

France: the left's surprising vote losses

by Claude Albert

In contrast to most other European election patterns, the governing Socialist-Communist coalition in France was badly defeated in the June 17 European parliamentary elections. Whereas the ecologist-pacifists gained ground in Germany, Holland, Belgium, England, and Denmark, a very strong anti-government reaction has left François Mitterrand's coalition with barely more than 30% of the total French vote.

Most spectacular, of course, was the sudden emergence into national prominence of the party led by Jean Marie Le Pen, the National Front. A very marginal political force previously, the National Front received slightly over 11% of the ballots cast in what can only be analyzed as an unquestionable radicalization of the population over the past year.

An ex-Legionnaire and paratrooper, Le Pen crystallized very strong and widespread discontent over the government's austerity policies, its internal security fiascos (protection of terrorists, for example), as well as the serious ambiguities of its military policy at home and abroad (for example, Chad). Over the past 12 months, this discontent had reached rather extraordinary proportions within professional military circles, parts of the police, and among the middle classes and workers most affected by the government's austerity policies. Hence the extraordinarily large vote for Le Pen, who used coarse and volatile sloganeering—including a large dose of racism—in his campaign.

In reality, however, the large vote for the National Front indicates less a strong upsurge of rage and irrationalism in the population than the failure of the neo-Gaullist RPR party of Jacques Chirac to mobilize the population around higher ideas which the constituency that voted Le Pen otherwise would have rallied to. Although there have been periodic surges of the radical right in France during this century, it has never represented a majority phenomenon. The radical and revolutionary right of the 1920s and 30s—the fascist Action Française, the Ligues, etc.—were but a small minority and certainly much more ideologically cohesive than the present day, very heterogeneous Le Pen coalition. Boulang-

ism, an extreme anti-German chauvinist movement named after General Boulanger, the leading French revanchist following the defeat of France by Germany in the 1870s, itself was proven ultimately to have been weak. In more recent history, the Algerian-based O.A.S. (Secret Army Organization) represented a real threat to the French state and republic, but reflected, again, a small if extremely well-organized and radicalized group within a larger population in favor of maintaining Algeria under French rule.

At least at present, Le Pen is not precisely of this mold, although the Socialist Party and others attempted to use these images to rally their electorate. Le Pen is a primitive nationalist who does not dominate the forces which gave him 11% of the vote.

The Socialist Party itself promoted Le Pen in the hope that the National Front would weaken the other opposition parties. In a much more devious way, the French Communist Party (PCF) also sought to promote Le Pen with the aim of sharpening the latent social and racial conflicts which persist in urban and semi-urban working class areas. So, while the PCF promoted radical leftism and Islamic fundamentalism among immigrant workers, it also, covertly, transferred votes to the National Front in earlier elections hoping that widespread conflict would incapacitate France. As far as the Socialists are concerned, their gamble failed miserably. It remains to be seen if the Communist calculation succeeds in creating greater social disorder.

Together, the large opposition parties and the National Front total well over 50% of the vote while the governing parties represent less than 30%. Although present in the European parliament, Le Pen's national power will be limited by other opposition forces. It is only under conditions of extreme economic crisis that the radical right could become more than an expression of severe discontent and become an actual threat to the republic.

Le Pen has recently attempted to dilute the more violent and extremist characteristics of his campaign, including the disgusting racial overtones of his policies, so as to gain respectability. He has affirmed the need for strong European and NATO defense and other obvious items of that type.

As far as the RPR and Giscard's UDF, the other major opposition party, are concerned, a new strategy will be required. The completely empty, idea-less policies they have been following must be discarded or they will fare badly in the 1986 and 1988 elections. Socialist President François Mitterrand, meanwhile, will be forced to reorganize his government if he wishes to maintain any credibility at all.

The Le Pen vote thus indicates that a critical mass of discontent has been reached and that all actors on the political scene will have to take that into account. For the moment Le Pen is a symbol of discontent, not a real power. Under conditions of real crisis and no leadership, however, a real force, a potentially dangerous force, could emerge.