

How to Resist Sarkozy?

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FRANCE IS A paradoxical country. Nowhere else in Europe has the neoliberal offensive — the drive to privatize services and enshrine free-market supremacy over social welfare — been resisted more fiercely or more successfully. In November-December 1995 striking public sector workers brought down the government and defeated an attempt to roll back their pension rights. In May 2005 French voters derailed a “constitutional treaty” that would have set the neoliberal project of the European Union (EU) in stone.

In 2006 months of student protests and strikes defeated a government project (the CPE) to limit job security for first-time hires. Yet the left failed this spring to block the election as president of Nicolas Sarkozy, a former minister of the interior whose repressive stance has earned him the hatred of young immigrants and whose economic plans make him the worst threat yet to the country's militant unions.

The problem is that “neoliberal” today covers the whole political spectrum outside the far right and far left, and the political parties committed to stopping neoliberalism are far weaker and more divided than the social movements.

Where's the Alternative?

The leading party on the left remains the Socialist Party (SP). After a mixed start in government in 1981-83, the SP under President François Mitterrand helped privatize French industries and push French society to the right until his death in 1995.

SP leader Lionel Jospin did the same as prime minister of a “plural left” coalition from 1997 to 2002. And the SP's 2007 presidential candidate, Ségolène Royale, failed to convince French voters that she would break the cycle of steady rightward drift under alternating right-wing and center-left governments. On the contrary, the photogenic but often evasive Royale gave signs of being a potential French Tony Blair, more dedicated to neoliberal “reforms” than recent French governments.

Jacques Chirac, France's Gaullist president from 1995 to 2007, has if anything dragged his feet at least as much as the SP in implementing the EU's Lisbon Agenda for labor flexibility and intensified competition. He also became a thorn in George W. Bush's side by failing to back the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (whatever his reasons).

Sarkozy, though the candidate of Chirac's party, seems cast in a different mold politically. Although he has reportedly said that he is less of an Atlanticist than people take him for, that still leaves room for him to move closer to the United States. His law-and-order rhetoric won many former voters for

fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen into his column.

Sarkozy's initial gestures to conciliate the left, for example by appointing Socialist Bernard Kouchner foreign minister, are interpreted by many as attempts to disarm resistance to his own version of the neoliberal agenda — planned attacks on the welfare state, including his announced tax cuts for the rich and layoffs of civil servants.

Given the extraordinary personal enmity between Chirac and Sarkozy, which has often dominated headlines over the past couple of years, it would be surprising if Sarkozy turned around now and followed completely in the older Gaullist's footsteps.

It is in Sarkozy's interests to look as statesmanlike and unthreatening as possible in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in June. Since 2002 the right has controlled the presidency and both houses of parliament. Only grassroots resistance and Chirac's caution has limited its scope for action. Following Sarkozy's election, his right-wing coalition is forecast to win a parliamentary majority once more. If that happens, Sarkozy can show just how aggressive he is prepared to be.

The French have repeatedly shown their opposition in the past to neoliberal plans. Polls showed clear majorities backing the 1995 public sector strikes and the 2006 anti-CPE movement, for example. So why did 53.7% of them end up voting for Sarkozy for president in the May 6th runoff?

Many on the radical left have argued that an electoral base exists for an anti-neoliberal political force to the SP's left. One of the best opportunities yet to create a unified radical left emerged in 2005 from the victory of the "no" forces in the referendum on the EU constitutional treaty.

Although some right-wing politicians opposed the treaty as well, all the evidence shows the main "no" vote coming from the left. The left's no campaign was waged by unified, radical, local collectives across France. These collectives brought together activists from the Communist Party, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, French section of the Fourth International), left-wing rebels from the SP and Greens (whose party leaderships backed the treaty) and independent leftists. After the victory in the referendum, the collectives continued to meet and discuss the possibility of joint electoral action.

The SP and Green leaderships succeeded soon after the referendum in winning back the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of their activists who had deserted them to campaign against the treaty. Those who remained in the collectives set about writing a program and seeking a candidate for the 2007 presidential elections. Gradually their debates turned into a tug-of-war between the CP on one side and the LCR on the other, with many independents in the middle looking for compromises and trying to hold the collectives together. The main issue was their relationship with the SP.

The CP has had a long, checkered relationship with the SP. Several CP ministers took part in SP-led coalitions after Mitterand's election in 1981, only resigning in 1984 as the SP veered too far to the right. The CP joined Jospin's government again in 1997, and this time stuck with its SP and Green allies right up to 2002.

In retrospect even the CP admits that these were "social-liberal" (socialist in rhetoric, neoliberal in practice) governments, which enacted many right-wing policies with a left-wing cover. CP leader Marie-Georges Buffet also sees that participation in these governments contributed greatly to alienating the CP's base and weakening her party. So the CP leadership says it has changed course, and will never join the SP in a social-liberal government again.

Many on the radical left remain dubious about the CP's conversion. As the CP has weakened in the

unions and movements, its center of gravity has increasingly been in parliamentary bodies and particularly local government, where it still has a substantial contingent of mayors and municipal councillors. Given its electoral decline and France's undemocratic electoral laws, the CP is largely dependent for its elected officials on alliances, above all with the SP.

A complete break with the SP could be devastating to the CP's finances and organization. And if the center-left were to win a parliamentary majority again, the SP could be expected to make CP support for an SP-led government a precondition for any kind of electoral deal.

This prospect cast its shadow over the collectives' debates over the course of 2006. At a certain point the CP and the majority of the collectives agreed on a formulation that ruled out any participation in or parliamentary support for a new social-liberal coalition with the SP. At the same time, however, the CP newspaper *L'Humanité* gave the party's own interpretation of this pledge.

The CP criticized the LCR for its pessimism about the possibility of winning SP members away from the party's neoliberal course. A strong electoral showing by the radical left and a transformed relationship of forces between the radical left and the SP could give a tremendous boost to the SP's left wing, the CP reasoned. It could make a coalition government possible including the SP and the radical left that would not be a social-liberal government, but rather radically anti-neoliberal.

For the LCR, this showed that the CP was preparing to return to its old tricks after the elections, creating a loophole through which to support a new social-liberal government while baptizing it something else.

LCR participants in the collectives therefore pushed to rule out any coalition with the SP. When this effort failed, the LCR leadership decided not to participate in the process of choosing a common candidate. The CP then saw its chance to impose its leader Marie-Georges Buffet as the collectives' candidate, bringing thousands of its 60,000 members out of the woodwork to create brand new local collectives and ensuring a majority for Buffet.

As a result the forces that had been in the collectives went into the elections split between three candidates: Buffet for the CP, the young postal worker Olivier Besancenot for the LCR, and radical farmers' leader José Bové representing many of the independents.

Aftermath

For many voters on the left, the crucial question in the presidential elections was how to stop Sarkozy. Royale had a big power of attraction as the lesser evil. When her appeal waned, some turned to centrist François Bayrou as the best bet to beat Sarkozy, though in the end Royale came in a comfortable second and went on to take over 46% in the runoff against Sarkozy.

The radical left, which had never been seen as a likely winner in the second round, seemed like even less of a contender when the unity effort collapsed. In 2002, the radical left candidates taken together had won over 13% of the vote. This year they did far worse. Buffet got under 2%, the CP's worst result ever, while Bové got 1.3%.

By comparison Besancenot did remarkably well for the LCR. With 4.1% he almost equalled the 4.3% he had won in 2002, which was far more than the LCR had ever polled before then. Since turnout was much higher for the first round this time than in 2002, Besancenot in fact did better this time in absolute terms, with almost a million and a half votes.

(Two other Trotskyist groups, Lutte Ouvriere and the “Lambertistes,” performed poorly, with LO veteran candidate Arlette Laguiller falling to her worst showing in decades at barely over one percent.)

In a presidential race where personal electoral chemistry makes a difference, the LCR’s Besancenot consistently comes across as intelligent yet modest, putting forward sensible-sounding alternatives to specific neoliberal policies. But there are probably deeper political reasons for his strong showing.

By contrast with the media-based campaigns of Sarkozy, Royale and Bayrou, the Besancenot campaign, more than any other radical left current, rested on a steady accumulation of forces in the unions and movements over more than three decades. At least as important, without ever denying the real differences between Sarkozy and Royale, Besancenot and the LCR got the message across more convincingly than Buffet or Bové that they would not be party to yet another center-left sellout.

The parliamentary election results will show what if anything can be salvaged from the last two years’ attempt to try to build a broad, strong radical left political force.

All the currents that took part in these efforts are seriously battle-scarred. The CP, having sunk to a new electoral low point, is once more enmeshed in soul-searching and recriminations. The LCR, well-known for its no-holds-barred tendency debates, is still wrestling with whether it did the right thing; despite Besancenot’s relatively strong showing and Bové’s weak one, a minority of LCR members still think that somewhere a chance at unity was missed.

Brief Update: The first round of parliamentary elections confirmed the expectations of a right-wing majority.

Sarkozy’s party slipped slightly in the second round, however, winning 314 seats while the Socialists came in with 185, higher than had been expected after the first round.

The CP — an institutional party receiving much local coverage — improved on its poor presidential election showing. It received 4.75% of the first-round votes while the far left combined slipped to 3.4%. The second, final round gave the CP 15 seats, 7 below their previous number.

The LCR, while fielding the most extensive slate of parliamentary candidates in its history (over 400 of them), also supported about 40 unitary radical left candidates. No one expected great results from these campaigns. But the radical left’s electoral showing can be significant as a sign of the relationship of forces as, once again, the battle is expected to move to the streets.

P.S.

* This article originally appeared in Against the Current.