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Whither France ?

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In the two rounds of cantonal elections (the cantons are administrative districts within each of the 80 departments) held on successive Sundays—March 20 and 27—the French political party Front National (FN) garnered results that confirmed polls giving its new leader, 42-year-old Marine Le Pen, and the party generally an impressive surge in voter support. Although it can be said that the FN benefited from a record low in voter turnout (45 percent of registered voters) and that it still trailed behind the two major parties—11.73 percent compared to 35.75 percent for the Socialist Party and 20.24 for the ruling UMP, the fact remains that the FN has clearly emerged as a force to reckon with during the year left before the two rounds of the presidential elections in 2012 (April 22 and May 6). Moreover, these figures are deceptive in that the FN was not represented in 300 of the 1,566 cantons.

The gains made by the Front National in France under the new leadership of Marine Le Pen, can be explained in different ways. The most evident is the failure of the traditional French Right, now incarnated by the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) to navigate between a nationalistic rhetoric with racialist overtones and the claim it represents the whole population.

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Much of the problem stems from Nicolas Sarkozy. This president has not been able to dissimulate his apparently pathological need for recognition and power, on the one hand, and, on the other, his allegiance to the wealthy and powerful, often expressed by a cynical appraisal of people in general, including members of his political clan and the even the oligarchs who he serves.

Secondly, Marine Le Pen, as president of the Front National, has eliminated factional tensions and, thusly, strengthened the party. By pushing the old guard to the sidelines—including her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the out-going president—, she has been able to give the Front National a more moderate and thus respectable image that has quickly erased, in the minds of many people, any fundamental difference between the FN and the UMP. In addition, Marine Le Pen has mastered the art of televised interviews ; she is serene and reasonable, which is in great contrast to Sarkozy's permanent state of arrogance supplemented by nervous tics.

Moreover, Marine Le Pen is now advised by people from diverse political tendencies, apparently attracted by her party's new popularity. These people have impressive university and administrative credentials and do not differ from those in the other parties.

The question nevertheless remains whether the French Front National is now or will be a fascist party. Given its lineage, it can be argued that the FN, with its origins in the Poujadist movement of the 1950s—a national populism similar to, or even a continuation of such movements current in the 1930s—is a variant of a proto-fascist party organization. However, the FN has always been careful not to approach a neo-Nazi orientation, although its relations with those who do profess such ideas have always been close. Still, Jean-Marie Le Pen, president of the FN since its creation in 1972 and until his daughter's election to the same post in January 2011, was notorious for his apology of Nazi crimes. For him, the use of gas chambers during the Second World War in the destruction of the Jews was a mere "historical detail" and the Nazi occupation of France was "not particularly inhumane". At the present time, the FN is taking great pains to present young and "fresh" appearing candidates to good effect, although the *Canard enchaîné* (March 30, 2011) investigated some of these candidates and found that some are linked to neo-Nazi, anti-semitic groups—one of these same candidates was described simply in *Le Monde* (March 24, 2011) as "a blond with a fetching smile".

The FN has consistently focused its program on what the party considers the noxious presence of foreigners—which means "Arabs"—who have taken jobs from French workers. Twenty years ago the FN used a poster stating : "3 million unemployed — 3 million foreign workers. What is the solution ?" which was a copy of a slogan used by the Nazis before their rise to power. The term "fascist" is, of course, avoided, but despite rhetorical

differences congruent with a greatly changed political and economic context, the FN has tread lightly but consistently in the footsteps of those who innovated what Hannah Arendt called the "New Right" of the inter-war periodâ€”fascism.

Since Marine Le Pen has taken the direction of the party there has been a significant change : she has apparently renounced the "neo-liberal" ideology of the past and calls for more aggressively state intervention in social and economic relations. Moreover, she calls for "social" programs in order to protect the population against the negative effects of global capitalism and its dysfunction. During the recent elections, Marine Le Pen's support for the demonstrations against the regressive reform of the retirement system and her criticism of the social consequences of the European Union were worked by FN candidates to good effect. To cite one of many examples, as reported in *Liberation* on April 1, Guillaume Vouzellaud, 42, General Secretary of the FN in the department of the Hérault and candidate in the elections, explained that his party was running on the following themes : "Social justice, defense of accessible public services, and the protection of salaries against unregulated capitalism."

What Marine Le Pen has done is to present the FN as more "Gaullian" than the UMP, thusly attracting dissidents from the strictly "neo-liberalist" orientation of Sarkozy's UMP. The present nostalgia for Charles De Gaulle, and even for Jacques Chirac, makes this ploy profitable, and Sarkozy cannot use it. A significant indication of Le Pen's "Gaullist" orientation is her opposition to military intervention in Libya and Afghanistan, just as Jean-Marie Le Pen opposed the war against Iraq. Mainstream analysts are now starting to wonder whether the FN will supplant the UMP as the largest rightwing political party in France.

The idea was borne-out almost immediately as members of the UMP began to openly criticize Sarkozy's leadership. "We have to stop running after the Front National," said one. The formulation is inaccurate, but significant, because Sarkozy's policy was never to run after the FN, but rather to undercut it by stealing its stock in trade : raising the red flag of out-of-control immigration and its deleterious consequences for the French economy and French identity. There is absolutely nothing innovative in this ployâ€”both the Socialist Party and the traditional right parties (the UMP and its predecessor, the RPR (Rassemblement pour la République) have been doing it in one way or another for thirty years.

But thirty years of Machiavellian manipulations is perhaps bound to have, ultimately, perverse effects. The present situation, carefully if stupidly orchestrated by Sarkozy, is entirely beneficial for Le Pen and the Front National. What Sarkozy and his gang have done is to legitimize the xenophobia of the fascistic right, while the Socialists continue to flounder in the morass of opportunistic consensualism that has been their strategy ever since the break with the "anti-capitalist" line that had ushered François Mitterand into office in May 1981 and that he jettisoned definitively two years later.

In effect, the French Socialist Party became another right-wing party in its dedication to free-market ideology, acquiescence to the cynical machinations of "The Florentine" (Mitterand) and its "realistic" cant that cut the party off from meaningful contact with any popular base. Inclusion of members of the Communist Party in Mitterand's first ministerial cabinet had the effect of equally disillusioning the working-class constituency of the French Communist Party. It was in the 1980s that working-class voters began to desert the French Communist Party and support the Front National.

It was at this point that Mitterand threw off the Communist Party in favor of weakening the RPR. He introduced "proportional representation" in elections for the National Assembly, thus allowing members of the Front National to enter in greater numbers. This tactic was calculated to weaken the traditional Right by dividing it and to thereby strengthen the Socialist Party. By 1986, a successful book titled, *La Deuxième droite* (The Second Right, by Jean-Pierre Garnier and Louis Janover) announced that the Socialist Party should not be considered a Left party at all.

And so the story continued. Like New Labour in Britain and its faithful champion Tony Blair, and the DLC (Democratic Leadership Council) right-turn of the Democratic Party in the US under the triangulating Bill Clinton, the French Socialist Party tried to out-do the right as hand-maiden to the take-back program of the moneyed classes. The Socialists out-did themselves and the Right in privatizing the nationally owed and managed industries, banks and services.

During the tenures of Pierre Bérégovoy and Lionel Jospin as prime ministers, such privatizations reached record levels. In 2010, the CEO of a major industrial group told sociologists Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot that Bérégovoy "from a working-class background and on the left-wing of the Socialist Party" was the best Prime Minister (1992-1993) ever, because of his privatizations. But then accused of corruption, Bérégovoy's career was terminated by either suicide or assassination—the controversy continues.

Between 1997 and 2002, Jospin did almost as well, to the point that his credibility plummeted. In 2002, Jospin lost the first round of the presidential elections and the run-off was between out-going president Jacques Chirac and the then-president of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen. The drift to the right is, therefore, strongly rooted in the recent past.

At the present time, and this is also an element in the process, Marine Le Pen refuses to describe the FN as right-wing, calling it "neither Right nor Left". Here she is in conformity with fascist organizations in the past. A fascist party and movement cannot accept the labels "right" and "left" because its vocation is to appeal to the popular classes while serving the interests of the capitalist oligarchy. For this, it must pretend to represent the "people" and to downplay any contact with powerful capitalist interests. Time will tell whether the FN will qualify as a "fascist" party, that is, as a vehicle for the imposition of a mode of authoritarian control over a population in industrial-capitalist society during a profound crisis of capitalism. It is perhaps appropriate to recall that "Nazi" meant "national-socialist" and referred to Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party.

Added to all this is the fact that the major labor unions in France have been largely integrated into the structure of state power and no longer present any coherent political, anti-capitalist vision. That members of the FN have infiltrated the CGT (Confédération Générale de Travail, FO (Force Ouvrière) and other labor unions should not be a surprise. And now is the time for them to declare there is no contradiction if members of the FN are in labor unions. In fact, it will be logical that the FN assumes a more radical position than the leaders of the labor unions. In part, this is the logical culmination of the FN's long-standing celebration of the memory of Joan of Arc on the First of May, also the "workers' holiday". On March 28, Fabien Engemann, 31, Secretary of the CGT section of public employees in the town of Nilvange (Moselle) and candidate for the FN in the recent cantonal elections, was suspended as union representative. Engemann, former member of the left parties Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle) and Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), explains : "the Left has betrayed workers" and "in a week or two dozens of union members like me are going to 'come out' because they have realized that the FN is not the devil and that Marine Le Pen defends social programs better than Olivier Besancenot [leader of the NPA]."

The most important new element in all this is, of course, the economic situation. The temporary collapse of financial structures, the outrageous methods of saving the financial institutions with state funds, and the lack of any real solutions for the deindustrialization of western economies, means the traditional left and right parties are largely discredited.

In this situation, the FN is now in a very advantageous position. Although it, too, has no solutions, like fascist parties in the past it can claim to represent an alternative to working and middle-class people who are the most threatened by rising unemployment, declining living standards and the privatization of state services and destruction of social programs. If the economy continues to weaken, the FN can pose as a providential savior. If and when this happens, an alliance between the FN and capitalist oligarchs could result in an even more dangerous restructuring of social relations and political institutions.

Post-scriptum :

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