

## Report from Paris by Laurent Rosenfeld

### Voters reject 'politics as usual'

*The victory of absenteeism, and the relative breakthrough of the European Labor Party, marked the county election results.*

**T**he clear winner of the county elections in France on Sept. 25 was absenteeism. Less than half of the voters affected by this election covering half of the country went to the polls, an abysmal figure compared the usual 70-80% participation of the French electorate. Why did the French voters "go fishing," as the saying here goes?

Admittedly, there have been five votes this year (two rounds for the presidential elections, two legislative rounds, and now the county elections), and two more are ahead (the county run-offs, and a referendum on New Caledonia coming up in November). That is, in total, seven in one year, to which will be added, early next year, the city elections in March (another two rounds), and the European Parliament election in June. Too much voting? Yes, of course, that is part of the problem.

But there is more—much more. In normal conditions, most French voters would nonetheless vote in such circumstances. A recent opinion poll organized by a TV channel may be the tip-off: "Do you still understand French politics?" was the question to which 80% of the polled individuals said, "No!" The traditional right-left opposition has gone out the window, as both sides are perceived to promote the same austerity policy—no wage increase to avoid inflation, high unemployment because of high taxation on corporations, etc.

The battlefield is strewn with empty images, grandiloquent statements, and petty debates on such issues as who is to be appointed the head of such and such state-controlled com-

pany, or how to reorganize the "French Audiovisual Landscape," i.e., who controls which TV channel. No discussion whatsoever on such "secondary" issues as economic policy, defense, or the infamous "Europe 1992," which will strip the country of its sovereignty by deregulating the money markets and set up controlled disintegration of the food supply.

In the aftermath of the presidential election, the big game of "opening," i.e., trying to include some center-right-wing factions in the left-wing government, made matters even worse. Many voters, who voted for people like Raymond Barre against François Mitterrand, now see Barre trying to ally with the President by having several of his friends become members of the cabinet, and feel they have been swindled.

In brief, the French voters have had enough of what is called the "wooden language"—technocratic jargon used by politicians to beat around the bush and avoid any issue—something similar to what was inflicted on U.S. TV viewers who decided to watch the Bush-Dukakis debate. It is in this framework, of course, that extreme right-wing populist demagogue Jean-Marie Le Pen gave many the impression of courageously raising the real issues, and this is the reason for the high results scored by Le Pen and his National Front in this year's polls.

But Le Pen's mindless ideas, or rather lack of ideas, could not appeal very long to most voters. His way of grabbing media attention by making tasteless puns (he called Michel Durafour, one of those center-right-wing

politicians who joined the cabinet, "Durafour crematoire," the expression *four crematoire* meaning crematorium), created an uproar in the country, not only among the liberal finger-waggers, but also in traditional Catholic circles who had previously voted for him. So, even the Le Pen protest did not make much sense anymore.

The obvious result of these combined elements was that many people found it useless to take the trouble of going to the polls.

The important other result is the relative breakthrough of the European Labor Party (POE) candidates who, by addressing real issues such as the destruction of agriculture and the nefarious implications of the Single Europe Act of 1992 for citizens' living standards, frightened the well-established political honchos so much that every trick in the book was used to try to prevent the POE from campaigning.

These methods, aimed at intimidating POE candidates, achieved only very limited success: Out of 378 candidates, only half a dozen dropped out of the race.

The others reached the highest scores ever for this party—as much as 5%—especially in farming districts. None got anywhere near victory—lack of recognition factor due to financial limitations is still very high—but the POE is the only party whose score went up in many places, often doubling compared to previous races, despite the fact that one-fourth of the usual voters did not vote!

As it does not seem very likely that this comes as a lesson to the petty-minded other parties, one can assume that this take-off of the POE is but the first step of a process which may well soon rock the French political scene. And, as we said at the beginning, other elections are soon coming up.