

France: the triumph of the political

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1: A new period

The result of the French referendum on 29 May 2005 was immediately greeted in France, but also internationally, as a major political turning point rather than just another election result. The full impact of the shockwave from the event has not yet been felt, which makes it difficult, but also very important, to put forward some hypotheses concerning how to interpret the situation, and how to intervene over the coming period. Along with the British and German elections, the French 'No' affects every aspect of the European left.

It can also be seen as part of a broader cycle of popular remobilisation and counter-offensive on a world scale (essentially in Latin America, but also in the form of the ongoing dynamic driving the movements for 'another globalisation').

The first hypothesis is that on 29 May the 'popular anti-neoliberal bloc' struck at the heart of the mechanism known as 'alternance' (alternation) whereby governmental office has alternated between the traditional right and the social-liberal left. For more than two decades this pendular movement has facilitated French capital's attempts to restructure society. It is too early to say whether this mechanism (as a system of relatively differentiated and interdependent politico-social forces) will be able to regain its coherence and effectiveness. That will of course depend above all on the actions and political capacities of the 'popular bloc'. What seems certain however, is that the mechanism will only be revived through a profound reorganisation-which will involve paying the price of a now inevitable crisis-and not by tactical manoeuvres or by superficially papering over the cracks, as has been the case until now.

2: The crisis of the dominant bloc

To measure the extent of the crisis affecting neo-liberal 'alternation' we must keep in mind that, in France and elsewhere, by its very nature neo-liberalism is based on challenging the 'Keynesian' social compromises which allowed the dominated classes to participate in the 'general interest'. It has thus only been able to produce 'weak', passive forms of consent, essentially 'by default', since it relied above all on the defeat and the weaknesses of its adversaries. Its own social base has hardly gone beyond entrepreneurial layers and certain groups of high earners, for the most part senior managers and a few limited sectors (the media, the 'new technologies', finance, those who have

benefited from property and stock market investment, etc). In the course of the radicalization of capitalist restructuring over the past few years, this limited base has seen its coherence and solidity fragment both within and beyond the workplace. We can here think of phenomena like rising 'harassment' and 'stress' at work, the unemployment of even highly qualified graduates, or the perceived devaluation of educational qualifications-all of this against the background of a falling social trajectory for the majority of the French population, and in particular for those generations to have entered the job market since the mid-1970s.

Together these processes have fed the crisis and the chronic fragility of the dominant bloc in France since the early 1980s. There is widening divide separating the young and the popular classes from the political parties of left and right supposed to represent them. For their part these parties are turning themselves into narrowly professional machines, deprived of organic links with popular layers, and almost entirely absorbed by the local and central state apparatus. The consequence of this, the notorious instability of the French political system, has translated into the defeat over the past 20 years of every governmental majority at the end of its first term of office.

Having emerged victorious from the major social confrontations to have punctuated French society since the crisis of the 1970s (industrial restructuring, the managerial revolution in the workplace, partial dismantling of the welfare state, etc), the dominant class has succeeded in countering the erosion of the basis of its domination in three ways:

(1) By building a system of bipolar 'alternation' between the neo-liberal right and the social-liberal left which assures the continuity of policies and, to a large extent, of the personnel within the state apparatus despite electoral changes of government or the irruption of social movements into the political sphere (December 1986, November and December 1995 being the most marked examples).

(2) By shifting the political and cultural centre of gravity in society towards the middle classes, who supposedly identify with the neo-liberal consensus. This applies to the party system, the (weakened and fragmented) trade union movement, and to the hegemonic cultural and intellectual field (in particular the media, the education system having escaped this logic to a certain extent following the symbolic promotion of a generational cohort from the popular classes).

(3) By marginalising the popular classes, and above all the working class, to the point of rendering it almost invisible in the public sphere and marginalising it from political representation.

During this period the 'European project' has acted as cement binding together all these mechanisms of systemic adaptation and stabilisation, and forging the relative unity of the leading fraction of the bloc in power. It therefore represented the strong point of the 'weak' consent to neo-liberalism. This is why the 29 May result dealt such a blow to the very foundation of that form of consent.

It has done so negatively, first of all, by bringing to light the fragility, or indeed the absence, of any kind of widespread popular identification with the neo-liberal bulldozer. The very nature of the poll (a referendum on the strategic issue uniting the dominant bloc) left no such leeway for the result to be deflected into a substitution of one neo-liberal government by another. The internal coherence of the whole system of neo-liberal 'alternation' has therefore been thrown out of kilter. Splits among the dominant bloc have broken out, and their potentially devastating effects go beyond the particular logic of the actors concerned-the classic symptom of crisis situations. The possibility of a regime crisis can therefore now be envisaged. This would signal the beginning of an irreversible crisis of the dominant bloc.

The right wing parties and the Socialist Party are struggling in this crisis. There is the long-term

division between a Gaullist right attempting to preserve what remains of the social compromise and a hardline neo-liberal right determined to face down all social resistance. And there are divisions between an openly social-liberal centre-left (a 'Blairised' Socialist Party possibly allied to elements of the centrist right) and sections of the mainstream left which have either joined the anti-neoliberal bloc, or seek changes in the reconfiguration of the 'alternation' system. The state media and the trade unions seem almost as shaken up as the party system (this is particularly so with regard to the CGT trade union confederation, whose leader Bernard Thibault's position has been severely weakened).

In a positive sense, then, the political and social sequence which led to 29 May has put an end to the mood of retreat, of passivity and of resignation among popular classes which has until now allowed the dominant bloc to keep a lid on things. In this way the referendum is the continuation of pre-existing tendencies, all the experience of struggles of the past decade-as well as, on the electoral front, the dynamic signalled by the results of the far left between 1995 and 2002 or the votes against the right wing government in 2004. This process has now been extended and is sufficiently structured and anchored to dictate the terms of the central confrontation ('a social versus a neo-liberal Europe'), and to establish a dynamic which relegates the far right to a subordinate role.

3: Popular repoliticisation

The real significance of the referendum process was the popular mobilisation which took hold of political questions on a scale not seen since the early 1970s. The 'No' campaign involved mobilisation from below within the framework of unity 'at the top', drawing into its ranks activists from trade unions, political parties and grassroots associations from different backgrounds, many without any organisational affiliation. In this way the left's campaign went beyond the objectives of those who set it up (which is not to underestimate their role) and built a genuine anti-neoliberal front, capable of bringing the key demands of ordinary people to the centre of political life. A major repoliticisation of French society, symptomatic of its deep divisions, has taken place over the past few months. It is only in this way that the victory of the popular 'No' can be understood, in spite of the bombardment coming from the media and the political establishment, in spite of the absence of any real support from the major trade union confederations, and in spite of the millstone represented by the longstanding ability of the extreme right around Le Pen to divert an element of working class revolt and despair.

This is also the reason why only the victory of the 'No' vote was able to breach the political wall which had withstood the impact of all the struggles of the past few decades, in particular the momentum developed during the strikes of December 1995. In this sense the 'anti-political' aspect of the preceding cycle may be considered over, once and for all-already undermined by the effects of the presidential election of 21 April 2002, the defeat of the mobilisations of spring 2003 and the massive electoral rejection of the right in the 2004 regional poll. The question of 'European integration' has effectively crystallised all the contradictions of the period, throwing into question the entire strategy of the dominant bloc. The outcome of the crisis which has now opened up will depend on the continuation and deepening of the popular dynamic. And the force-or the coalition of forces-which, at the heart of the anti-neoliberal bloc, are able to affirm their hegemony will be those that appear able both to carry this dynamic forward and transform it into a genuine political alternative, putting to one side both sectarian divisions and compromise with the faltering and discredited system of alternance.

4: The relationship between anti-neoliberalism and anti-capitalism

The campaign and the victory of 29 May were built on the basis of clear and resolute opposition to the two alternating variants of neo-liberalism. It is precisely the stabilisation and the deepening of an anti-neoliberal orientation, equipped with the aim and the means of breaking with the existing state of affairs, which raises the question of an anti-capitalist perspective. This requires a perspective flowing from the logic of things rather than as a programme stuck on from the outside, an abstract radical rhetoric, incapable of acting on the actual faultlines of the given situation.

Today, after decades of capitalist offensive, the development of effective anti-neoliberal politics is the principal dividing line for all social, intellectual and political forces. Its implementation by a popular majority bloc at the level of existing institutions (including governmental) can only lead in the short term to class conflicts on a huge scale. Such conflicts will inevitably raise the question of the ownership of the principal means of production, exchange and communication, as well as those of the power structure and the state apparatus. It is also this movement that will build a European space for struggles which could lead, over time, to the establishment of 'constituent' democratic spaces going beyond the framework of existing nation-states. In this context we should emphasise that every cycle of rising popular struggle on a European scale has been marked by constituent aims of this kind, from the 'Red Republics' of the 1848 revolutions to the project of a Europe of workers' councils which caught the imagination of millions of workers in the aftermath of the slaughter of the First World War, from Turin to Petrograd and from Berlin to Budapest.

5: The class front

It is therefore on the terrain of a consistent anti-neoliberal orientation that the question of hegemony within the anti-neoliberal bloc will be played out. The political strength of revolutionaries will be judged on their capacity to give impetus, at every stage of the situation, to the deepening of this orientation without breaking the unitary framework of the popular movement. This is an undoubtedly difficult task, but one whose success would doom any attempt to reconstitute the system of neo-liberal 'alternation' with its dual role of marginalising radical forces and popular classes.

There is clearly a class dimension in what we have until now referred to as the popular anti-neoliberal bloc. It reflects the majority view of all layers of wage earners and young people up to the level of 'upper management and intellectual professions'. It is characterised by a clear class polarisation, with a 'hard core' around 'blue collar' workers, nearly 80 percent of whom voted no (and who turned out to vote in much greater numbers than usual), and 'white collar' workers (more than 60 percent of them voting no), with a slightly lower majority in the intermediary layers of wage earners and young people.

Given the absence of a 'standard' social democratic pole in France (organically linked to the labour and trade union movement) it falls to the anti-capitalist forces of the anti-neoliberal bloc to take on the task of giving a class structure to the popular bloc. The rebuilding of working class hegemony is today the condition for overcoming the internal divisions created or widened by capitalist restructuring (young/old, public/private, 'French'/'immigrant') and for undermining in the long term the Front National's influence among the popular electorate. It is the structuring of a class front which can also shift, in a more productive way, the demarcation lines between those 'classist' forces (notably in the PCF and the CGT), which are anti-capitalist but often reluctant to act in unity with others and limited to 'workerist' horizons, and the forces of the far left (essentially around the LCR), very at ease in the context of united fronts and the dynamic of mobilisations from below, but with

weak roots among workers.

The establishment of an anti-capitalist pole going beyond existing organisational fragmentation and the building of a hegemonic class politics are therefore the dual conditions for the success of an anti-neoliberal front capable of leading the popular movement onto the counter-offensive and to victory. The time to take the initiative has come.

P.S.

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