the share of the opposition. The reform of the five year term of office, like the initiatives aimed at modification of the electoral calendar, have strengthened this 'secondarization' of the role of the national assembly.

In short, the specific character of the institutions of the Fifth Republic amplifies these phenomena of abstention.

We repeat, the basic explanation for abstention is the effects of the neo-liberal socio-economic policies of governments of left and right; this goes beyond the institutional forms specific to each country but the logic of the French institutions accentuates the phenomena. Even if, we should specify, it is a tendency and not a finished process.

These transformations collide with and will collide with the history of the country, its revolutionary traditions, the reality of the social and political relationship of forces which is reflected in the level of social resistance to neo-liberalism. However, the events of April and May 2002 speeded up all these processes. That is why the results of the presidential and legislative elections remain fragile for the right; the ground is still moving. Order has not yet been restored. The crisis of the first round of the presidential has not been overcome by the election of Chirac and the victory of the parliamentary right.

In these conditions we must oppose the 'presidentialization' of the institutions with a logic of radical democracy, not a return to the parliamentarism of the Fourth Republic. A Sixth Republic or a new republic which would maintain intact the neo-liberal order would not settle the basic problems the people face. Only a radical democracy which constitutes a genuine democratic and social breakthrough would begin to give a first coherent response; in particular, through the election of a national assembly by proportional representation, popular control of those elected, disallowing the holding of concurrent mandates, the alignment of the incomes of deputies and ministers with those of the average wage earner, the suppression of the election of the president of the Republic by universal suffrage and the abolition of the old Senate.

This rupture with the institutions of the Fifth Republic should also have an economic and social content which allows the elected assemblies to control the country's activities on an overall basis. Democracy should not stop at the door of the workplace nor before the power of the financial markets. No domain should be free of it. It demands inroads into private property and the establishment of social property. It presupposes then a mobilization of workers and the emergence of forms of direct democracy in the workplaces and the communities which would also involve their centralization. From this point of view, the socialist perspective is also that of extreme democracy.

Relationship of forces and victory of the right

Abstention is, then, the manifestation of a political and institutional crisis. Contrary to the analysis put forward by Jacques Julliard in the *Nouvel Observateur*, who writes that 'the French have sensibly returned to a bipolarisation which once again renders the political game readable', we do not think that the election of the 400 right wing deputies to the national assembly reflects the exact relationship of social and political forces. It is 'too good to be true' as Raymond Barre, a rightist who with a more intelligent appreciation of the relationship of forces and the interests of the dominant classes, has noted.

It would be truer to say that there is a strong tendency to political and social polarization in the country expressed by the parliamentary victory of the right, the social-liberal evolution of the traditional apparatuses of the left and the trade union movement but also by the resistance of workers and social movements to the neo-liberal offensive.

In one sense, the breakthrough of the far right and at the opposite end of the spectrum the far left's upsurge also witness to these tendencies to polarization.

However, the balance of the relationship of forces is moving to the right. The 'right wing wave' today sweeping across nearly all European countries after years of left and centre left government corresponds to an acceleration of neo-liberal construction in Europe.

It amounts to the punishment of a left enmeshed in the criteria of Maastricht but it is also the result of the politics of the dominant classes, who demand that neo-liberal restructuring passes to a higher gear.

Deregulation, generalization of privatisation, flexibility, challenges to pension regimes, reforms of unemployment benefit systems to force jobseekers to adapt to insecurity; these have been the axes of governmental policies which have sought to put an end to what remains of a certain type of 'European social model'.

Thus the constitution of a single party of the parliamentary right, the UMP('Union of the de la Majorité Présidentielle'), has a dual objective:

– to cope with the confrontation now being prepared to remodel the country's social relations, essentially to implement the 'social refoundation' proposed by the MEDEF [the employers' organization - ed.].

– to lean on the institutions of the Fifth Republic in building the party of the president.

It is a turning point for the French right which notes the level of social and political instability and which draws all the consequences of the institutional changes which have happened in recent months.

This explains the prudence of the French leaders. Nonetheless, behind the 'rural', 'France profonde' image projected by Raffarin's team, the dominant classes of the country are preparing a new offensive against the labour movement.

After the parliamentary elections, Chirac and the traditional right have contained the crisis of April 21; now, the focus moves to the extra-parliamentary social and political relationship of forces.

The situation of the far right

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/brunerie.jpg>]

Maxime Brunerie (right) would be assassin of Chirac, on FN march, 2000

After the parliamentary elections a number of commentators once again declared the far right to be buried. Wrongly. Certainly, the Front National fell back but there are two possible approaches to this.

a) The first stresses the raw electoral data; these reveal only a very limited overall progression of the far right vote. Le Pen's vote plus that of Megret [another far right candidate - ed.] was only just 600,000 more than the combined score of Le Pen and De Villiers [a right wing Catholic traditionalist - ed.] at the 1995 presidential election. Le Pen only beat Jospin by 200,000 votes. At the parliamentary elections of 2002, the far right lost 2 million votes.

From the strictly electoral viewpoint, this analysis underestimates totally the consolidation of the far right vote during the presidential elections; the FN confirmed its 1995 result in 2002, while in the second round of the presidential election it repeated its performance in the first round despite an extraordinary anti-fascist mobilization. More than 5 million people voted for Le Pen. As for the results in the 2002 parliamentary elections, they are in line with the average FN vote obtained over the last 15 years. The system of majority voting over two rounds and the dynamic of

the useful vote also penalized the FN. In general this analysis leads to a relativisation of the consequences of the FN's vote.

b) The second approach, which we share, looks beyond the simple analysis of electoral movements. It relates the overall factors which have determined the political crisis: Le Pen's breakthrough should be related to the rejection of the governing parties after 20 years of neo-liberal policies carried out by successive governments, to the explosion of abstention, the collapse of the traditional right (a loss of 4 million votes between 1995 and 2002) and the debacle of the left (a loss of 2.5 million votes between 1995 and 2002). The right, resting on the institutions of the Fifth Republic, has retaken the initiative after the parliamentary elections but nonetheless the far right's accumulation of electoral strength is such that in a conjuncture of crisis the fascist party becomes the nodal problem of the situation. That also explains the mass democratic and social eruption of youth and workers against the FN.

In this situation the tactics, proposals and attitude of revolutionaries should all be concentrated on the development of democratic and social resistance to the far right.

Certainly (and we have always said it) we are not in the 1930s, on the eve of a fascist seizure of power. Fascism was the counter-revolutionary response to the revolutionary rise of the working class in Europe.

At this stage, there is no mass fascist party taking to the streets to attack the workers' organizations. No significant fraction of big capital supports Le Pen's party.

However, the depth of the social crisis, the upheavals resulting from capitalist globalisation and the hypothesis of a European crisis combine together to create conditions favourable to the growth of the far right. 'Populist' or 'fascist', it could become one of the instruments of an authoritarian solution and no doubt a decisive strike force against workers and their organizations.

The qualitative transformations of the left

These recent elections have confirmed the tendencies at work on the French left for several years:

The left suffers from a real disengagement from a significant part of the masses, reflected in abstention, votes for the far left and unhappily for the FN also. In these conditions, contrary to the expectations of a number of PS and PCF leaders, there was not, in the second round of the parliamentary elections, any 'jump' by the people of the left to save a series of left deputies. Nonetheless, a significant part of the masses continue to vote for the traditional left and more exactly for the Socialist Party. These sectors are socially and politically heterogeneous; some continue to vote left to block the road to the right. Another section of the wage earners and the middle classes accept the neo-liberal theses, in the absence of a credible political alternative. If the PCF is collapsing and the ecologists are sagging, the PS remains the broadly dominant party on the left.

However, it's a PS which is changing. Social democracy is orientating increasingly towards social liberalism. The integration of social democracy in the state apparatus and the circles of industry and high finance have converted the essential players of the socialist apparatus to neo-liberalism. It is less and less 'the trade union bureaucrats and the café owners', to use Trotsky's phrase, who dominate the socialist apparatus, but increasingly technocrats and senior civil servants.

Jospin's orientation, presented as an alternative to the politics of the 'Third Way' of Blair and Giddens, has not carried

much weight. The balance sheet of the Jospin government in the area of privatisation or flexibility of the workforce shows that the PS has adapted to the underlying tendency working through European social democracy as a whole. European construction has accentuated this integration in the structures of domination of the dominant classes. This evolution is not restricted to the political parties; it also involves a good part of the trade union movement integrated in the European Trades Union Confederation (ETUC).

That has not yet led to a rupture of political relations between social democracy and the history of the workers' movement; as we have shown a part of the mass electorate still follows this traditional left but the organic adaptation of the latter to neo-liberalism has gone through qualitative advances in the recent period. And the question now posed for social democracy is to adapt the theory, the programmatic corpus, to the policies implemented for some years. In short, does it follow Blair into a new ideological revision? Some socialist leaders - Fabius and Strauss Khan - answer in the positive. No doubt, there will be debates in the PS and the evolutions will depend also on the extent of social conflict, but the logic of the socialist apparatus pushes in this direction. That does not rule temporary 'left' positions which could be taken by the PS apparatus in response to a radicalisation of the situation.

Finally, this socio-political change is also reinforced by the logic of the institutions of the Fifth Republic. The alternation between conservative party and liberal left is now integrated by all the forces of the plural left. It is moreover this which led the Jospin government to itself take the initiative of the referendum on the five year Presidential term and the modification of the electoral calendar, giving pre-eminence to the Presidential election.

This 'presidentialization' of political life led the socialist leaders to accompany their social-liberal adaptation with a mechanism whereby the PS will be locked much more into its alliances. The formula of the plural left is now obsolete. The PS finds itself with considerably weakened allies. Thus the qualitative modifications of the workers' movement, the decline of the PCF and the limitations of the ecologists will lead the socialist leadership to retain formulae which push the PS to accentuate its place as central party, enlarge its social and political base to become the 'big party of the social-liberal left', the party of alternation on the left, and to relativize the question of alliances. The acceleration of the presidentialization of the regime creates an impulse to construct to left the equivalent of what the UMP is to the right.

Where will the leadership of the PS end up? What will the relationship between the allies and the central Party be? How will the Greens and the PCF position themselves in this debate? These will be the decisive questions in the coming months.

Unhappily, this social-liberal evolution will not spare the allies of the PS, the PCF and the ecologists. The latter have limited the electoral damage to themselves. They occupy a specific place on the left, combining radical proposals on the societal level - in defence of the rights of the undocumented immigrants, for example - and acceptance of the social liberal framework in participating in the government of the plural left.

Thus, if the Greens have pushed forward certain discussions on ecological questions, they have not particularly distinguished themselves in relation to certain key questions like nuclear energy or genetically modified organisms. How to relaunch an activity of unitary mobilization on these themes, how to push forward the debate on the necessity of a new political approach where participation in the institutions is subordinated to the dynamic of the social movements, these are some capital questions to debate with the Greens.

The PCF has experienced a new electoral setback, in both the presidential and the parliamentary elections, which has not really been softened by the preservation of its parliamentary group in the assembly. Its result is now equivalent to that of the far left. The historic function of the PCF has been discussed since the collapse of the USSR. Its satellization by the PS has substantially sapped its 'national communist' bases. The USSR no longer exists, the PCF is no longer sufficiently distinct from the PS, what is the purpose of the PCF? That is the question posed by

thousands of Communist voters and activists and beyond this thousands of activists in the social movements or other left and radical left political parties.

The historic decline of the PCF is irremediable. Defending the apparatus of the PCF cannot constitute a policy. The confirmation of an orientation subordinated to the PS, for some, or nostalgia for the PCF of yesteryear for other oppositionists, can only lead to an impasse. Falling back on a theoretical discussion reduced to the Communist project or the reconstruction of a 'Communist house' does not take into account the necessity of an overall recomposition on new axes.

A new anti-capitalist force cannot identify itself with a patching up operation linked to the apparatus of the PCF. What is needed is a break with the infernal logic of the debates inside the PCF which, for some, confuses unity with adaptation to social democracy and for others, confuse radicalism with nostalgia for a bygone Stalinism.

It is by drawing the lessons of Stalinism in all its dimensions, by returning to the balance sheet of participation in the government, by choosing the terrain of unity of action and reflecting on the proposals of rupture with the capitalist system that the construction of a unitary and radical current will be advanced.

After Olivier Besancenot's campaign, the LCR has met a certain echo among Communist activists. This new phase in the PCF's crisis demands a series of specific LCR initiatives: from proposals for common action and discussion with militants and sections of the PCF to participation in all the debates today going on in the 'Communist galaxy'.

And the far left?

The far left or the radical left can now be an entirely special political force in the French situation, even if the results of the far left in the parliamentary elections did not confirm those of the presidential contest. The candidacies of Laguiller, Besancenot and Gluckstein had obtained 10% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election, while the far left did not get more than 3% in the parliamentary election.

In a difficult election, this was the result of the system of majority voting over two rounds, which penalized the small political formations, exerting pressure for a 'useful vote' while encouraging abstention among those who, precisely, did not wish to vote 'usefully'. The far left also paid for its divisions, in some seats there were no less than five candidates of the radical or far left.

We should add a final commentary on our results; the fact that many voters did not yet make the connection between the candidate of the LCR in the presidential elections - Olivier Besancenot - and the candidates of the LCR in the parliamentary elections.

In this framework, two remarks should be made concerning the LCR's results in the parliamentary elections. The first is that in 1997 we presented and supported only 150 candidates who obtained nearly 80,000 votes. In 2002, the LCR presented 450 candidates who won nearly 330,000 votes. It represents clear progress.

Secondly, these parliamentary elections reveal a relationship of equilibrium between the score of the LCR and that of Lutte Ouvrière, to the benefit of the Ligue. Lutte Ouvrière has visibly been punished by a part of its electorate, which did not accept its sectarianism or the political approach of LO between the two rounds in the mobilization against Le Pen. In calling for a blank or spoiled vote in the second round and refusing to call for a vote against Le Pen, the leadership of LO was frontally opposed to the movement against the FN. As a result, a part of its electorate withdrew

at the parliamentary elections.

It would be wrong to conclude after the parliamentary elections that the far left is out of the game. These elections are the most difficult ones for the far left, and also it is necessary to take account of the results over the long term. Since 1995, with the exception of the two parliamentary elections of 1997 and 2002, the far left has progressed with each contest, to reach 3 million voters in 2002.

The weakness of the current situation of the far left does not reside in its electoral results, completely exceptional in relationship to the membership of these parties, but in the limits of the political self-activity of the labour movement. These results, if they indicate a partial political reflection of the social struggles of the past decade, do not correspond to a qualitative progression of anti-capitalist consciousness linked to the organic growth of 'class struggle' currents or parties in the country.

The radical left, in all its plurality, is developing in Europe today. A new political space is opening for this anti-capitalist left in Italy, Portugal, England and Scotland, Denmark and France. It results fundamentally from social resistance and neo-liberal offensives - workers' and social struggles, movements against capitalist globalisation - and qualitative changes in the traditional left. The social-liberal evolution of social democracy combined with the decline of the Communist parties frees a space to the left.

This space must not be left to the social liberals and the sectors of the masses for whom the struggles of a real left retain a meaning must not be abandoned; that is the meaning of '100 % - gauche' reference point of the candidates or municipal lists presented or supported by the LCR in these elections.

Beyond these references the construction of a new anti-capitalist force will turn around the following axes:

a) The 'centrality' of the social question. The relevance of a critical Marxism resides in the analysis of the contradictions of capitalism and the social struggles that the latter generate, of the extension of their themes, youth, feminists, ecologists, articulated with the contradictions of the labour-capital relationship. Far from seeking the 'elusive middle classes', we start from a broad definition of the proletariat: 'all those who are forced to sell their labour power', that is more than 2/3 of the active population: workers, employees, technicians, teachers, some managers, employed or jobless.

Why recall all this? Because one of the key problems of reconstruction of a social and political movement is to reconstruct a sense of social and political belonging or identity. They are said to be 'invisible', but the majority of the population is very much made up by the class of workers, even if this class is fragmented, differentiated, divided by situation and status. There is effectively a crisis of identity which is exploited by the far right, who substitute racial or nationalist references for social ones. This crisis of social identity is also seen at the political level where the disintegratory effects of Stalinism and social democracy at the level of political consciousness still weigh on the emergence of a new political force. It is the task of the revolutionaries and beyond that the anti-capitalists to reconstruct these class references. Hence the necessity of putting the accent on a series of experiences of struggle from Danone to the youth at MacDonald's, on the democracy and self-organization of the social struggles and movements. Hence also the importance of restoring some flesh to the socialist project by revitalizing a programme of revolutionary democracy. It is also this understanding that led us to the choice of a young worker as candidate in the presidential election. A 'young postman' whose discourse the popular classes could identify with.

b) The social question is also at the centre of the programmatic refoundation of an anti-capitalist left. This programme must combine the immediate demands of the struggles with transitional objectives which reverse the current socio-economic logic, giving priority to social needs rather than profit, objectives which subordinate property to social rights.

To rearm the social movements over the long term, we must avoid self-limitation to the struggle against neo-liberalism, whether it is a hypothetical return to a capitalism with a human face or the definition of objectives compatible with the domination of the law of profit and the preservation of the bourgeois institutions.

The discussion on the question of banning layoffs or on participation in government relates to this debate. This programmatic discussion should also integrate a broad vision of the social question. It is not only about defending the interests of the workers in the workplace, but integrating all the dimensions of exploitation and oppression, first of all the struggle for the liberation of women. It is also about action against capitalist globalisation, the question of soft drugs which we raised in the presidential campaign or other societal or democratic themes.

c) Finally, building a new party means doing something new. This perspective cannot centre on developments inside the traditional organizations. Of course sectors of the PS, PC or ecologists can at given moments oppose their leadership, indeed break with their organizations. They can wish to change the left. We should be there, attentively, but the centre of gravity of a new force will be outside the old traditional organizations. It is about changing the left, to build a new force.

This was also one of the successes of the Besancenot campaign: affirming a clearly demarcated camp and in particular registering a clear delimitation from the plural left.

There are today two lefts, in action and in perspective, in this country. A social-liberal left satellized by the PS and composed of the parties of the ex-plural left and an anti-capitalist left. A left of fellow travellers with social-liberalism and a left of rupture with the capitalist system. Of course, some areas of unity of action between these lefts are indispensable to resist the attacks from the employers and government but the construction of a new force which can resist the right and the far right can only be done in total independence from the parties of the governmental left. A new political perspective cannot blur indispensable demands for social mobilization, the banning of layoffs for example or questions like participation in governments of the social-liberal type. Such a blurring is characteristic if the current projects floated by the Greens and the PCF, which allow these latter to maintain their links to the PS.

The LCR: passing to the stage of the small popular party

It is in this framework, that of the necessity of an anti-capitalist alternative, that we must now adjust the construction of the LCR in the new period, effecting a deep seated change in the organization in the wake of the campaign of Olivier Besancenot.

a) First, by proposing united mass action. The question of the preparation and construction of unitary social mobilizations against the plans of the Chirac-Raffarin government is one of the priorities of the coming social and political period.

Pensions, layoffs, wages, privatisation. On each question, we must build a unitary front of workers and their organizations. Why not build a unitary national committee for the defense of pensions based on the local committees in the communes, workplaces and neighbourhoods? On the anti capitalist globalisation front, mobilization for the European Social Forum in Italy and preparation for the mobilizations against the holding of the G8 in France in 2003 will constitute the next important events. A spectre is haunting the right now that it has returned to power: the general strike of winter 1995. It's up to us to create the conditions for a new 'tous ensemble' ['all together'].

b) The LCR has called for the holding of forums to discuss the perspectives for the construction of a new anti-capitalist force. The political crisis which resulted from the first round of the presidential election has accelerated this perspective: faced with the liberal left which has failed, a new party is needed.

We have proposed to associate local activists or collectives with these forums. The discussion on this question is decisive for the future, both from the viewpoint of political content and form. On content, programme, strategy, breaking with capitalism and its institutions is central. These are the broad lines of Olivier Besancenot's campaign. On the forms, a new force can only result from a qualitative leap in the organization of radical and anti-capitalist forces.

Only a convergence of forces originating from the social movements, the young generations, left activists breaking from a bankrupt policy and revolutionaries can lead to new organizational structures. Only such a convergence will go beyond current reality from an organization like the LCR. Events can accelerate the situation, but as things stand at present, this process will be long: it demands many debates and the confrontation of experiences. In this perspective, the LCR has taken the initiative of Forums which will be organized by its local activists but also by the currents, groups or activists interested in this discussion. These meetings will be an important chance to discuss, draw links, create the conditions of exchanges on immediate action and perspectives. In the immediate the LCR is available to participate in all the debates which will interest thousands of left activists. It will also pursue its unitary policy in relation to Lutte Ouvrière.

c) Finally the new political situation puts on the agenda a process of transformation of the LCR in the wake of Olivier Besancenot's campaign. The latter has attracted some hundreds of sympathizers and new members. The LCR must now open itself up and change so as to welcome them, stabilize and organize them. To pass from the stage of organization to that of small popular party, that is the objective for the Ligue in the coming months. This militant influx is essentially composed of youth, but also activists who have observed the Ligue for some years and who now make the step of joining, not forgetting those former militants who are resuming party involvement. Membership cards have been drawn up. They allow the formalization of the militant contract between member and organization. Meetings or educational sessions for new members have been organized nationwide. Dozens of new sections must be created to respond to the demands of groups of activists in the new towns. In short, we are confronted with a new stage in the construction of a revolutionary organization, a new Ligue.