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France

Setback for plural left

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Despite the predictions of the pollsters that it would be victorious, the gauche plurielle ("plural left"), that is the coalition government, came out defeated from the French municipal elections of March 11th and 18th 2001.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/frenchrailstrike.jpg>]
Recent french rail stoppage

Yet its defeat was not really a victory for the right, who suffered a symbolic defeat in losing Paris and Lyon. Certainly, the electoral system, which advantaged the lists which came first, assuring them nearly three-quarters of councillors, and marginalized minorities, meant that after the second round the "plural left" took the two biggest cities. And it also allowed the right to claim victory in that they now control 139 towns of more than 30 000 inhabitants (23 more than before March 18th, of which 6 have more than 100 000 inhabitants) against 114 controlled by the governmental camp. [1]

However, beyond these institutional results, the novelty lies elsewhere.

The first round was marked both by a high rate of abstention and a significant breakthrough of critical left votes bearing witness to a growing discontent with government policy. In the second round the transfer of these votes to the candidates of the governmental left was more limited than in the past; indicating a strong rupture of the progressive electorate with a left installed for the past 20 years in governmental alternation with the right, and within this framework implementing a policy of management of capitalist interests.

A "social fracture"

Barely ten days before the scrutiny, the first wave of accounts published by the 12 biggest companies registered a significant rise in profits in the year 2000: whereas in 1999 the 30 biggest French firms accumulated 121 billion francs in profit, in 2000 the 12 biggest French groups totalled 126.7 billion in profits. [2] The first clear signal if one was needed that prime minister Jospin's government has in no way redistributed wealth.

On the day after the municipal elections the annual study by INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) on "incomes and wealth of households" was published and its results drew the headline in Le Monde (March 23rd), "Since 1997, growth has not reduced poverty".

While the number of unemployed has fallen from a million under the Jospin government, benefiting from a favourable conjuncture, "from January 1996 to May 2000, the rate of poverty stabilised": 7.3% of households, or 4.2 million people, live below the poverty threshold. [3] The rate of poverty is at its highest among youth of less than 25 years old, reaching nearly 20%, and among the households of immigrant workers originating from the Maghreb, of whom a quarter live below the poverty threshold.

"Nearly all jobs created by the private sector since the beginning of the legislature seven eighths, in fact have been at a wage lower than 1.3 times the SMIC (minimum wage), that is 7 400 francs net a month. By way of comparison, wages lower than 1.3 SMIC represent 40% of wages in the private sector in France" in the year 2000. [4] Note again that in 1999 32.5% of wage-earners received a wage lower than 1.3 times the minimum, thus in one year the share of low wages has grown by 7.5%.

In the course of the same period there has been a significant growth of temporary jobs: the number of such jobs grew by 33.8 % in 1999 and again by 20.2% in 2000.

In short, contrary to the affirmations of Lionel Jospin, the creation of jobs 1.5 million since June 1997 does not amount in itself to a policy of redistribution, above all when we are talking about temporary and poorly paid jobs while at the same time profits are taking off, supported by an increased rate of exploitation.

The law on the 35 hour week, another source of pride for the government of the "plural left", has favoured the creation of jobs but has also led to a deregulation of the labour market favouring an increased rate of exploitation. [5]

The 'social question' has been central in France at least since the 1995 strike movement. Jacques Chirac won the presidential election of 1995 promising to heal the "social fracture", a promise whose non-fulfilment led to his defeat at the parliamentary elections that he himself called in 1997. Lionel Jospin, whose discourse of self-satisfaction is increasingly dissatisfying to those who hope to see change, is in the process of learning his lesson too.

An impatient combativity

Whereas for the past 20 years in a context of mass unemployment the number of strike days in the private sector has fallen continuously, 1999 (the last year for which figures are available) saw a considerable increase.

Stimulated notably by conflicts around from the application of the 35 hour laws and wage struggles, the number of individual days lost through strike action in the private sector went from 353 600 in 1998 to 573 560 in 1999, an increase of 62.2%.

A phenomenon all the more remarkable in that we are for the most part talking about local conflicts, with national actions called by the confederations hitting an all time low in 1999, accounting for only 1% of total strike days. Even if the rise was more modest in the public sector, nonetheless 68,300 more days were lost than in the previous year. According to René Mouriaux "there is every reason to think that the phenomena observed in 1999 will continue in 2000". [6]

This combativity is apparent also in the survey carried out by the CSA institute for the CGT. [7] Thus in autumn 2000, 67% of wage-earners said they were ready to demonstrate to defend their interests, 66% to go on strike and 36% to occupy their workplace. In comparison with the similar survey carried out in 1996 (under the Juppé government, after the huge strikes and demonstrations of December 1995), willingness to demonstrate increased by 6 points, to strike by 11 points and to occupy by 3 points.

In total, if one builds an index of combativity starting from the three modes of struggle, 62% of wage earners have a high index rating (at least two of the three criteria mentioned).

This militancy is widely diffused in society, among women (56%) and men (66%), intermediary professions (77%) and blue-collar workers (65%), private sector (61%) and public (63%).

Finally a phenomenon indicative of the pressures felt by the low paid it is much higher among the highly paid (those earning more than 20,000 francs a month) than the low paid (less than 7,500 francs a month): 56% of the former said they were ready to resort to at least two of the forms of struggle mentioned, whereas only 46% of the second replied

in the affirmative.

Finally, an element which indicates the social diffusion of discontent and militancy, 49% of higher managers have a high index of combativity and 54% of them are ready to resort to strike action to defend their interests.

Social conflict enjoys, moreover, a great popularity: commentators had a lot to say in 1995 on "the strike by proxy", when despite the propaganda efforts of the Juppé government, the strike movements (which affected public transport in particular) were popular with the public.

Since 1995, of 26 broad social conflicts, one alone the rail workers strike in 1999 against the agreement on 35 hours, called by a part of the unions only met with more disapproval than approval from the public.

Over the whole period, on average, 41.4% of French people have supported the conflicts or protests, 28.2% have sympathised, 10.9% have said they were indifferent and only 16.7% were opposed or hostile. [8]

What is more, despite all the efforts of propaganda aimed at presenting public sector workers as privileged, private sector employees' support their strikes. And, evidence of a recomposition of the very identity of the wage-earning class, "managers are now on the side of the social movements" [9] - 57% (support and sympathy combined) were against the freezing of public sector wages in October 1995 as against 82% in March 2000.

There has been a "new phase of social contestation" since 1995, according to René Mouriaux, or the development of a "critical vision of society synonym of more pressure on workers and the effects of globalisation" according to Jérôme Jaffré.

All of this provides the basis of an interpretation of the municipal elections of March 2001, since a willingness to defend one's interests in struggle also indicates a taking of distance in relation to the government.

Thus, whereas in the course of the 'Mitterrand years' the sympathisers of the left were ready to allow time for the great man, today they are even more willing to strike than in 1995 under the Juppé government (66% against 63%). As for the sympathisers of the right, only 25% said they were ready to strike under Juppé, as against 54% today under Jospin.

It is as if 20 years of neo-liberal policies, carried out in the name of the "left" as well as the "right" have led to the rediscovery on a mass scale of the old slogan "the emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves"!

Diverse critical left votes

"It is possible to think", wrote the editorialist of the bourgeois daily *Les Échos* (March 26, 2001), commenting on the studies mentioned above, "that the strong showing of the Green and far left lists in the first round of the municipal elections confirms this revival and radicalisation of social combativity".

The results of the first round of these elections confirm a displacement of votes towards candidates who in various degrees appear opposed to the governmental left. Unsurprisingly, 27% of people polled at the end of January 2001 replied "there is no difference" to the question, "Who would you have more confidence in to manage the affairs of

your commune, the plural left or the right?" and 22% said they desired neither the victory of the (plural) left nor the right at the municipals. [\[10\]](#)

The Greens

This is partly the case for the Greens, who are nonetheless present in the government with two ministers, but in a subordinate position. Where they opposed the lists of the "plural left" they improved on the already significant score of the list headed by Daniel Cohn-Bendit at the European elections of 1999 (9.72%).

It is as if some at least of the electorate who voted this time for the Greens hoped to encourage their gesture of independence and so that they would show more insubordination towards the ruling social democrats.

The Greens averaged 12.3% in Paris (making them the second biggest left group on the city council, with 23 councillors and control of one district); 15.5% in Lille; 18% in Talence; 16% in Morlaix; 16.31% in Evreux; 14.19% in Manosque; 12.5% in Montpellier; and 12.37% in Pau.

In the Parisian suburbs, they scored 24.42% in Pierrefitte; 23.53% in Mureaux; 23.06 % in Villejuif; 20.53% in Bagnolet; 20.17% in Montreuil; 15.95 % in Epinay-sur-Seine; 15.85% in Nanterre; 14.19% in Vincennes and 13.67% in Creil.

Their electorate is mainly young and employed and if some sections of the media present support for the Greens as a form of "bourgeois bohemianism", studies on the evolution of consciousness of wage earners and the radicalisation which also includes the better paid, cited above, allow the Green vote to be interpreted otherwise.

While a survey by IPSOS published in Le Monde (March 21, 2001) shows that more than half of Green sympathisers desire a government which pursues a policy "neither more nor less left" than the previous one, for many young rebels "a left policy" is that of Mitterrand-Jospin, the only one they have known under this name, and there is no doubt that a policy of "more Mitterrand-Jospin" would not be acceptable.

Yet, the mobilisation of the electorate by the Greens ultimately- served to prop up the governmental lists and it would be to say the least one-sided to think that all Green voters are critical of the government in which the Green party participates.

The more so in as much as the Greens were also an integral part of the lists of the "plural left"; the most high profile of its lists, that headed in D'Ále by [their leader] Dominique Voynet, did not equal the score of the combined Union of the Left and the Greens in 1995, losing more than 500 votes and nearly 4%.

The Green vote appears then as a very composite vote, both in favour of the government (a vote that the press characterises as "liberal-libertarian") and critical of the government for its social and environmental policy. However, it is this critical dimension of the Green vote particularly in the former bastions of the Communist Party (PCF) - that is partially responsible for the good scores achieved by the party when it stood alone.

The "citizens' lists"

To the left of the governmental left other lists were able to capture the discontent. Thus in Toulouse, the list Motivé-e-s (set up around the Tacktikollectif, an association whose best known members are the musicians of the group Zebda and who had previously collaborated with the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), clearly positioned to the left of the governmental left, scored 12.38% of the votes, well ahead of the Greens (6.15%), the LCR and LO. [11] Similar lists did well in Bondy (Rebondyr, 12.89%), in Rennes (where Motivé-e-s obtained 8.22% in a campaign very hostile to the far left) [12] and in La Roche-sur-Yon (14.31%).

These lists led very diverse campaigns, critical of the government in varying degrees and also to some extent critical of politics itself. The media have catalogued them as "citizens lists" and the governmental left did not hesitate between the two rounds to try to embrace them, with lukewarm success.

Sometimes the basis of these lists was linked to a negative judgment on the ability of the revolutionary left to animate a left current of opposition to government policy. However, whatever the political discourse of these lists, even when, as in Toulouse, they were absorbed in the second round by the governmental left, their electors did not always follow them, indicating their refusal to identify with the "plural left" even when enlarged in its plurality.

Emerging above all from local initiatives, without any real national dimension (even if attempts to link up were made and media coverage popularised them beyond the communes where they stood), these lists took votes which had gone traditionally to the far left or Greens, at least where they were in competition, but also the votes of those who were breaking with the governmental left for the first time.

Far left breakthrough

"The far left prospers on the ground of the left", noted Les Échos; "LO-LCR: surprising scores" wrote l'Humanité, daily of the PCF; "The far left creates some bastions" said Libération; while Le Monde ran the headline, "The far left and the lists citoyennes compete with the governmental left". [13]

Yet, contrary to the European elections of 1999, the two main formations of the revolutionary left, Lutte Ouvrière and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, did not present themselves in a unitary fashion and were often in competition.

Having refused all agreement with the LCR, LO presented 129 lists. The LCR supported 93 lists, having sometimes succeeded in regrouping other components of the left breaking with the governmental policy. There was also the competition of the 146 lists led by the Parti des Travailleurs (Lambertistes), under the name "local democracy and secularism". A generally narrowly corporatist discourse marked by a somewhat archaic brand of secularism; a visceral rejection of being identified with the rest of the far left; and finally the fact that the PT has for many years rejected all common activity with other radical left forces makes it harder to characterise this vote, but it also undoubtedly won votes from those wishing to reject the governmental left from the left. [14]

The scores obtained by the LCR and LO lists were by no means negligible, in both municipal and cantonal elections. [15] The total vote was generally more than 5% and the LCR gained representation in 20 municipalities with 28 councillors, while 34 LO councillors were elected in 25 municipalities.

While Lutte Ouvrière, which has a long electoral tradition and runs with a remarkable regularity, generally scores more than the LCR, the results for the two organisations in 2001 were similar on average in the towns where the LCR ran it received 4.44% while LO obtained 4.37%.

The combined average of the two organisations was 6.23% in the municipalities where at least one of the two was present, which exceeds the score of the LO candidate, Arlette Laguiller, at the presidential elections of 1995 (5.3%), and that obtained by the LO-LCR list in the European elections of 1999 (5.03%).

We see, then, the affirmation of a far left constituency, which not only rejects the governmental policy but also supports the lists representing an alternative left policy to that of the reformists.

The importance of the critical left votes underlines the responsibility faced by Lutte Ouvrière and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire. For both the electoral results and the radicalisation and social combativity mentioned previously demand the appearance of an alternative to social liberalism, a political project and a project for society, a framework of struggle, a strategy in short a political party that would represent the wage earners.

The debacle of the PCF

These municipals mark a new setback of the French Communist Party (PCF). If its decision to run on the lists of the "plural left" means we cannot compare the score of the PCF to those of the non-governmental left or the critical left, it nonetheless lost a number of its municipal bastions.

In the first round it lost the towns of Drancy, Montluçon and Sens while in the course of the second it lost Nîmes, Tarbes, Evreux, La Ciotat, La Seyne, Dieppe, Argenteuil, Colombes and Pantin to mention only the most important. In the cantonal elections it lost the presidency of the department of l'Allier. The only two towns won were by opponents of the PCF leadership: Sevrans and Arles.

Through the 1930-1970s, there was a PCF municipal policy, which differentiated these municipalities from those, governed by the right or social democracy. However the neo-liberal offensive; the de-industrialisation of the towns it ruled; and its participation in social democratic governments has meant that this specificity has been significantly eroded where it has not completely disappeared.

Thus the municipalities led by the PCF often proceed like the others with the privatisation of public services; reduction of cultural and social expenditure; abandonment of social housing; and the introduction of tax reductions for companies.

In a lesser position in the government, the PCF (which unlike social democracy had maintained for a long time the reformist discourse of a 'peaceful road to socialism') is incapable of making its presence felt. Lacking a project, subordinate to governmental policy, the PCF continues through the force of its apparatus. It still runs 84 municipalities of more than 10,000 inhabitants (111 before March), 29 towns of more than 30,000 inhabitants (against 41 before) and two departments. Its daily l'Humanité, despite efforts at renewal, remains in trouble.

The leadership has been taken to task following the municipals. The deputy from l'Oise, Patrice Carvalho, demanded the resignation of Robert Hue, while an open letter from André Gerin, deputy from the Rhône, demanded that the entire leadership do the same. Another deputy, Georges Hage, demanded the resignation of the Communist ministers from the government. For now Robert Hue is ignoring these calls and preparing a Nouveau Parti Communiste (New Communist Party) to be launched at next October's congress. This NPC represents a project of the apparatus rather than any clear political project.

Crisis of the right

The current president of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, tried to the last to patch things up among the Parisian and Lyonnaise right wing and it is in these two towns that the divisions of the latter allowed the "plural left" to win symbolic victories.

In Paris, Chirac showed himself incapable of bringing his successor at the town hall and his creation, Jean Tiberi, to heel, and the candidature of the latter torpedoed Philippe Séguin's attempt to mark a clean break with the corrupt Chiracian past in the capital.

In Lyon, trying to profit from the defeat of the centrist Michel Mercier who abandoned the struggle after the first round, Chirac negotiated with Charles Millon a former minister whose past alliance with the [far right] National Front (FN) for control of the region had placed him beyond the pale for the official right in support of the of the RPR candidate Jean-Michel Dubernard. However, this dubious alliance alienated the centrists and the lists of the partially recomposed right were beaten.

Given the defection of part of the popular electorate, the right won more municipalities than it had hoped for, but it remains divided and does not have a candidate capable of uniting it for the presidential election of 2002. Chirac is undermined by scandals and two other candidates' the liberal Alain Madelin and the centrist François Bayrou are preparing to run.

However, Chirac still has at his disposal an electoral apparatus the Gaullist RPR - which, although too weak to impose its will on the other right formations, remains still strong enough to block any redistribution of cards to its detriment.

The far right

The split in the National Front (FN) of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the appearance of the Mouvement National Républicain (MNR) led by his ex-deputy, Bruno Mégret, weakened the far right but it has not disappeared.

Whereas the FN controlled four municipalities before the split, after the election only Toulon has been lost by the far right; the FN carried Orange from the first round with 60% and the MNR kept control of Marignane and Vitrolles.

If their rivalry meant the FN and MNR could not maintain as many lists in the second round as in 1995 (234 FN lists then exceeded the threshold of 10% of votes cast) and had to make do with 41 for the FN and 37 for the MNR, while a more significant share than before of the far right electorate voted "usefully" in the second round, the two organisations confirmed through these elections the ability to exist independently.

Despite the fratricidal struggle at least two thirds of the 15% of electors who voted for the National Front at its apogee have shown their disposition to support the far right by their vote.

For Jean-Yves Camus and René Monzat, who follow closely the evolution of the far right in France, "the far right can evolve in two directions: the first sees the current situation of mimetic rivalry between the FN and MNR continue, with none of these parties gaining the upper hand; or the militant base, conscious that the split alone maintains the far right below the threshold of representation, will push for reunification against the opinion of the apparatuses,

something which will only happen when Le Pen retires from political life". [16]

And Jospin continues

If they reveal the profound movements of French society rise of combativity and radicalisation of the workforce; political polarisation; crisis of representation; break-up of a political scene that the institutions alone maintain in a bipolar framework the result of the municipal results do not appear to threaten Lionel Jospin's project for the Presidency. Paradoxically the electoral weakening of the governmental left combines with a growing crisis of legitimacy of the main presidential candidate of the right and the sharpening of the presidential appetites of his competitors, of whom none has the breadth of support to hope to win.

On March 28 Jospin addressed the national council of the Socialist Party (PS) on the results of the municipal elections. On the "radical" left, it was the balance sheet of the defeat of the list of the "plural left" recomposed with the Motivé-e-s in Toulouse that he referred to: "If we must have a dialogue with this left, it should not be to drift towards it, for we lose on the one side without gaining on the other". On the policy of his government he said, "We are not implementing a social liberal policy". [17]

However, there is no question of changing economic and social policy. Leave the last word to the pro-government daily Libération (March 22nd 2001) outlining the three priorities of the government now: control over expenditure [i.e. holding down public sector wages and social budgets]; lowering of taxes [i.e. reduction of taxes on the highest incomes rather than VAT which hits everyone]; reduction of deficits [i.e. reining in of public expenditure]".

[1] Note that the phenomenon holds true for the smaller towns also: of those with more than 15,000 inhabitants, 40 went to the right.

[2] Le Monde, March 1, 2001. Top of the list with 49.8 billion profits, up 126.9% on the preceding year, was oil company TotalFinaElf, a big beneficiary from increased oil prices.

[3] This threshold was defined in 1996 as half the average standard of living of French people, or 3,500 francs (533.57 euros) a month for a single person, 5,250 francs (800.36 euros) for a couple, plus 1,050 francs (160.07 euros) for a child under 14. Today it should be higher: around 3,800, 5,700 and 1,150 francs, the average standard of living having increased.

[4] See Virginie Malingre, Le Monde, March 30, 2001.

[5] See article by Charles Paz, Inprecor, No. 455, February 2001.

[6] Le Monde, March 7, 2001.

[7] Cited by Jérôme Jaffré, Le Monde, March 7, 2001.

[8] Stéphane Rozes, Le Monde, March 7, 2001.

[9] *ibid.*

[10] <http://www.sofres.com/sofres/etatop2001.htm>.

Setback for plural left

[11] In the regional elections of 1998 the total vote obtained by the lists of the LCR (2 regional councillors) and LO was 11% and in the European elections of 1999 the LCR-LO list obtained 6.7%. However the discussions between the LCR and Takticollectif on setting up a common list foundered with the majority of the initiators of the project rejecting the presence of political organisations. During the partial legislative election in Toulouse on March 25, 2001 the "LCR-100% À gauche" candidate, Aline Pailler, came third with 5.57%, behind the Green candidate supported by the PS (20.31%) and the new mayor of the town, Douste-Blazy (53.03%) and before the candidate of the PCF (5.49%, down 2%).

[12] "The sectarians with 0.003% don't interest us! We want to rally and attract the votes of all those who are fed up with politics" said their spokesperson in Le Monde (March 13, 2001). Yet the combined vote of LO and the LCR comes to 8.93%, or more than the Motivé-e-s!

[13] All headlines from newspapers of March 13, 2001.

[14] These lists generally scored less than those of LO and the LCR, except where they involved militants breaking from the PCF, where the lists of LO and the LCR did not stand (8.82% in Niort; 6.89% in Saint-Malo) or where they already had a councillor (5.31% in Saintes; 5.09% in Dieppe). They also reflect a vote punishing the government. The PT lists elected 12 municipal councillors.

[15] The cantonal elections elect councillors who govern the department.

[16] Libération, March 22, 2001.

[17] Quoted in Le Monde, March 29, 2001.