

The Reaction in France

Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

The consolidation of the extreme right racist Front National continues with the capture of the municipality of Vitrolles in southern France. In the 1994 elections the FN gained nearly 20% of the votes cast in the presidential poll. Previous to the capture of Vitrolles, three other town halls had been taken by the FN. This dramatic rise is a result of years of Socialist rule under Mitterand where the working class became embittered and bewildered by the high hopes invested in a Socialist administration. These illusions had been reinforced by the Communist Party and by the extreme left. The fact that vicious anti-working class measures were carried out under Socialist rule was not something that the leftists were prepared to admit before the elections that swept Mitterand to power.

Racism is deeply engrained in French society. There is the legacy of racism from the days of French imperialism. There is the sense of cultural superiority nurtured by the French Revolution (when the bourgeoisie overthrew the monarchy) and by Napoleon. There is the legacy of the Algerian war, when the French were forced to withdraw physically from Algeria. There are the large numbers of deeply racist pied noirs, French settlers in Algeria who were forced to relocate, mostly to the south of France. There is the strong tradition of anti-Semitism and "revolutionary" reaction, going back to the days of Action Francaise who often resorted to street actions. There is the experience of the Vichy regime, the implication of many in a fascist regime kept in power by the German Nazis. Add to this the reactionary right of the Catholic Church, particularly strong in France and opposed to the equally strong traditions of secularism and free thought, many of them active in the FN. Take account of the consistently nationalistic stand of the Communist Party, who had a mass following in the working class, which only in the last few years is dwindling. Also take note of the fact that the extreme left, as well as many anarchists, failed to address themselves in a serious fashion to the problems of racism. There was no effective propagandising against racism and the Front National(the largest leftist outfit Lutte Ouvriere produces several hundred factory bulletins twice a month-which have totally ignored the problems of racism and the FN). The extreme left, for the most part, lined up behind the Socialist Party and the unions in peaceful demonstrations that failed to confront the FN. There was a general feeling that the FN was a phenomenon that would quickly pass. Only with the honourable exception of groups like SCALP was there any awareness that racism must be countered with revolutionary arguments and that the FN had to be seriously challenged, both theoretically and physically, before it could grow.

Now the FN has grown considerably and is putting down roots through its strategy of capturing the town halls. In the municipalities it has captured, hounding of the immigrant populations, including physical attacks, increases, and the public libraries are purged of books, as in Orange, that upset the FN. Various cultural groups are deprived of funding, and black musicians are discouraged from playing there. In Toulon the FN mayor colluded with the local police, themselves thoroughly riddled with FN members, to dismiss the director of the National Theatre of Dance and Image, who had consistently opposed the FN. As a French anarchist writes: "The current centre-right government as well as their predecessors the Socialists have been particularly complicit in the rise of fascist ideology in France. By saying that the FN has 'bad solutions to good questions' they have allowed the fascists to set the tone of political debate. In introducing ever more xenophobic immigration laws both governments hoped to steal the FN's thunder. On the contrary the FN has been able to control policy, maintain its popular image as anti-establishment and avoid the blame for the failure of the racist policies..."

The core of the FN was an alliance between reactionary Catholics, outright fascists from the now defunct Ordre Nouveau, monarchists, and petty-bourgeois reactionaries from the old Poujadist movement. Now however, the FN is going beyond its petty-bourgeois and small and big business supporters to the working class. Within the last year increasing numbers of working class people have been attending FN rallies and some of the FN vote is certainly from the working class.

The only credible alternative to the FN is coming from the anarchists. We have deep criticisms of the Federation Anarchiste(FA), the anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT-F, and organisations like Alternative Libertaire (on the right of the libertarian communist current) and Organisation Communiste Libertaire (sound on a lot of things but with questionable positions on national liberation). Nevertheless, these anarchists have often been at the forefront of the struggles both in the workplace, and in the struggles in defence of abortion rights, divorce and illegal immigrants. Alongside the rise of the FN there has been increasing combativity in the working class and there seems to be a growing polarisation of French society. The FN and indeed the boss class in general is aware of the appeal of anarchist ideas. As a result a number of prosecutions have been taken by the FN and by the government against the anarchist press. The leader of the FN, Le Pen, took out a writ against the Federation Anarchiste's paper Le Monde Libertaire, because it contained a cartoon that upset him. Around the same time, Debre, the Minister of the Interior, sued Le Monde Libertaire for abuse, slander and incitement to murder of policemen! A little later, the MP Christine Boutin, a leader of the Catholic right and several anti-abortion groups, sued the anarcho-syndicalist paper Le Combat Syndicaliste for defamation of anti-abortion groups. These trials are pending. In the case of the Le Pen prosecution, the chances are that he will lose. However, Debre hopes to cripple Le Monde Libertaire with a fine of between 100,000 and 300,000 francs, whilst Boutin hopes that she can get 65,000 francs compensation. The aim of all these prosecutions is to silence the libertarian press, seen as offering a pole of resistance.

If this were not bad enough, physical attacks have begun against anarchists. Following a demonstration by groups of the FA in Lyon on February 15th, to protest against the Le Pen prosecution, 50 stickers were plastered up over the FA bookshop/offices in Lyon during the night. They were signed by the youth wing of the Front National. This had never happened in the neighbourhood, which is regarded as a revolutionary stronghold. Later at 5am the following day, the bookshop was set on fire. The entire stock and the shop were incinerated although adjacent meeting rooms remain usable. The arsonists set fire to the doorway to an adjacent resi-

dential block, where many immigrants lived. By luck, there was no loss of life. In the aftermath, a demonstration of support of 3,000 took place on 22 February in Lyon, with a thousand people in the anarchist section. The same day an anarchist demonstration of support in Montpellier assembled 400 people (on the same day 100,000 demonstrated in Paris against the anti-immigration laws). Two days later a benefit supper in support of illegal immigrants and against the Debre anti-immigration laws in Lyon, was swamped by a thousand people (only 50 meals had been prepared!) The arson attack had been successfully turned against the fascists, with massive support among the Lyonnais population. The phone and fax at the bookshop have been reinstalled as a first step. The International Secretariat of the FA noted in their correspondence over these incidents that: "Our enemy is not only fascism, but the whole society of exploitation and oppression: so we refuse to fragment our struggle which has to be global" We urge all comrades and interested parties to send letters of solidarity and donations to Plume Noire, 19 Rue Pierre Blanc, Lyon, France.

Footnote- A New Popular front

As social unrest increases rapidly and the old institutions of the French State start to decay, it is no surprise to find the forces of the Left looking for a solution that will maintain capitalism and restore stability. In the forefront of this is the French Communist Party(PCF). At their recent conference in December they discussed in detail a renewal of an alliance with the Socialist Party. This would prepare the way for a new coalition government which could replace the Juppe administration if it was forced to resign due to mounting social unrest. Specific mention was made of the Popular Front government of the 1930s by Robert Hue, PCF National Secretary. He stated that : " Our party has a duty to take part in government to ensure that a policy of change is implemented. We consider that ...the possibility of Communist Ministers will relay citizens' demands to France's institutions and rulers".

The conference was designed as a cosmetic exercise. It was entitled a "conference of reform" and a number of old Stalinist hacks resigned from the Central Committee as 'proof' of this change. A leading Stalinist in the leadership of the CGT , the union central dominated by the PCF, "resigned"from the Party. The conference set out to prove to the boss class that the PCF was a nice tame pussycat of a Party, whilst at the same time offering an "alternative" to the working class. In cahoots with the Socialists a new Popular-Front style administration will be used to defuse the unrest that is gathering a head of steam.

And this is a repeat performance of the 1981 "Government of the Left" that included the PCF as well as small leftist parties like the Unified Socialist Party(PSU). In this period massive attacks were undertaken against the working class. The PCF is attempting to show that this time the package is something different. This was behind Hue's remarks distancing himself from the previous leadership of Georges Marchais which had enthusiastically supported the Soviet Union and its allies. Like Blair, Hue sings the praises of the market. Like his counterparts in Italy, Hue will lead a PCF that will collaborate in vicious attacks on any gains made in the past by the working class.

But in order to do this, the PCF needs to bring in new allies. It has lost a lot of influence and respect within the French working class. In order to regain some credibility, it must bring in new partners from Trotskyism. It would like to gain the support of groups like the Parti des

Travailleurs, Lutte Ouvriere and the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire. So far, Lutte Ouvriere has held them at arm's length, but there seems more chance with the Parti des Travailleurs and the Ligue. Already the 1968 veteran and leader of the Ligue, Alain Krivine, has appeared on joint platforms with the PCF. There is a good chance that Krivine will serve in a future Popular Front administration. Already he has been given extensive coverage by the ruling class media. A Trotskyist legitimisation of a joint Socialist-Communist-unions bloc administration would possibly open the way to growing disillusionment and the possibility of an FN government. Against these manoeuvres it is vital that a credible revolutionary alternative be offered.

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