

## NO! - from the Left

The neoliberal draft European Constitution rejected by French voters

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At ten o'clock on Sunday night, as the last polling stations closed, the result came down like the blade of a guillotine. France's electors had voted "No" to the projected European Constitution. All the polls in the last few days before the vote were predicting a victory for the "No". But the size of the majority, nearly 55 per cent, was absolutely unequivocal.

What was also clear, and finally recognised by a media that had been almost uniformly partisan of the "Yes" vote, was that the battle had been won by the "No from the left".

Of course far-right leaders like Jean-Marie Le Pen and Philippe de Villiers were on television claiming victory. But the sociological and political composition of the vote showed that the bulk of the "No" votes didn't come from their supporters.

Among social categories, 81 per cent of manual workers, 79 per cent of the unemployed, 60 per cent of white-collar workers and 56 per cent of "intermediary professions" voted "No". The only categories where the "Yes" was in a majority were executives and intellectual professions (62 per cent), those with a university education (57 per cent) and pensioners (56 per cent).

An analysis of the vote by age group shows that the "No" won by 59 per cent among 18-34 year-olds and 65 per cent among 35-49 year-olds. The "Yes" was only in a majority among those over 65. Politically, 67 per cent of left-wing voters opted for the "No" - almost unanimously among supporters of the Communist Party and the revolutionary Left, but also 59 per cent of Socialist supporters and 64 per cent of Green supporters. And 61 per cent of non-aligned voters voted "No". Only supporters of the two mainstream right-wing parties, the UMP and the UDF, voted massively (76 per cent) in favour of the Constitution.

If we put the far Right at 15 per cent of the electorate, that means that the other 40 per cent for the "No" came from supporters of the Left and the non-aligned. Questioned on the reasons for their vote, those who voted "No" cited the economic and social situation in France, especially the issue of unemployment, and the "too liberal" character of the treaty.

And 35 per cent of them expressed the hope that the constitutional treaty could be renegotiated. So as the campaigners for a "No from the left" have been saying for months, most people who voted "No" didn't do so because they were chauvinist, anti-European or whatever. They voted against neo-liberalism and its devastating effects in France and in Europe.

The political effects of the vote will be multiple. "Chirac disavowed, Europe destabilised", said the headline in the Monday edition of "Le Monde". Chirac is likely to sack Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a convenient scapegoat. Raffarin may be replaced by Nicolas Sarkozy, who on television on Sunday night produced the somewhat original analysis that the French people had voted "No" because they wanted even more neo-liberal policies... Which is what they will get if he is nominated. Or Chirac may feel that nominating Sarkozy would be too much of a provocation.

The President himself is now indeed disavowed and seriously weakened, and it is difficult to see how he can still envisage standing again in the 2007 presidential election. On the left, only the LCR called clearly and unequivocally for Chirac to resign and for the dissolution of Parliament.

But of course not all the losers were on the right. The majority leaderships of the Socialist Party and the Greens were also disavowed by their own supporters, and post-referendum battles in both parties look set to be fierce. Socialist leaders like François Hollande, Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Lionel Jospin who led the “Yes” campaign are unlikely to meekly hand the party over to those like Laurent Fabius, Henri Emmanuelli and Jean-Luc Mélenchon who defended the “No”.

On a European level it is not of course “Europe” that has been destabilised but the neo-liberal EU project. And listening to a succession of European leaders of left and right on Sunday night, they gave no signs of drawing any lessons from the defeat. One after the other they came on the screen to reprimand the unruly French and announce that business would go on as usual.

Of course most of them won’t have anything as messy as a referendum to contend with, having chosen parliamentary ratification of the treaty. Whatever the defenders of the Constitution say, the French “No” can open up the debate on Europe that hasn’t yet taken place in most countries of the EU. The opponents of neo-liberal Europe have a chance to go on the offensive, not only for the rejection of this Constitution but also for a break with the undemocratic way it was drawn up, and to demand that the peoples of Europe elect constituent assemblies to draw up new proposals. The LCR has called for a European Social Forum to discuss the way forward

In France, on the left, the victory of the “No” opens up new possibilities for building a radical anti-capitalist force. The months of cooperation between militants of different parties and of none, of collaboration with trade unionists and activists of social movements, have created a real dynamic and raised expectations. Discussions have already begun on how to build a force on the left that can break with what in France is called “alternance” - the pattern whereby governments of left and right alternate regularly, with a high degree of continuity in their neo-liberal policies.

These discussions will certainly continue, no doubt against a background of continuing social resistance to the neo-liberal offensive of Chirac and whoever he names as Prime Minister. What is needed is to build a credible alternative to the social-liberalism that is incarnated by the Socialist Party leadership. In a declaration the day after the referendum, the LCR proposed that the 1,000 committees for a “No from the left” that have mushroomed over the last months continue and work towards a national meeting.

It has also proposed a meeting of the political organisations that helped last autumn to launch the “Appeal of the 200” that was the basis for the committees. Some of the forces involved in the “No” campaign will be tempted to be drawn into a new union of the Left under SP hegemony, to prepare a new “alternance” for 2007.

But that perspective will be combated not only by the LCR but by many other activists, including in the Communist Party, and even by some Socialist Party members. Prospects have never looked better for building a radical anti-capitalist force in France. The coming weeks and months will be decisive.

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**P.S.**

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