

France: 1.6 million vote for a revolutionary candidate

By Martin Thomas

ARLETTE LAGUILLER'S 1.6 million votes in the recent French elections show that it is possible to give socialist political direction to the anger and disillusion so widespread in France, as in Britain. It is possible to do it even in conditions such as exist today both in France and in Britain — mass unemployment, greatly weakened unions, a low level of working-class confidence for struggle, a serious decline of the traditional left political culture of the working class. It can be done — it was done — on the basis of straightforward class demands, such as those in Arlette Laguiller's "emergency plan". Laguiller expressly did not campaign for revolution — for that she was condemned by the French co-thinkers of the British SWP — nor did she "modernise" herself by putting fashionable liberal causes (animal rights, environment, etc) upfront.

Laguiller's success thus gives supporting evidence for the approach which the AWL is attempting in Britain by supporting the Welfare State Network. If Lutte Ouvriere had tried to organise its voters with a network of local campaign committees for the "emergency plan" — apparently they considered that option, but rejected it in favour of going for a full workers' party — then the parallel with the WSN would be even closer.

At the AWL London forum on 10 May, however, where Francois Rouleau of LO spoke alongside myself from the AWL, the biggest argument was about the second-round vote: to abstain or back Jospin?

In the AWL's view, the general reasons which indicated critical support for Mitterrand in 1981 still apply. By critically supporting reformist parties based on the working class, where we cannot run viable candidates or our own candidates have been eliminated, revolutionaries can get a better hearing for our demands from that majority of class-conscious workers who back the reformists; we can, with those demands, help give immediate political direction to the conflict of those reformist workers with their reformist leaders; we can help the mass labour movement to develop, and sections to move beyond reformism.

True, the French Socialist Party's roots in the working class are very weak, much weaker even than the British Labour Party's after a decade of purges and attacks on the trade-union link. True, French workers are more sceptical about Jospin today than they were about Mitterrand in 1981. Neither factor undoes the general arguments.

To judge from their press, LO's second-round stance was designed to grip a significant minority of CP members who want the CP to assert more independence

from the SP and from the terrible record of Mitterrand's 14 years as president. LO's calculations are not to be despised. The question is whether they outweigh the general arguments, and whether a second-round vote for Jospin would have been more helpful in trying to organise something solid out of Arlette Laguiller's first-round 1.6 million. That LO is aware of a problem is, perhaps, shown by their awkward formula for the second round: we abstain, but we do not call for abstention.

If LO can now initiate a new broad workers' party — "based on class struggle, but not Trotskyist", as Francois Rouleau put it at the forum — that would be a tremendous step forwards. This would be a real, if small, party, with a working class electorate in the same league as the Communist Party's, not a puffed-up sect like the SWP or Militant Labour in Britain; moreover, the extreme weakness of the Socialist Party's working-class roots and the neo-Stalinist regime of the

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CP, make work by Marxists in these parties from inside at best a sideline operation. The other main Trotskyist groups in France agree with that objective — only one, the "Lambertist" CCI, claims to have already built the broad workers' party (in fact, their Workers' Party is just fancy-dress for their sect), and the other, the LCR, has pursued it by fruitless politicking with feeble CP, SP and Green splinter groups.

History suggests some doubts about LO's approach, too. Francois Rouleau said that LO hoped to find maybe 25,000 people — one in sixty of Laguiller's voters — whom they could talk to and bring into the project. But to line up 25,000 people, one by one, for the idea of a new party, and then form the new party when they are all in place, is a tricky business! It is like the games in which you have to balance and tilt to get a number of balls into holes simultaneously — only this "game" has 25,000 balls to get into 25,000 holes. Historically, no big new workers' party has ever been formed in a country (like France) with a substantial labour movement already established, except by a process including upheavals and splits in that previously-established labour movement.

The central worry for Marxists, however, about what can be made from the 1.6 million votes, should not be tactical questions — about which it is foolish to read dogmatic lectures from afar — but the basic politics of Lutte Ouvriere.

LO dates back to a tiny splinter from the French Trotskyist movement in October 1939, led by "Barta" (D.Korner). Barta split, not because of any political differences — though differences later emerged, he said they were not decisive — but because of the "petty-bourgeois" organisational chaos of the Trotskyists. He set out to build a group defined as proletarian by strict discipline, professionalism, and moral intensity. After the war he had a perspective of rapidly-looming fascism, military dictatorship, and a third world war: everything was down to a race to build a solid revolutionary party quick enough.

The Barta group fell apart and disappeared in 1949-50. In 1956 a few activists made a new start, without Barta. They had simply bypassed the political crisis of the Trotskyist movement in 1948-51, and the "Pabloite" shift to speculation about the ever-ongoing "rise of the world revolution", in which socialist revolutions would be made willy-nilly by Stalinists and Third World nationalists. They stuck to the pre-1940 Trotskyist consensus that the USSR was still a degenerated workers' state but Eastern Europe, China, etc were still bourgeois states. The perspective of Armageddon round the corner they modified, essentially, by considering History to be pausing, for an undetermined while, before that Armageddon. The mind-numbing method of equating political decisions with moral choices and (simultaneously) with social-class identity, they maintained.

The result is a movement refreshingly free of neo-Pabloite mysticism both in its practical routines (400 regular workplace bulletins, assiduous contact work) and in many of its political judgments. It is also a movement so strait-laced that it is difficult to imagine it responding creatively to revolutionary events. In May 1968 they went no further than declaring "No to De Gaulle! Long live the general strike!" and insisting that the situation was "at no time revolutionary". Their philosophy is more like a fusion of Blanquism and syndicalism than Marxism proper.

The French working class needs a new Trotskyist movement, free from the limitations of the existing groups. But LO's magnificent election effort may have done much to rally the raw material for such a movement.

On the following pages we print some extracts from the comments by LO and other French Marxists on the election result.