

After the two Irish elections

THE two recent polls in Ireland, in the North on 1 May as part of the UK elections, and in the Republic on 6 June, suggest that many people in Ireland blame the British government for stonewalling.

The Provisional IRA's short ceasefire, and indeed all the efforts at negotiation and politicking since the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, have delivered no visible progress in Northern Ireland. In the North, the Provisionals won two seats, and in the South, one.

Caoimhghín O'Caoláin, elected with 19% of the vote in the five-seat border constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, will become the first Sinn Féin member to take his or her seat in the Dail since 1922, in a move which may sharpen the long-simmering division between politicians and militarists in the Provisional movement.

Fianna Fáil, traditionally the more nationalist of the major parties, has regained office from a coalition led by the less-nationalist Fine Gael.

Fianna Fáil will govern in coalition with the economic-rationalist Progressive Democrats; and it would be foolish to see the nationalist swing as likely to help break the political and social impasse in Ireland.

The swing was in any case slight. Fianna Fáil gained few votes. Sinn Féin still gets only 2.5% of the first preference votes in the Republic.

More fundamentally, all there is on offer from nationalist politics at present is the plan (backed, with variations, by all the major parties in the UK and the Irish Republic, and by the majority Catholic party, the SDLP, in Northern Ireland) for gradually-knitted links between North and South in the framework of and on the model of the European Union.

The fierce, concentrated and resilient resistance of the Protestant or Anglo-Scots majority in north-east Ireland to any subordination of their community to the island's Catholic-Gaelic majority stands in the way of any more radical or rapid nationalist moves. The Provisionals have, in effect, turned to a strategy of demanding that the British state, urged on by Dublin, overwhelm that resistance. No British government, nor any Dublin government wants to try that. They probably could not do it if they tried, and even if they should succeed that would produce no better than a renewed version of the current communal conflict, where the aggrieved minority would be the Northern Protestants (in all Ireland) rather than the Northern Catholics (in Northern Ireland).

Real progress, both on social issues and on the national and communal questions, depends on developing at least a degree of working-class unity and independent working-class politics. On this front the election results from the Republic were, if not unambiguously hopeful, at least interesting.

The big gainers in the poll were the independent and smaller-party candidates, winning a total 9.8% of the first preferences. Two Greens were elected to the Dail. In Dublin West, Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party (formerly Militant) gained one of the constituency's four seats, with 16% of the first preference votes.

These gains for left-wing candidates came at the expense of the established left parties. The Labour Party declined from 19% of first preferences overall to 10%. The Democratic Left — the bulk of what was the Workers' Party, which, originating from the Republican movement but moving in a sharply anti-nationalist direction, at one time outstripped the Labour Party as a left-wing alternative in Dublin electorates — continued its decline, going from 2.8% to 2.5%. Both Labour and the Democratic Left had been in coalition with Fine Gael. The Workers' Party rump got only 0.4%.

YET the fact is that the voters moving from Labour and the Democratic Left remained on the left. It would be over-optimistic to see Joe Higgins's victory as one for the "bold socialist programme" which Militant used to promote in its heyday: a lot of his vote was personal, he stood as part of the Taxation Justice Alliance, and even the Socialist Party's own election manifesto was very limited.

It said nothing at all on Northern Ireland. There is some sense here: working-class voters in Dublin, as against rural Catholics in Cavan-Monaghan, are not moved by green flag-waving. Yet even in its journals and pamphlets the Socialist Party has few answers on the democratic issues. It has advocated a federal solution which would unite Ireland and give relief to the entrapped Northern Catholics while allowing autonomy to the north-eastern Protestants — but only as something which might be devised "after socialism", and certainly not as a platform for immediate working-class unity. But it is precisely as a means of giving an answer to "the constitutional question" — a united Ireland; a partitioned Ireland? — *now* and thus creating a basis for working-class unity across the Catholic-Protestant divide, that this idea is of vital importance to Irish workers! All qualifications granted, though, Higgins' victory is a hopeful sign.

What is Workers' Liberty?



The key Marxist idea is that the class struggle takes place on the three levels of trade union and social struggle, political struggle and the combat of ideas guides the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. The Alliance for Workers' Liberty exists to fight and co-ordinate the class struggle on every front: our supporters work in the trade unions, the Labour Party, in single issue campaigns, in the students' union.

"The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race or sex." Karl Marx

If you want to know more about the Alliance for Workers' Liberty write to PO Box, 823, London SE15 4NA.

Letter from Hong Kong

Nothing to celebrate

LAST month Britain's last major colony was handed back to China, and a new Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China is about to be established. It should be an uplifting and proud occasion for Chinese people and for working people all over the world. It ought to be the end of 150 years of national humiliation, imperialist exploitation and racism, and a progressive step forward towards self-determination for Chinese people as a whole.

But it is nothing of the sort. It is not a fatal blow to imperialism, or real liberation from exploitation for workers in Hong Kong or China. This is a business-like handover to be celebrated by Big Business with much fireworks, fanfare, festivities, and financial bonanzas on the stock market. It is true that British imperialism will lose certain economic benefits in Hong Kong itself, but this is just the levelling of the playing field. It is merely the continued development of Hong Kong's economy, away from being a prop for Sterling in the '60s and becoming the third leg, after New York and London, of a round-the-clock world finance market. Both the Chinese regime and international capital, including British, are looking forward to the new opportunities for the super-exploitation of a new generation of Chinese workers now drawn into the nearby hinterland north of Hong Kong.

According to the Joint Declaration signed between Britain and China in 1984, Hong Kong as an SAR will enjoy a high degree of local autonomy and the rule of law for the next 50 years without change. The phrases coined by the Chinese regime led by Deng Xiaoping at the time were: "Hong Kong people will rule Hong Kong, and there will be One Country and Two Systems."

The 1984 deal was struck without consultation with the six million people in Hong Kong. The Tory government had agreed to hand over a compliant working population which had never enjoyed one person one vote, and a free market economy geared to meeting the needs of international capital. The agreement included the handing over by Britain of



Workers' rights will be the first target for the new regime

existing organs of local government and laws, including those which restrict freedom of speech, assembly, association and the right to strike and demonstrate. In return, China agreed to allow the Hong Kong economy to continue along existing lines. All was signed and sealed, except that the whole process received a nasty jolt, and what should have been a smooth transition had become an almighty wrangle.

THE spanner in the works is Tiananmen, June 4th 1989. The bloody repression of the Chinese Democracy Movement by the Chinese People's Liberation Army under Party orders had transformed the political consciousness of Hong Kong people. Once out, they can never be put back inside the pressure cooker again. In their eyes, Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Communist Party had been responsible for "Chinese killing Chinese"; "the People's Army killing the

People". Hong Kong people followed every minute of those fateful weeks and days, cheered for democracy, demonstrated for the regime's downfall, and brought the city to a standstill time and time again when over a million spilled into the streets, in fighting mood and eventually in utter despair.

The shock was so much the greater for those who had fervently wished that Deng would bring about a more democratic and modern China. When Deng eventually died earlier this year without making it to Hong Kong, the mourning and open weeping of people here was genuine enough. I suspect most of them had felt depressed by the fact that Deng had in their eyes forfeited an honoured place in history by his terrible decision over

Tiananmen.

The rulers in Beijing were furious that Hong Kong had become a "centre for subversion". The millions of dollars raised in support for the democracy movement, plus the determined and disciplined work of Hong Kong activists and their contacts inside China had created an "underground railway" for hundreds of dissidents to escape capture and imprisonment. The campaign has defiantly held annual commemoration candlelit vigils, organised demonstrations and generally been a thorn in the side of both the Hong Kong government and Beijing.

The Hong Kong government realised that they were dealing with a volatile mass movement. There have not been many occasions in world history when over a million people are on the march; certainly none that the writer can recall in Chinese history at any time. They had no means at their disposal to suppress or even diffuse the angry protest in Hong

Kong. As for the political escapees, again it would have been extremely embarrassing for a hard talking right wing UK government to be seen collaborating with a communist regime at the height of its brutality by sending them back as illegal immigrants. The Hong Kong government rode along with the wave of popular protest, while seeking all ways and means of gradually toning it down and bringing matters under control.

The UK Government and the West at first adopted either a wait-and-see or even an anti-communist triumphalist position, half expecting some further collapse in China after the dramatic disintegration of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Reassuring noises were made to Hong Kong people, and Chris Patten was appointed to be Hong Kong's last Governor probably as part of this agenda of exerting political pressure on the Chinese regime. A Bill of Rights, and Patten's package of electoral reforms were delivered to the people of Hong Kong in the early 90s.

However, as it became clear that the Chinese CP regime had survived its worst ever crisis, the Tory Government and its political representative in Hong Kong began to back-pedal. Beijing was by now furious, accusing the UK (quite correctly) of reneging on the unwritten understanding established in 1984, of keeping the lid on Hong Kong nice and tightly and keeping the economy buoyant. At the elections for the Hong Kong Legislative Council (Legco) of 1995, under the new framework introduced by Patten, there was a landslide victory for those forces

which have consistently supported the Chinese Democracy Movement, headed by the Democratic Party.

Beijing's response was to refuse to keep to their side of the handover agreement, to grant the 1995 Legco a "through train", ie allow it to serve its full four year term until 1999. Beijing insisted on ending the Democratic Party's dominant position on Legco. A Preparatory Committee of 400, handpicked by Beijing, representing conservative elements in the territory, was assembled to firstly "elect" the SAR's Chief Executive, and secondly to appoint a Provisional Legislature which will take over from Legco on July 1st 1997. The Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa is a local business tycoon with strong connections with Beijing (and a native of Shanghai, same as Chinese President Jiang Zemin). He was a member of Chris Patten's cabinet, and a conservative in every sense (he donated £50,000 to the Tory election fund in 1992). He is in favour of Hong Kong people "leaving June 4th behind", as well as restoring those repressive local laws on public order which Chris Patten had started to dismantle selectively. He has moved so rapidly toward being a Beijing rubber stamp since his "election", that the head of the local civil service Anson Chan has taken the unprecedented step of speaking out publicly, including an interview with *Newsweek*, stating her concerns and hinting at resignation.

The Provisional Legislature has been forced to meet in Shenzhen during the past months, for fear of being challenged as an unregistered society under existing laws. (These laws are quite draconian but

they have never been applied to the most important unregistered society of them all, the underground Hong Kong branch of the Chinese CP.. The latest row is that China intends to inaugurate the Provisional Legislature, along with the Chief Executive and the Chief Justice, at the handover ceremony. This has prompted the USA and then Tony Blair into boycotting the latter half of the ceremonial rituals.

HOW are the working people of Hong Kong reacting to all this? For a start, 50,000 people attended the June 4th commemoration event, in direct defiance of Tung Chee Hwa. This was more than the total in the past few years. University students have protested en masse against campus authorities in their fight to erect the "Pillar of Shame", a work of art commemorating the Tiananmen martyrs. The democracy movement supporters, including the Democratic Party and other parties, are planning to stage alternative protest events during the handover period. The bulk of organised labour are bureaucratically controlled by pro-Chinese CP forces, and these are generating a whole series of patriotic committees and events. There appears to be a quiet refusal by a lot of people to get involved in the numerous handover celebrations. There are also over 150,000 migrant workers in Hong Kong, largely from the Phillipines and Thailand, who are anxious to hang on to their jobs. The general mood seems to be one of being on guard, and waiting to see what will happen.

For the past months, the local media have largely been exercising self-censorship. The Hong Kong press is still relatively free in the Asia region, compared to Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia. The most likely scenario is that subtle economic pressure by conservative corporate powers will keep the local media compliant, rather than any high-profile heavy handed legal clamp-down.

More than ever, the fate of Hong Kong is closely linked to the fate of democratic and working class forces inside China. The new layers of workers recruited to Hong Kong-financed factories in Shenzhen and further inland will in time organise themselves in response to super-exploitation, and it will be in the best interests of democracy forces in Hong Kong to rally in support of their fellow workers across the border as well as supporting the right of migrant workers to stay in Hong Kong, and to oppose existing immigration controls which drive families apart.

Chen Ying

Workers' Liberty

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Showdown on private railways

AS reported in the last issue of *Workers' Liberty* a major rail strike is looming over the private train operating companies' plans to increase profits by taking away the safety and operational role of guards and cutting their pay.

The private rail bosses are using salami tactics. They hope to destroy RMT as an effective union by weakening the position of the guards who are usually RMT members. In order to get this they will bribe members of ASLEF, the drivers' union. But once RMT are beaten management will come after ASLEF. What are the tactics we need to stop this attack?

In both 1994 and 1996 ASLEF drivers were central to management's strategy of breaking the signalling workers' and traincrew railworkers' strike. They are clearly confident that this strategy will work again in attacking the operational role of the guard and extending Driver Only.

Traincrew can prevent this and can also obtain acceptable restructuring deals but only if we unite and co-ordinate industrial action in resistance to management's plans.

Unity will only happen if rank and file members of ASLEF organise and seriously demand unity in action of their elected officials. Moaning will not succeed.

RMT would not have tolerated these divide and rule tactics if most of the drivers had been in their union. Nor would they tolerate it in the future battle to come. They would not have tolerated the kind of drivers' proposals and deals that have been recommended by the ASLEF officials either. United we stand, divided we fall.

This is a battle that will determine the safety or otherwise of travelling by

train, thousands of railworkers' jobs and the power and credibility of the union for years to come.

However, given the deals around Driver Restructuring Initiatives (DRI) combined with management's use of technology and the use of non-striking members of other unions it is going to be a very difficult strike to win.

The leadership must learn the lessons of our two most recent large strikes. The exclusive use of the power of one grade of worker combined with one-day strikes led to long drawn-out wars of attrition. The powerful signalworkers' national strike in what was then an integrated railway lasted over three months. Traincrew on Scotrail lasted over nine months.

With documentation to prove that the bosses have got it in for shunters, station staff, guards, drivers and signalworkers in the smaller boxes, we should be hitting management with the power of all these grades right at the outset in a *real* strike.

One-day strikes in 1996 were impossible to get away from as the membership got used to making that low level of sacrifice. It would be foolish to repeat this mistake and be faced with the same problem of management almost indefinitely running a service. Or, in other words, managing to manage.

The rail bosses will be planning for some kind of repeat of 1996. We should give them a short, sharp shock and demonstrate our power as a union.

- For coordination amongst Train Operating Crews.

- Sustained industrial action beyond isolated one-day strikes.

- All affected to fight for job security and retention of existing roles.

A Scotrail driver

Blair's plans to gut party democracy run into trouble

AT its annual Congress in Brighton last month the GMB (general union), now Labour's biggest affiliate adopted a response to the "Labour Into Power" proposals which talked of "A growing crisis of accountability" within party structures and argued that "the timetable for consultation has been far too short".

The GMB says: "It is essential that sufficient time is allowed at the 1997 Party conference for a substantial debate to be held, and for all the key issues to be considered, before any decisions are reached."

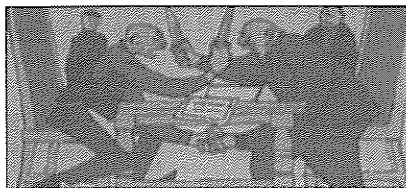
The GMB document then defines what is the key issue in the battle over party democracy. It is essential that CLPs and affiliated organisations can submit motions direct to Party conference and not just to the Joint Policy Committee and National Policy Forum."

If this demand is won at this year's conference then it will remove the cornerstone of the "Labour Into Power" proposals by taking away the ability of cabinet to totally dictate the conference agenda. Building a united front around this demand is now the key task in the fight to defend party democracy and a democratic party/union link. If we can defeat Blair on this question it will make it easier to block his other proposals such as gerrymandering the NEC elections by banning individual party member from voting for left wing MPs.

It is also worth noting that the GMB and UNISON have both come out against delaying the vote on "Labour into Power", making it virtually impossible for the left to hope to win such a position at this year's conference! Instead, the GMB have opened up the prospect of a prolonged debate at conference presumably including the option of tabling a wide range of amendments to the final proposals. An option that Blair and Sawyer will find it difficult to oppose without looking very undemocratic!

The GMB decision comes in the middle of a conference season that has seen only one major union positively endorse "Labour Into Power" and some huge votes for the Keep the Link/Keep the Party ♦

INSIDE THE UNIONS



The adventures of Tom Sawyer

TONY Blair and his inner circle of yuppies are, generally, pretty good at dissembling. But in the presence of trade unionists their powers desert them: the Blairistas simply cannot hide their contempt for the trade union movement. This is something of a problem for the leadership of what is still a trade union-funded party bearing the name "Labour".

Which is where people like the tragi-comic Mr Prescott come in useful. Honest John still boasts of his firebrand past in the National Union of Seamen and at his first Downing Street meeting with a delegation from the TUC, playfully produced a sandwich and a can of beer.

But poor old John, for all his canine loyalty to the Leader, is not taken very seriously by anyone — even the TUC — these days. When it comes to selling the Blair "project" to horny-handed sons (and, these days, daughters) of toil, Party General Secretary Tom Sawyer is much more effective. Sawyer also claims a militant past and unlike Prescott, can produce evidence to back this up.

In the '70s Sawyer was an Area Officer for NUPE's northern region and played an active role in the 1979 "dirty jobs" strike against the Callaghan government's Social Contract. In 1982 he was appointed Deputy General Secretary and soon after became the first NUPE representative on Labour's NEC. As a good Bennite (he'd been the North East organiser of Benn's campaign for Deputy Leadership) Sawyer initially voted with the 'hard left' on the NEC. This was fine as far as General Secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe was concerned: the union's policy was broadly "Bennite" and, any-

way, there was a de facto division of labour whereby 'Bick' concentrated on TUC matters and Sawyer had a free hand in the Labour Party.

Quite soon, however, Neil Kinnock spotted something that is central to an understanding of Sawyer's character: an almost pathological need to ingratiate himself with people — especially powerful and influential people. It was noticeable that Sawyer's opposition to Kinnock was never based upon any principled arguments but upon the complaint that there had been no prior consultation with NUPE (i.e. himself). This was easily rectified and soon Sawyer was voting with Kinnock against the 'hard left'. Sometimes (like over the expulsion of Militant) Sawyer was able to persuade the NUPE Executive to adopt the Kinnock line. But even in situations when NUPE's policy directly contradicted Kinnock's wishes (as over reselection) Sawyer voted with his new-found, powerful friend.

When Tony Benn proposed "full support" for striking (NUPE) nurses in 1988 Sawyer demanded that the amendment be withdrawn and when Benn declined, voted against.

Sawyer's loyalty to Kinnock was rewarded when he was appointed Chair of the "Policy Review" (the process, you may remember, whereby Kinnock divested himself of most of Labour's 'unpopular' radical policies). Sawyer was assiduous in his efforts to sell the results of the Policy Review to the unions. One aspect of the Review might have caused a less craven apparachik some embarrassment: the dumping of unilateralism, a long-standing NUPE policy. Our hero had to choose between loyalty to his new

friend Kinnock and loyalty to his old friend Bickerstaffe. No contest. At the 1989 NUPE conference, Sawyer made a thoroughly demagogic speech, arguing that unilateralism had to be dumped so that a Labour government pledged to the minimum wage, redistribution of wealth and major defence cuts, could be elected. Sawyer won the vote — and in doing so reduced poor old Bickerstaffe to tears.

That incident tells us something else important about the Sawyer mentality: he is a fantasist who probably believes his own fantasies. Like in 1993, when he urged union delegates to back OMOV on the grounds that it would allow them to take over many Constituency Parties and thus increase union influence in the Party! Or this year, when he urged CWU executive members to back the Party Into Power document on the grounds that it consolidates the union link and makes the leadership more accountable.

So there we have Tom Sawyer: a self-deluding fantasist, craven supporter of the powerful, ingratiating creep who lives to tell people exactly what they want to hear. In fact, exactly the man to sell the anti-union Blair project to gullible trade unionists... or not, as the case may be.

One final point: during Sawyer's time as Deputy General Secretary, NUPE declined in membership, failed to resist privatisation in local government, was overtaken by COHSE in the health service, and only narrowly avoided financial collapse. With a record like that, the only surprise is that there's anyone left who takes Sawyer seriously.

Sleeper

Labour position of defending conference sovereignty and party democracy.

But Blair can only be beaten if we concentrate on the democratic merits of our case and don't take the edge off our arguments by becoming fixated with the technical questions of timetable and delay. ● Stop Press: some 100 motions have been submitted by CLPs to Labour conference critical of "Labour Into Power". Only 10 support it!

How the key unions voted

AEEU (engineers and electricians): no vote at conference but can be expected to back Blair, though may go with GMB on conference motions.

USDAW (shopworkers): no vote at conference but executive will back Blair.

UNISON (public sector workers): unrepresentative Affiliated Political Fund structure backed "Labour Into Power" and committed the union to supporting a quick decision.

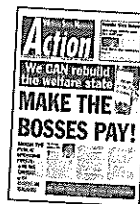
CWU (post and telecom workers): overwhelmingly rejected key proposals of Labour Into Power. As did FBU (firefighters), GPMU (print workers), BFAWU (bakers) and RMT (railworkers).

MSF (technical, finance workers): vote to reject the key proposals of "Labour Into Power" but also voted to "welcome" the publication of the document.

GMB (general union): supported the right of unions and CLPs to put motions directly to conference. At the time of writing *TGWU* and *UCATT* (construction workers) look likely to oppose "Labour into Power".

Tom Willis

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A victory for socialism?

ALAS, the bankers, financiers, and profit-grabbers did not tremble when an alliance of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party won France's parliamentary elections on 1 June. But at least they fidgeted in irritation. The stock market and the international value of the franc both dipped.

French workers did not dance in the streets as they did in 1981, when the left won office after 23 years of right-wing rule. But there was a big demonstration in Paris on 10 June demanding "Europe for Jobs". And union leaders have been talking with some energy and confidence about holding the new Socialist prime minister, Lionel Jospin, to his promises: a cut in the working week from 39 hours to 35 with no loss of pay over five years, in order to reduce France's 12.8% jobless rate.

All this is an after-effect from the great strike wave of November-December 1995. Rail, bus, metro, post, education, health, telecom, electricity and gas workers struck against social spending cuts, and repeated demonstrations brought over two million workers on to the streets. The strikers won significant, though partial victories, and so crippled the right-wing government of Alain Juppé that president Jacques Chirac eventually gambled on an early election this year.

The new government has increased the national minimum wage by 4%, halted civil service job cuts, and stalled privatisation of Telecom and other enterprises. Further measures have been postponed to September, on the pretext of an audit of the national finances.

Jean-Claude Trichet, Governor of the Bank of France, reprimanded the government, calling for cuts in the budget deficit, wage "moderation" and more "flexibility". Louis Viannet, leader of the strongest union federation, the CGT, declared that if the government says in autumn that the finances are worse than it had thought, and attempts a clampdown, then "we will be heading for a big clash. This majority has been brought to power to go in a new direction. If, in the name of the constraints of the euro, of Maastricht, and of the [European Union] stability pact, we find ourselves back with the policies which have been condemned, then neither the CGT nor the wage-workers will accept it".

The French Socialist victory caused a mini-crisis in the European Union. This year, 1997, is when European Union countries have to hit the Maastricht Treaty targets of budget deficit less than 3% of national



Lionel Jospin

income, and national debt less than 60%, for the creation of a single euro-money to go ahead in 1999.

France's national debt, however, has increased explosively over the last seven years, and on present lines its budget deficit will be about 3.8% this year and 4.8% next. Mild though Jospin's reforms are, they will certainly not reduce the deficit, and he is not raising taxes.

The European Union summit in Amsterdam in mid-June was a tense affair, with results universally reckoned to be a feeble compromise.

"The social democratic parties had a spell of neo-liberal-labour success. By the mid-1990s it was over. In Spain, Australia and France (1993), they were routed in elections."

I have thought ever since the Exchange Rate Mechanism crisis of 1992 that European capitalism was nowhere near having the stability necessary to go ahead with the single euro-money. Not only France has problems: Chancellor Helmut Kohl has just had to back down on a plan to wriggle Germany's figures into the prescribed limits by revaluing the Bundesbank's gold stocks.

Yet the big operators in the international money markets evidently have a different opinion. The French election results set them selling not only francs but also deutschmarks, calculating on the prospect not of a divergence of European currencies but of a fudged and weak monetary union.

Whichever way it goes, coming years promise financial turmoil in Europe.

France will not have a strong or confident government to deal with that turmoil. The Socialists got only 26% of the first-round vote on 25 May. Since 32% of registered voters abstained, and 5% cast blank votes, that was only 16% of the electorate.

France's parliamentary elections go to a second-round run-off a week after the first round. In that second round, on 1 June, the fact that the fascist National Front remained in contention in many seats, splitting the right-wing vote, helped the Socialists to win 275 seats out of 577. Together with the Communist Party and the Greens they have 320 seats. The electoral system magnified the shift in votes to create an impression of a huge swing from the 1993 elections, which brought in 484 right-wing MPs and only 93 for the left.

Public sector workers, who carried the November-December 1995 strikes and are less weakly unionised than the private sector, voted heavily but by no means overwhelmingly for the left (63%). Among manual workers generally the left's vote has fallen from 62% in 1986 to 49% in 1997. Conversely, the left has gained among senior managers and professionals: the left-right pattern of voting in these better-off layers was over 20% different from the pattern among manual workers in the 1980s, but is now only 3% different. The self-employed, small shopkeepers, and farmers continue to vote very heavily for the right.

ALTHOUGH the number of French people describing themselves as "interested in politics" has increased somewhat since 1978, from 46% to 50%, the proportion who believe that politicians are not interested in them has increased from 59% from 72%. Most startlingly, more than two-thirds of young people either abstained or cast blank votes in this election.

In short, the new government has been elected with very little positive support, amidst mass disillusion with established mainstream politics and a continued erosion of traditional class loyalties in voting.

The French Communist Party got 10% of the vote, a far cry from the consistent 20% it got until the 1980s, but a good score by recent standards. It has three ministers in the government. In November-December 1995 it showed that, unlike other ex-CPs in Europe, it still has a network of worker-organisers willing and able, on occasion, to lead large-scale class struggles. Its ability to

strangle such struggles, should they escalate beyond what the CP leaders want, is probably less than it was. The USSR no longer exists, and internal CP discipline is much looser.

The far left scored 4% on the first round, mostly for candidates of the Trotskyist group *Lutte Ouvrière*. LO did not repeat their tremendous result in the presidential election of 1995, when they won 1.6 million votes, but they did get their best-ever score in a parliamentary vote: 3.06%, up from 2.15% in 1993. They stood in 321 of the 577 constituencies.

THE French Socialists' victory, following Blair's in Britain and the Olive Tree's in Italy, seems to mark a second Indian summer for social democracy in Europe. There are social-democrat prime ministers in nine out of 15 European Union states, and the German Social Democrats have a good chance of regaining office in elections next year.

Fifteen years ago, in the early 1980s, social democracy looked shattered. Its stock-in-trade — modest reforms and fairly full employment, through measured "Keynesian" increases in public spending — had been discredited in the chaos of the 1970s. The French Socialist government elected in 1981 attempted a last hurrah of the old reformist politics, but within a year retreated in disarray to neoliberal policies of cuts and austerity. In 1983 the British Labour Party suffered its worst election defeat for over half a century. The German Social Democrats were thrown out of office.

Then there was a first Indian summer. The social-democratic parties reshaped themselves in a neo-liberal-labour, "Blairite"

mould. The French Socialists regained office in 1988, after losing it in 1986. In Spain, Australia and New Zealand, social-democratic parties won elections while pushing through free-market measures in economies which had previously been heavily state-regulated under right-wing administration.

Arguably the social-democratic parties were better fitted than the traditional right-wing parties to carry through these measures, compulsory for any government which wanted to fit its national economy into the new world-capitalist regime of the 1990s, with its rapid restructuring and vastly-increased mobility of capital.

Traditional right-wing parties could be pushed by their middle-class base into conserving vested interests or, conversely, into dogmatic spite-fuelled excesses. The social-democratic parties, however, had been built as parties geared to governing at cross-purposes with their base. They were better able to sweeten the economic pain with liberal social reforms. As long as the working class remained relatively quiet — as sadly it did — the social democrats could be better bourgeois than the bourgeoisie.

"Whichever way it goes, coming years promise financial turmoil in Europe."

Anyway, the social democratic parties had a spell of neo-liberal-labour success. By the mid-1990s it was over. In Spain, Australia, and France (1993), they were routed in elections. The parties' activist base had been gutted. Corruption scandals hurt them in France, Spain and Australia, and wiped Italy's Socialist Party out of existence.

This election in France reminds us, however, that there are millions of people who want some left-wing alternative to the brutalities of modern capitalism, and, until we build something better, they will vote, however sceptically, for the social-democratic parties as the best on offer after the great collapse of the Communist Parties. Under pressure of those millions, even the most rotten and discredited social democracy — and few are more raddled than the French Socialist Party — can zig-zag to the left. Revolutionaries who think that they can now write off the social-democratic parties and rebuild the left from a blank slate are fools.

Yet social-democracy's revival is shallow, and goes together with a continued internal decay. Everywhere, the social democrats' base of committed activists and voters has dwindled drastically. And they have no answers to offer.

For now, the main gainers are the far right. Jean-Marie Le Pen's fascist National

Front got one of its best scores since its first electoral breakthrough in 1984, with 15% on the first round, though it won only one seat in the run-off. Its vote has hardened, while that of all other parties has softened. Previously, less than one-third of National Front voters described themselves as "identifying with" the party; now, over a half do.

While the core of the National Front vote remains with the self-employed, small shopkeeper, and small business class, it has bit deeply into the working class. It won 25% of manual workers' votes, 23% of the unemployed, and 22% among voters with no more than primary education.

In November-December 1995 the National Front was marginalised. Big workers' demonstrations jeered outside the NF-controlled town hall in its stronghold, Toulon, without the NF being able to mount any counter-demonstration. The idea that united and militant working-class industrial struggle is the best antidote to racism and fascism is important, but the election results show it to be only a half-truth. Racism has to be defeated ideologically and politically, not just pushed aside. Industrial struggle gives the best conditions for building a workers' party that can organise the ideological and political effort, but it cannot substitute for that effort.

Nationalism has long been the cancer of the French left. The French Communist Party has proved itself to have the deepest working-class roots of any European CP: it is also the only European CP that could, in the 1970s, have recruiting posters which said flatly: "I love my country, therefore I am joining the French Communist Party", or "No to a German Europe". It is the only CP which could have one of its mayors in a suburb of Paris lead a gang to smash up an immigrant workers' hostel and force out the residents, then excuse the action with the "class" argument that CP municipalities were being made to take an unfair share of the burden of dealing with immigrant workers, while the right-wing local authorities escaped lightly (Vitry, 1981).

The demonstrations of November-December 1995, when the idea of Europe-wide workers' unity was prominent and nationalist anti-Maastrichtism very subdued, were one sign of improved possibilities for building something better. The 10 June 1997 march, with its slogan "Europe for Jobs" is another; so is the Renault workers' fight for jobs, which has involved joint strikes and demonstrations of Belgian, French and Spanish workers.

Stormy times lie ahead for France, with great opportunities — but also a great urgency — for French Marxists to build a big movement which can wrest the political initiative from the far right.

Martin Thomas

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