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France

The situation in France after the regional elections of March 2010

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV424 - May 2010 -

Publication date: Saturday 8 May 2010

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In a situation where the crisis is deepening, the principal lessons of the regional elections which took place on 14 and 21 March, 2010 are the following: a massive level of abstention; a real electoral defeat for the government; the return of the National Front; and the disappointing results of the NPA.

A result that leaves no room for doubt

The principal aspect of these elections is the extent of the rejection of Sarkozy and his policies, a rejection expressed in various ways. It was a major defeat for the party in power, the UMP. The Right received around 26 per cent of the votes cast in the first round and 35.5 per cent (which represents only 15 per cent of registered voters) in the second round. It came behind the Socialist Party (PS) in almost all the regions. The eight ministers who stood were defeated just as much, if not more, than the other UMP candidates. It was clearly the government's policies as a whole which were being repudiated, policies which serve the interests of the big shareholders and the richest classes, policies which make the majority of the population pay for the crisis, policies which destroy public services and social gains. So in terms of electoral punishment for sitting governments, these elections are up there with the best of them. There is nothing new about local elections expressing a corrective compared to the preceding results. That happened, for example, against the Left in 1983. But, generally, it was a corrective and rarely a phenomenon on such a scale.

The massive level of abstention constitutes the other major aspect of this election. It was 53 per cent in the first round and 49 per cent in the second for the electorate as a whole, but it was nearly 70 per cent among young people, two-thirds in the popular classes and the turn-out was only 30 per cent in many popular neighbourhoods. Abstention on this scale indicates a disavowal of the institutional parties but also an alienation of part of the population from electoral politics. Social exclusion produces political exclusion.

The National Front (FN) has taken on a new lease of life. Although its score and its ability to stand in the second round (which is only possible for lists receiving at least 10 per cent in the first round) are down compared to 2004, the FN is surmounting its crisis. It is taking full advantage of the crisis of Sarkozyism and the nauseating debate launched in the middle of the campaign by Sarkozy on national identity, which set up a competition as to which candidates could make more racist speeches than their opponents. But the FN also attracts a protest vote, including among popular layers.

It was the scale of the rejection of the Right which made possible the clear victory of the PS and its allies and allowed them not to be penalised for their record of applying neo-liberal policies in the regions that they have governed since 2004. In the second round, all the lists of the Left improved on their score in the first round. That kind of results had not been seen since the beginning of the 1980s. The lists of Union of the Left, and the PS in particular, certainly cashed in on the mood of "anything but Sarkozy", but it seems that these lists did appear, for part of the electorate, as credible and capable of opposing the Right. Nevertheless, we cannot say that this electoral success represents approval of the policies followed by the PS and its allies. Indeed, the results of the PS, when it found itself faced with a triangular contest in the second round, were less good. In the Limousin region, for example (where the NPA obtained two regional councillors on an NPA-Left Front list), the results that this list obtained show that when there is a third choice available, on the left, independent of the Socialists, alongside the traditional head-to-head between the PS and the UMP, there is an improvement compared to the first round. On March 14, the list got 13.13 per cent and won 19.1 per cent a week later (a gain of 20,000 votes). We saw the same situation in Brittany, where the Europe-Ecology list stood against the PS in the second round.

The PS is in the strongest position because it alone appears capable of replacing the Right as the centre of gravity of the government. Europe Ecology, which was less successful than in the June 2009 European elections, but won around 12 per cent of the vote, is establishing itself as the second force on the left in electoral terms. The reasons for this success are multiple. The strong ecological aspirations among the population explain this result, even though the programme of the Greens and their allies is in no way the expression an “anti-system” party. At the same time, the vote for Europe Ecology is a way of expressing distrust in the PS, even though the main leaders of this political current have largely taken part in government at different levels, in alliance with the PS.

The results of the Left Front appear rather good in the context. The Left Front won an average of 6.95 per cent, compared to 6.45 per cent in the European elections, but with very uneven results and with peaks in the traditional bastions of the Communist Party (PCF). The continuation of the Left Front and the maintenance of its scores mark the establishment on the political scene of anti-liberal reformist Left, different from social-liberalism even though it remains dependent on it, which will continue to contest with us the radical space in French politics. The fact is that by choosing the alliance with the Left Party, the PCF, in these two elections, has stemmed its continuous electoral decline, which began in the 1980s, without however being able to reverse the curve and find a clear dynamic. The number of PCF elected representatives has been cut by half compared to 2004. We were able to verify in the interval between the two rounds the fundamental disagreements that we have with the leaderships of the parties which make up the Left Front. Programmatic fusions with the PS took place in almost all regions. The PCF decided to take part in executives dominated by the PS. The leadership of the Left Front, with contradictions, is thus demonstrating its readiness to take part in a new version of the Union of the Left with the 2012 elections in view.

Disappointing results for the NPA

Let us put it clearly, the results obtained by the NPA in these regional elections were not good. The average over the 21 regions where we were present was 3.4 per cent. So that represents a clear weakening. In none of 18 regions (apart from the three where we stood in alliance with the Left Front), did we cross the 5 per cent threshold, although with 4.99 per cent we only missed out by a few dozen votes in Basse-Normandie. In the three regions where we had joint lists with the Left Front, the results were a little better. This was especially true in Limousin. On the other hand, in the Pays de la Loire region, again by a few dozen votes, the list did not reach the 5 per cent threshold, obtaining far less than the combined scores in the European elections.

The level of abstention, which reached 53.6 per cent, once again particularly affected the popular neighbourhoods, with the turn-out not exceeding 30 per cent in many towns, sometimes less.

More fundamentally, we suffered, in a sharper way than in the European elections, the disaffection with the electoral process of most of the voters closest to our ideas, a phenomenon which we suffer from much more than the other parties. That necessarily comes from being at an intermediate threshold, where unlike the PS, Europe Ecology or even the Left Front at the regional level, voting for us does not appear as a credible way to punish the Right, independently of the sympathy that people have for our ideas. That poses a difficult problem: how to build a political party which does not want to take as its basis working within elected bodies and being organized around its elected representatives, but rather direct political action based on social mobilizations, on organizing young people, workers and popular layers in workplaces and neighbourhoods. On that basis the utility of our presence in elected bodies can only become credible as the prolongation of this action, which requires us to be implanted and to have support on a large scale, which the NPA has in certain places, but not on a national scale. That also requires us to be more able to give the coherence of a political alternative to the social demands that we put forward: it means in particular going beyond demands on jobs, wages and social protection, being able to appear as representing an alternative for the organization of society in favour of workers. So we can attract an electorate at certain elections, in particular around the figure of Olivier or when our vote appears as a credible way of sending a political message, but we do not yet

have a sufficient solid implantation to enable us to have broad and consistent electoral support.

But overall all of the scores to the left of the PS were disappointing, the far Left in general being particularly affected. The weakness of the social mobilizations last autumn of course weighed heavily in the balance. Basically, faced with the brutality of the crisis, faced with the violence of the policies of the Sarkozy government, we did not demonstrate that it was useful to vote for us.

The crisis is ahead of us

These regional elections open up a political crisis where the government, with Sarkozy at its head, has lost any legitimacy that it had. Hardly had the results been announced before splits began to appear in the Right, now realising that the re-election of Sarkozy was no longer sure. Sarkozy has no alternative but to unify his own camp by making a turn even further to the right, with pension reform as its central axis for the coming months. For Sarkozy, the success of this reform, which apparently mainly consists of extending the retirement age to 62 or 63, will prove to his own camp that he alone is able to “modernize” the country. Facing him, we can now see again the project of an alternative government of the Left, under the leadership of the PS. Each of the three forces concerned by this project has to some extent overcome the crisis which they had experienced since 2007. The PS is temporarily reunified around Martine Aubry. The Greens produced, with Europe Ecology, a solution to the dead end their movement was in. And Jean-Luc Mélenchon enabled the PCF to halt its decline, by giving it a new shot of vitality. Although a new version of the Union of the Left is already being prepared, the contradictions are still strong within each of the three poles, with different projects and important internal rivalries.

The current turn in the crisis is incarnated by the situation in Greece, in a scenario which is being repeated in Spain and in Portugal and will not spare, to differing degrees, any country of Europe. The public debt contracted by bailing out the banks and the financiers is the object of fresh speculation, and governments are presenting the bill to the majority of the population (freezing of wages, reduction of pensions and social protection, job losses in the public sector). The economic and ecological crisis which is accelerating is provoking resistance which, though strong, is at this stage insufficient to stop the capitalist offensive in the countries where the attacks have been raised to a new level.

Profound discontent is being expressed throughout society and was expressed in the last weeks of the election campaign, even though the struggles were not able to upset the electoral game or overcome the blockage organized by the government and the leaderships of the big trade-union confederations. It is impossible to predict how these contradictions will work themselves out. The combination of a very much worse economic situation and elements of political crises puts the government in a difficult situation. But this particular economic situation can be exploited only if a fighting Left, as strong and united as possible, is able both to take up the challenge of the social resistance, the united mobilizations that have to be to be built, and to put forward an anti-capitalist alternative.

So even though the NPA has suffered, after one year of existence, an electoral failure which creates a situation of some difficulty, these last few weeks do not invalidate our original project. More than ever, to build and develop a mass anti-capitalist party, a party which can amplify mobilizations, a party for “the revolutionary transformation of society” remains, in a period of total crisis of the system - economic, social, ecological -, not only a necessity but a real, immediate, possibility.