

Analysis

French presidential election (first round): Le Pen, Macron and the radical left

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The first round results for the French presidential election confirm the deep political crisis in the country, which will no doubt deepen at the legislative elections in June

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The banker

The highest vote (23.9%) in the first round went to Emmanuel Macron, ex-banker and high flying former economy minister from Hollande's "Socialist" government. Politically, he is a more empty-headed version of Tony Blair. He stood in the election as an independent but garnered support from many Socialist party bigwigs who had abandoned their own official candidate (Benoît Hamon) as too left wing. Macron openly declares that entrepreneurial attitudes are what will save the day. France needs to become "a country of start-ups", he claims, and his official slogan is "France should be an opportunity for everyone". He has expressed his admiration for Thatcher's policies in Britain in the 1980s, and is cheerfully pushing for privatization and deregulation of anything that moves. On non-economic issues, however, he pushes a liberal view, distancing himself from the Islamophobia ex-Prime Minister Valls liked to whip up, and declaring recently, in spite of the unpopularity of such a view on the Right, that colonialism was a crime against humanity.

Macron has benefitted from the support of the right wing of the Socialist Party, from the fact that he has managed to present himself as an outsider to the political system, and also from tactical votes from people who felt he was the most likely to soundly defeat Le Pen in the second round. In reality his plan to impose ever more austerity is likely to lead in the medium term to even more desperate support for the fascists.

It is ironic that Hollande's anti-working class policies made it impossible for him to stand in the election, but that the winner of the first round is a man who wants to follow the same course, but in an accelerated version. The fact that Macron was not standing as a Socialist Party candidate allowed

him to win many votes from the right wing, not least from those who were disgusted by the thievery of the official Right wing candidate, Fillon. Macron is runaway favourite to win the second round run-off against Le Pen and become president of France.

The fascist

The fascist candidate, Marine Le Pen, came second in the race, with 21.4%, receiving a million more votes than she got five years ago, and over seven million in all. This number of votes for a fascist is obviously very worrying, and the lack of a serious, broad, national, permanent antifascist campaigning organization is one of the tragic elements of the present political situation. There is every reason for the Left to rethink its strategies on antifascism. Nevertheless, Le Pen has steadily lost support over the last month: most polls had her marked down to top the poll, and it is something of a relief to see her come in second.

Le Pen has been busy working on “detoxifying” her party’s image, to distance it from fascism. Her official election slogan is “Restoring order in France”. At the same time, regular reassurance is available for the fascist hard core in the FN: a few days ago Le Pen declared that she thought that France was not responsible for the deportation to death camps of French Jews. Such a statement served to remind her followers that antisemitism (and indeed massacre) was not a problem for her. It has become a tradition, for herself and her father, to release such statements at moments when their support is high. These are normally reported in the press as “dérapages” – accidentally skidding off-message – but they are in fact carefully thought out. Across France this week, supporters of the FN who had turned to it because of anger over unemployment and austerity, were being asked by the people around them what they thought of Le Pen’s statement about the massacre of Jews. They were thus under pressure either to abandon support for Le Pen or to take on more clearly fascist ideas. Well aware that she is very unlikely to win the presidency this time round, Le Pen is hardening up the core of her party for future struggles.

The last time that the Front National got through to the second round was in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen got 16.8% (4.8 million votes). There was immediately a massive wave of daily antifascist demonstrations, including some high school strikes and a two million-strong May Day demonstration against Le Pen. Tragically, this uprising did not leave behind it a permanent national antifascist movement as it might have done.

Now in 2017, there have been a series of antifascist demonstrations in different towns (Saint Denis, Pau and elsewhere) to protest against FN meetings, usually of a few hundred people each time. This week there will be more, and May 1st will no doubt see a huge antifascist rally, but it seems unlikely that the mobilization will match 2002. This is partly because Marine Le Pen has managed to persuade a good number of people that her party is no longer fascist, but also because most sections of the Left are not really convinced that specific antifascist activity should be a priority. For many Left groups, developing union struggles and fighting unemployment and austerity are the key way to beat back fascism. Of course such struggles help tremendously, but there is a need for specific activity to make it harder for Le Pen to build up a mass fascist party machine.

And the radical Left

Just a couple of points further back, on practically equal footing (19.9% and 19.6% respectively) were official Republican candidate François Fillon, and Red-Green left reformist Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Fillon was supposed to win this election hands down. His candidacy shows the weakness

of the traditional right wing party. It was tremendously difficult for them to find a candidate who united the party using a system of primary elections in which Fillon was not favourite. When Fillon was exposed as a thief of public funds a couple of months back, the party did not have a plan B. But the revelations led to many of Fillon's supporters choosing Le Pen or Macron instead. One of the bright spots of this week's news is that, now that Fillon cannot benefit from the immunity which comes with being president, he may well be convicted for his crimes.

To turn to the radical Left, I have written elsewhere about the meaning of Jean-Luc Mélenchon [1]. His meteoric rise, based on a brilliant, upbeat campaign and a programme of inspiring radical Left proposals reversing the steam on austerity politics, is the reflection of a move to the Left of a considerable section of the working class after the massive wave of strikes and demonstrations against Hollande's Labour Law in 2016 [2]. He has been able to embody the main dynamic of radical and anticapitalist politics in France, a dynamic which several years back had been occupied by the New Anticapitalist Party. The proposing of radical change to fight unemployment and poverty was able to attract a lot of votes which would no doubt otherwise have gone to Marine Le Pen. Mélenchon's impressive result in this election, coupled with the collapse in the Socialist Party vote, mean that the reconfiguration of the Left will be heavily influenced by "Insubordinate France" the movement he established recently.

We may be seeing the end of the Socialist Party, a dominant political force on the Left in France since 1971. The official Socialist Party candidate in 2012 (François Hollande) got 28% of the votes in the first round (10'000'000 votes). In 2017 the official PS candidate, Benoît Hamon, on the left of his party, managed a meagre 6.4%.

Restructuring of left and right

Polarization, then, is the key result of this election. Those parties which have been responsible for austerity politics have been severely weakened, and the far left, far right and non-party extreme "centre" have come to the fore.

We will not have to wait long for reconfiguration and renewal both on the Right and the Left. In June come the (two-round) legislative elections for a new national assembly. The president elected next week will need a parliamentary majority in order to govern. But Macron has no MPs at present, whereas the Socialist Party has 292, the Republicans have 198 (the radical left has 15 and the National Front has two). In the weeks to come, the Socialist Party is likely to explode as sitting MPs scramble either to be approved by President Macron or to persuade their local party to support them against a Macron-approved candidate.

This leaves open a possibility of restructuring the radical Left. The many thousands of activists who built the Mélenchon campaign will be looking to get into parliament MPs who will defend workers' interests. When the Socialist Party splits, it may be possible to attract numbers of Socialist sympathizers to a more solid, class-based, Left option.

Meanwhile on the Right, disintegration is also on the menu. Different groupings within the Republican Party around Sarkozy, Juppé and Fillon, are likely to find unity tremendously difficult in the wake of defeat. Some have already joined Macron, others will follow. In the disintegration, some of the right wing groups are likely to decide to ally with the increasingly powerful Front National. For fifteen years the traditional Right has generally avoided alliances with the fascists, and such alliances can only strengthen Le Pen.

A barrage against Le Pen

I have left till last the question which is obsessing political commentators and activists across France. Should the Left call for a vote for Blairite Macron, as a “lesser evil” against Le Pen? The Socialist Party, Communist Party and a number of far left comrades individually (including plenty of old-timers) have called for such a vote. Mélenchon has not. The question divides left activists, as it did, equally spectacularly, in 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen was in the second round run-off against Conservative Jacques Chirac. It is important not to make this question, of voting or abstaining in the second round, the centre of political debate. The first task of the day is maximum unity and mobilization against Le Pen, and to persuade those tempted to vote for her in two weeks’ time of her true nature as an anti-working class demagogue who has no solution for the people.

Having said that, we can learn from the experience of fifteen years ago. The massive vote for Chirac in the second round in 2002 against Le Pen did nothing to slow the building of French fascism. On the contrary, the continuing austerity policies built up more misery which translated easily into more fascists, and the “Republican Unity” against Le Pen helped the fascists to present themselves as anti-system outsiders.

Millions of left wing French people, including many anticapitalist activists, will be voting for Macron in two weeks’ time. Though this is understandable, I think it is a mistake. This, however, is not the essential political question of the day. The key questions are how to build on the excellent score of the radical Left in this first round to construct a mass Left alternative, both for the legislative elections and for the everyday struggle, and how to organize a permanent antifascist force in France to counter the rise of the nazi Beast.

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P.S.

* April 24, 2017:

<http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/18897-french-elections-le-pen-macron-and-the-radical-left>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/18880-excitement-in-the-french-elections-the-meaning-of-jean-luc-melenchon>

[2] <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/18399-class-struggle-in-france-a-temporary-stalemate>