

French Left: what happen? — Looking at the Results of the Presidential Elections

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A few weeks ago, I published a document entitled “On the French Left: what’s going on?” [1] for the use of activists of the different parties and movements of the European Anti-capitalist Left, or elsewhere in the world, who wanted to know more about the situation of the French Left.

This new document sets out to give additional information and analysis after the results of the two rounds of the presidential election and, incidentally, discuss some contributions written on the same topic among the anti-capitalist and/or anti-liberal Left.

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A new political situation

The main issue, of course, is the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President and the meaning of that event for the Left. Sarkozy was elected with a clear advance mainly because he was able to bring together the right and to convince a significant number of former far right voters. He first won the ideological battle for hegemony and then the electoral battle.

Ségolène Royal - the candidate of the SP - didn't propose a really different programme and was unable to personify the hope of a better life, better jobs, better wages. At this point, Sarkozy's victory is an electoral victory. His biggest challenge is to change it into a social victory, into a defeat of the working class in order to accelerate implementation of the neo-liberal agenda that has been delayed in France (compared to others developed countries) by social resistance. Whether he can win that challenge or not is exactly what is at stake in the coming months.

Social and political background

We can all consider that the election of Sarkozy and the circumstances of this election will significantly help the offensive of the MEDEF (bosses' association) and the right wing parties against workers' rights. In a certain way, the high number of voters for this election as well as the really

very rightist proposals Sarkozy made publicly during his electoral campaign are new and important obstacles to popular resistance because his politics have gained a kind of legitimacy on a broad scale. But there is more controversy about another issue: this election obviously shows an evolution towards the right of the political superstructures (both right wing and left wing parties). But is that global trend another evidence of a deep gap between the genuine mood of ordinary people and the different political apparatus? Or is this election the logical concretization of an already damaged status of the relationship of forces between social classes and of left ideas in society? In other words: after a social and political period of increasing popular resistance, are we now faced with a kind of “downturn”? This issue can remain open for a while.

My view is that we should remember that the outcome of most of the explosions of resistance – from 1995 to 2006 – has not been a victory and that the neo-liberal agenda has effectively been implemented in France, though at a slower rhythm than in other imperialist countries.

I have summarized a more detailed analysis of these issues in a document for the LCR National Leadership “Remarques post 6 mai”, available on request (but, unfortunately, only in French ...) [2].

In his document – “The French presidential election” – Murray Smith considers it “a very lucid and realistic contribution on the extent and limits of resistance to neo-liberalism and the relationship of class forces in France today”. But he states that, despite that “objective” situation, important items to be underlined are “the level of political consciousness”, “a greater mobilisation and politicisation of young people”. Consequently, he argues, the main issue to be addressed is “a credible political alternative”. And he adds: “In the first place, the lack of such an alternative makes social resistance harder”.

Yes, we have to build a credible political alternative! But is the lack of this political alternative the main reason for our difficulties in building a broad movement of resistance? One can also think exactly... the other way round! The difficulties in organising resistance are significant obstacles to building a political alternative. These difficulties – and the defeat of some of the widest movements of resistance (such as the demonstrations and strikes in 2003) – can explain the difficulties in building a political alternative, as well! Most probably, the conclusion will be that the tasks of building resistances AND building a political alternative are interrelated and have to be carried out simultaneously.

Fairy tales

These points – relationship of forces, political situation, and so on — are very important and have to be clarified. A correct analysis of the social and political situation, including a realistic analysis of the relation of forces between classes, between left and right wing parties, between radical left and neo-liberal left is useful. But, anyhow, an accurate analysis will not automatically guarantee a clever political orientation. Of course, if it was so, life would be easier for us! Unfortunately, a correct analysis cannot by itself provide an orientation. But it can specify what is possible. And what is NOT possible.

And, according to the real situation of French society in 2007, some hypotheses that have been brandished in diverse debates among the anti-liberal Left were simply... not possible. For example, some of the self-proclaimed leaders of the anti-liberal Left have supported the idea that a joint single candidate of the anti-liberal Left would have been able to get more than 10% of the votes for the first round of the presidential election. Some even stated that a single anti-liberal candidate could get a better result than the candidate of the SP! Under such circumstances, being suspicious about a “secondary” issue such as the supposed and contingent relations with the SP would have been out of

place! And the insistence of the LCR in raising that issue would only have been additional evidence that the LCR actually didn't want a common candidate because the LCR was only looking for pretexts in order to stand Olivier Besancenot as its own candidate...

And you can oppose nothing to that, not even the genuine results of the election! For the supporters of a unique anti-liberal candidature, whatever the political cost should be, the results of the election are just an evidence of the mess caused by the absence of such a candidature. And the "apparatus" of the CP and the LCR are (necessarily) guilty for that mess. A mess that would not have occurred in the case of a common candidature...

They don't try to explain why, in the framework of a global disaster for the anti-liberal Left, Olivier Besancenot and the LCR have been able to resist and obtain a "relative success". They don't try to explain it because it is not so easy to do so and, mainly, because they are not interested in doing so. They prefer to feed the regrets of lost illusions.

But, of course, more that 10% for an anti-liberal candidate - or even more votes than the candidate of the SP! - were just absurd statements. Nevertheless, AFTER the 22nd of April, some of the leaders of the former anti-liberal coalition, mainly those who supported José Bové, are still "explaining" what could have happened ... if.

For instance, in the daily *Liberation* (11/05/2007), Yves Salesse - former candidate to be the candidate of the anti-liberal Left and a spokesman of José Bové's campaign - wrote: "The failure of the left doesn't end with the failure of the social-liberalism. Because it doesn't provide any accurate answer, the division of those who are supporting another orientation for the Left has been devastating. The surprise of this election should not have been Bayrou but the breakthrough of this alternative Left. The leaderships of the LCR and the CP have made a different choice." [3]

For instance, Pierre Khalfa, a former leader of SUD and a leading member of the French global justice movement, in the course of his debate with Pierre Rousset — recorded on the website: www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article6070 — wrote : "For me, it was possible to be involved in unitive dynamics which would have won more than 15% of the votes, asserting its will to win the majority in the Left space. Of course, this is not what has happened. But this fact doesn't invalidate my position, except if it's a case of wishful thinking: I analyse that it is not possible; I act in order for that not to be possible; it didn't happen; so, I was right to think it was not possible!" [4]

For instance, Murray Smith wrote: "I have never found convincing the wilder surges of enthusiasm by the partisans of unity, going so far as to predict that a unitary candidate could have got more votes than the SP. But I think he or she would certainly have got more than 8.5 per cent. Between 10 and 15 per cent seems a perfectly realisable objective. At that level, the relationship of forces on the left starts to change, and a serious marker is laid down for the future".

Before the first round of the presidential election, you could consider theses analyses just as (serious) political mistakes or ridiculous polemical speeches in order to denounce the "sectarianism of the apparatus of the CP and the LCR" and to please the average mood of the numerous activists of the No campaign who were yearning for unity. But, AFTER the results of the election, we are faced to something qualitatively different: a desperate attempt to find a magic explanation of what has gone wrong, a pathetic denial of reality. And, of course, a very comfortable reading of the election that protects you from any self-criticism! Actually, they prefer to borrow an "explanation" once used by the SP. Just as the SP tried to "explain the 21st April 2002" by the dispersion of the left (too many candidates), they explain the failure of the anti-liberal left in 2007 by its dispersion...

Back to reality

The attempt of José Bové to present his campaign as a unitary campaign failed. Even his decision to stand was not, in any case, the result of a democratic debate in the “movement” or in the framework of the remaining anti-liberal collectives. When it was possible for him to be designated as candidate by at least a part of the anti-liberal collectives, he withdrew his candidature. He has been able to be “designated” only after the explosion of the movement (after the takeover of the CP in order to impose its general secretary as unitary candidate) via a very anti-democratic process through a web-petition. Some of his rallies were successes, while others were not. He failed to express a really broad anti-liberal orientation and confined himself to very specific — though legitimate — issues (such as the fight against dissemination of genetically modified crops). It also must be noticed that he attacked LCR publicly in a very nasty way, while Olivier Besancenot never attacked the other candidates of the anti-liberal Left. He even counterposed its candidature to the “eleven others” presented as “candidates of the system! Between the two rounds of the presidential election, he even accepted a “mission” from the SP candidate (Segolène Royal) about “food sovereignty”. He also had a very indulgent evaluation of her openings towards François Bayrou and the centre right. That doesn’t “prove” he was under the control of the SP. But it proves that the issue about being independent from the SP that the LCR had raised was not... superfluous. The electoral results were bad (483,000 votes; 1.32%) and left many of its supporters disappointed. Anyhow, one point must not be discarded: he really did have a significant number of supporters, some of them being radical activists of the social movements, a necessary component to build a political alternative, a broad anti-capitalist party. A problem that has to be dealt with now...

The campaign of Marie-George Buffet was an impossible challenge from the start. The CP desperately tried to convince people to vote for her — and not for the SP candidate — by criticising the neo-liberal orientation of the SP. But, at the same time, the CP never explicitly rejected the idea of a governmental or parliamentary coalition with the SP, feeding the illusion that it would be possible to have a government bringing together “all the left”... on an anti-liberal basis! The CP obtained its worst ever result: 707,000 votes; 1.93%. Then it has tried (without success) with the SP leadership in order to rescue a handful of its MPs. No doubt about it: this is a new step in the endless crisis of the CP. And the anti-capitalist Left has to deal with that...

Another issue we have to think about is the result of Arlette Laguiller, the candidate for Lutte Ouvrière (LO), the main other revolutionary organisation in France: from more than 5% in 2002 to 1.33% in 2007. There are several explanations for that. It was the sixth (!) campaign of Arlette Laguiller for presidential election and that was not the best way to show how revolutionary organisations deal with the renewal of politics. This was made worse by the competition with Olivier Besancenot, of course. Some former voters for LO were also angry about its attitude after the 21st April 2002 when LO refused to be part of the movement against Le Pen. And during the 2007 campaign, LO sometimes gave the impression of calling on the SP to defend genuine left measures rather than opposing it. Anyhow, the anti-capitalist left should now consider that LO will remain a significant revolutionary organisation that will not disappear just like that...

New responsibilities, new opportunities

Obviously, the political situation after this presidential election gives new responsibilities to the LCR. As noticed before, we have to deal with the disappointment and the bitterness of the activists who supported José Bové; we also have to deal with the deepening crisis of the CP and the former supporters of LO who are more or less orphans. But in order to decide what to do, it is necessary to analyse our own results and understand why we have been able to resist better than the others

candidates of the anti-liberal Left. Because we now have to build mainly on that basis.

There are at least three reasons of the success and they make the difference with the other candidates:

- The defence of a radical anti-capitalist programme,
- The ability to personify the renewal of the radical left,
- The absolute independence.

Our programme – for the presidential campaign and for the general elections – was a set of emergency measures that were at the same time concrete answers to the situation of millions of people and a bridge towards another world. The LCR has not invented anything: most of these measures were borrowed from social movements or, at least, from the most advanced sectors of the social movements. But supporting them without any compromise made the difference: they are not items of a programme just for elections; they have been and they will be the core of the forthcoming struggles.

Personifying the renewal of the Left needs a clear political profile and a candidate appropriate for that. Olivier Besancenot was that candidate because he is young – and able to be understood by young people – and because he is a worker, not a professional politician. In 2002, one of the slogans of the campaign was: “Olivier Besancenot, 27 years old, postman”. At that time, he was the youngest candidate by large. In 2007, of course, he was five years older... but he was still the youngest candidate. And he was still a postman, as well. It’s not about “casting” or political “communication”. It’s about our ideas of political fight.

Absolute independence has been the most disputed issue. It’s the most important one. It’s both correct and... efficient! Many new voters and many former voters for the radical Left in 2002 (even the majority of voters for Olivier Besancenot) voted for Ségolène Royal in April 2007, even without any enthusiasm for her programme and campaign: the pressure for “useful vote”, the will to avoid another “21st of April”, the opposition to Nicolas Sarkozy were very high. And these reasons explain to a large extent the average bad results of the radical Left. More than the fact that this anti-liberal Left was divided, anyway. And those voters who nevertheless wanted to vote “more to the left” that the SP chose to vote for the most independent candidate from the SP, Olivier Besancenot. Actually, having 280,000 votes more than in 2002 means, at least, he has convinced between 800,000 and 900,000 new voters [reaching a total of 1.500,000 and 4,1%].

Considering what would have happened if – if a common candidate would have stood, if the CP have supported José Bové or another non communist candidate, if the LCR had supported José Bové, and so on – make no sense, because these hypotheses have just no basis in reality. But, anyhow, I believe that Marie-George Buffet featuring a common anti-liberal candidate, supported by LCR and anti-liberal collectives, would have got more or less the same result she reached as a candidate of the CP. José Bové, supported by the LCR and CP, would have got, more or less, the same results he got on its own. Nowadays, none of the parties of the anti-liberal and/or anti-capitalist Left has a stabilised electorate. For every election, you have to win every voter by convincing them it is useful to vote for you. And arithmetics are not politics...

Anyhow, the results of the first round of the presidential election, the number of people who sent letters or e-mails in order to join and resist against Sarkozy have given the LCR a broad credibility. And new responsibilities! After the general elections that, most probably, will be a severe defeat for the SP and its allies, a debate will begin about the future of the Left. For many activists inside the traditional Left and among workers and young people, the question is: what had happened? Why have we been defeated? How can we avoid new forthcoming defeats?

The different leaders of the SP are already arguing of the necessity for an “aggiornamento”, a realignment of the French SP on the political orientation already shared by the other parties of the European social-democracy. They underlined the contrast between their defeat and the victories of Tony Blair in the UK or Romano Prodi in Italy. They suggest they lost the election because they were linked to old-fashioned ideas about socialism, class struggle and so on. And they begin to think about the kind of relationship they must have with the centre right.

The challenge we have to answer is to show that, in face of that neo-liberal left, there is another left, a left “100% left”, which thinks that in order to oppose Sarkozy you must refuse any evolution towards centre and clearly defend workers’ rights. A Left entirely committed to struggles and socialist alternatives. A Left whose main purpose will be to organise resistance and contest the hegemony of the SP rather than trying to pressure it.

The LCR doesn’t intend to be sectarian or arrogant. But there is absolutely no reason to apologize for not having been marginalised like the other candidates and parties of the anti-liberal Left! Now, we have to move and offer a genuine alternative to failed orientations. We have to do it in an open manner, with the genuine will to associate as many people as possible. How can the LCR – a small revolutionary organisation – in practice help a significant number of people to make a new step towards a broad anti-capitalist party? This issue will now be discussed among our members (old and new) and be clarified during the preparation of our national Congress (December 2007). But, during that discussion, we will keep in mind the reasons why we are faced with such a challenge (rather than sadly discussing about our failure): commitment to a radical anti-capitalist programme and absolute independence from the institutional left.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] [On the French Left: what’s going on?](#)

[2] [Quelques remarques post 6 mai 2007](#)

[3] [La France n’est pas à droite](#)

[4] [À la gauche de la gauche : chassé croisé sur la présidentielle et l’expérience des années 2005-2007](#)