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France

Historic breakthrough for the far left

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The score of the far left in the first round of the French presidential election is a major political event even if it has been relativised by the electoral success of the Front National.

The mobilisations against the far right and the preparation of a response to the coming attacks on pensions and public services, as well as the upcoming parliamentary elections, present the opportunity to consolidate and build on this result.

Two political earthquakes took place at the first round of this presidential election. The first is the presence of the Front National in the second round. It has relegated to the second level the other earthquake; the fact that the results of the far left exceeded 10%. And if the presence of Le Pen in the second round is effectively the major political element of this election which upsets the traditional political chessboard, and demands a unitary and immediate mobilisation to bar his road - we should not minimise the achievement of the far left and its political impact.

With 10.4%, its results were more than triple those of the PCF and almost equivalent to the sum of the PCF, Green Party and Movement of Left Radicals vote. This electoral influence was not limited to certain departments or regions but was nationwide in scope. With the exception of the DOM-TOM [France's overseas territories] the scores in every department were higher than the 5.3% obtained by Arlette Laguiller in the 1995 presidential election. In 16 departments, the far left exceeded 12% with the best results in Haute-Vienne (13.42%), Seine-Maritime (13.55%), Pas-de-Calais (13.56%) and Puy-de-Dôme (14.10%). In a general manner, these scores are in line with the deep phenomena of recomposition of the workers' movement that has been going on for some years.

Plurality of the far left

If some polls indicated that the far left could reach or even exceed 10%, the division of the electorate between the LCR and LO, up until three weeks before the ballot, indicated a relationship of between 1:5 and 1:10.

The two last weeks of the campaign substantially modified this relationship, to the extent that Olivier Besancenot received 4.23% of the vote and Arlette Laguiller 5.72%. And even if the respective electorates of the two far left organisations do not coincide exactly, it is obvious that a substantial part of the 10% of voting intentions that the polls had called for Arlette Laguiller went to the LCR candidate.

The breadth of this phenomenon is all the more important in that the latter was totally unknown - the LCR had not contested the presidential election in its own right since 1974 - whereas Arlette Laguiller was candidate for the fifth time, benefiting from the start from popular recognition, electoral capital and substantial goodwill.

This result shows, if it was necessary, that the far left is plural. Any attempt at hegemonism is not only vain but constitutes an obstacle to the unity of the diverse components of the far left. Lutte Ouvrière's decision to reject a common candidacy was certainly in part determined by the appreciation that this campaign could allow it to exert a political hegemony on the far left, either because the LCR would not succeed in gaining the 500 sponsorships or because there would be a substantial electoral gap between the two organisations.

Neither happened, and in the immediate it would be better to return to the spirit of the European electoral campaign

of 1999 rather than seek false justifications concerning the allegedly petty bourgeois nature of those who voted for Besancenot (as implied in Arlette Laguiller's statement following the first round). For our part, we rejoice at the score of our candidate but also that of the whole of the far left, because it clearly expresses a rejection of the policies followed by the government of the plural left and the search for an anti-capitalist alternative.

That goes also for at least some of those who voted for Daniel Gluckstein, [candidate of the (Lambertiste) Parti des Travailleurs], although in the case of this organisation, its total absence from the social movement or any framework of unitary mobilisation, together with its manipulative and sectarian political practices, render any unitary approach more problematic.

A major political responsibility

The success of the far left should not lead us to fall into triumphalism or smug and sterile self-satisfaction. Some hundreds of thousands of workers and youth look to us today. The LCR and Lutte Ouvrière have immediate particular responsibilities that will be discussed in the framework of a joint meeting scheduled for the coming days. Our tasks: to be the spearhead of the necessary mobilisation against the Front National and the far right without falling into the trap of the republican front; to prepare the conditions of a massive unitary mobilisation to counteract the anti-worker offensive that is being prepared by the Medef [the employers' federation] and the next government on social security, pensions, the dismantling and privatisation of public services; and the challenge to democratic rights.

Finally, the unprecedented crisis of the traditional workers' movement and the Communist Party in particular, poses objectively the question of the construction of a new anti-capitalist workers' party. There is no royal road to advance in this direction, but politics abhors a vacuum and if we do not seize all our opportunities, the reformist leaderships will take the initiative and occupy the terrain.

These are the stakes, and they are sizeable.