

THE FRENCH FAR RIGHT

Despite the occasional rhetorical reference to Europe, the recent European elections in France were considered on all sides mainly as a way of measuring the reaction of the electorate to three years of Socialist-Communist administration. After a semi-defeat in the municipal elections a year ago, and repeated by-election failures, the Left has been shown once again to be steadily losing support. With only 32% of the vote the Socialist-Communist alliance is now in the unenviable position of being the most unpopular government - in electoral terms - since the beginning of the Fifth Republic.

Both coalition partners suffered heavy losses compared with the 1981 general election: the Socialists from a landslide 37.5% to 20.7% and the Communists from 16.17% to 11.20%. However, the Socialist vote in 1981 was artificially swollen by Mitterrand's success in the presidential election; the Communists had already registered a sharp decline after averaging just over 20% throughout the 70s.

The full extent of the Communist collapse becomes clearer if we compare the Communist votes in the 1979 European elections with 1984: respectively 4,154,512 and 2,260,973. The PCF leadership, in analysing the decline, has pointed to the discontent among working class and traditionally Communist voters over the present austerity measures of the Mauroy government and the resultant relatively large number of abstentions. However, a major rethink about the role of the PCF in contemporary French society, its policies and the image it projects, now seems highly likely, and vital if the Communist Party wishes to avoid being eliminated from the mainstream of French politics.

The other significant feature of these elections has been the re-emergence of a strong ultra-Right current for the first time since the Poujadist movement of the mid-50s. With a score of 10.95% Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the neo-fascist Front National, and himself a former Poujadist member of parliament and OAS activist, has made a spectacular comeback into parliamentary politics - hardly familiar ground for his organisation which over the last ten years has made a name for itself on the fringe of constitutional politics by virulent and sometimes physical attacks on immigrant workers, and by fanatical anti-Communism (the Front National was founded in 1972 after the banning of the



infamous Occident group, most of whose members joined the Front).

Several factors help to explain the Front's rise. The radicalisation of the traditional right wing parliamentary parties and their adoption of some of the rhetoric of the ultra-Right - particularly on issues such as immigration and law and order - have helped to make the ideas of the Front more respectable. Indeed in last year's municipal elections the two parties of the parliamentary Right entered a political alliance with it in the town of Dreux.

Undoubtedly the violent activism of some traditional supporters of the right - in particular the non-salaried middle strata and their adoption of extra-parliamentary action with the encouragement of the neo-Gaullist RPR, have also pushed these groups into the arms of the Front extremists. And the lack of mobilisation of the Left, in particular against the rise of racism in the main urban centres, has undoubtedly facilitated Le Pen's success.

A brief examination of the June election results and of opinion polls carried out during and after the campaign make it possible to identify more precisely who voted for the Front National and to eliminate some of the more superficial and tendentious interpretations.

It is clear that Le Pen and his group have made greatest headway in the urban centres, while their support in rural areas remains marginal. The Front took 21.4% of the vote in Marseilles, overtaking both the Socialist and Communist Parties in a traditionally left wing stronghold: its score was 15.2% in Paris and 17% in Lyons. In what was considered the 'red belt' around Paris the Front has built on its initial successes in the municipal elections last year, with 15.98% in Seine Saint Denis, 14.62% in Val de Marne and 14.14% in Hauts de Seine. Le Pen's appeal to irra-

tional gut reactions over the presence of immigrant workers and the problem of 'security' in the big housing estates has been successful in working class areas where the percentage of immigrant workers is high.

However, as the SOFRES poll carried out among Le Pen voters on the evening after the election has shown, the success of the Front National is mainly due to a redistribution within the Right and not, as some hasty commentators have claimed, to a transfer of traditionally left wing, and in particular Communist, voters. Only 11% of Le Pen's voters (about 1% of all voters in the election) said they had formerly voted for one of the Left parties, whereas 25% were former supporters of the RPR.

A social breakdown of Le Pen's supporters, based again on the results of the SOFRES poll, shows that the Front has succeeded in gaining a foothold among the more virulent of the support-strata of the Right, that is those most involved in direct action against the Left government. 14% of shopkeepers and artisans voted for Le Pen, but support remains *relatively* weak among the unemployed and the working class.

Optimistic observers have suggested that Le Pen's success, like that of Poujade, may only be a flash in the pan, a protest vote which will drift back towards the main parliamentary parties in the next election. The organisational strength of the Front and the growing tide of racism among large sectors of French society argue against such facile optimism. It may be true that Le Pen and the Front activists now constitute a serious handicap for the RPR and the UDF who contributed so directly to their electoral success - the anti-Jewish and anti-Arab diatribes of the Front leaders may scare centrist opinion away from the Right.

But this can be no consolation for the

Left. Only a thorough reappraisal of the impact of racist politics, and of the causes of the Front's success, followed by resolute anti-racist mobilisation, can reverse what could well become a deep-rooted and dangerous political trend in French society.

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