

Prospects dim for new workers' party

By Martin Thomas

IN FRANCE'S municipal elections, on 11 and 18 June, the fascist National Front won control of its first big city, Toulon, in southern France.

It also won two smaller cities, Orange and Marignane, and generally scored well though patchily.

The mainstream right did not do as well as it must have hoped after Jacques Chirac won the presidency. The Socialist Party did a bit better than expected, the Communist Party worse.

A scattering of "alternative left" lists, including splinters from the Socialist Party, Communist Party, and Greens, and the Trotskyists of the LCR, did respectably: the LCR got six councillors under France's complicated system of semi-proportional representation in local government.

For readers of *Workers' Liberty*, the most interesting results were probably those of Lutte Ouvrière, the Trotskyist group which won an extraordinary 1.6 million votes in the presidential election. LO ran 52 lists, with 2,330 candidates, and got seven elected. Its score, 2.8 per cent of the votes in the areas where it ran, was around its average in elections over the last twenty years, and only one third of the votes won by its presidential candidate, Arlette Laguiller, in those same areas. Three local lists which LO ran jointly with the Communist Party scored an average of nine per cent.

Abstentions were very numerous, and it looks as if they included many of the people alienated from official politics who were attracted by Laguiller's straightforward socialist platform.

Lutte Ouvrière concluded: "We are thus still far from being able to build the party which is terribly lacking to defend the political interests of the workers, the unemployed, and the youth". Rather than being able to launch a sizeable new workers' party from its tremendous presidential campaign, it looks as if LO will only be able to enlarge its political periphery — as François Rouleau of LO put it at a recent AWL London forum, to restore its periphery to the size it was in the late 1970s.

Even that is no small achievement. At Lutte Ouvrière's annual fete on 3-5 June, 35,000 attended — an increase on the usual 25,000-to-30,000, despite constant rain at this open-air event.

In forums and debates at the fete, LO speakers were resolutely sober and even pessimistic in their assessment of prospects. LO has recently published a document, adopted at their last conference, in late 1994, which sketches an overview of the

ups and downs of the revolutionary workers' movement over the whole of the 20th century. It shows strikingly how LO combines downbeat perspectives — utterly different from the frantic babble about "the rise of the world revolution" used by so many Trotskyist groups — with unbroken, undulled energy.

"No-one", declares LO, "is in a position to say today when the retreat of the proletarian movement, ongoing for *three quarters of a century*, will stop" (emphasis added). Its story of the first third of the century follows the standard Trotskyist account, more or less — revolutionary opportunities betrayed by social-democracy and Stalinism.

After 1945, however, LO argues that the workers' movement "declined as its leaderships discredited themselves politically... The militants, disgusted by the policy of their party, abandoned activity..." The great workers' upsurges of 1956 (Hungary), 1968 (France), 1975 (Portugal), 1980-1 (Poland), etc. are not mentioned at all. Against its picture of steady decay, LO's document sets the facts that the working class remains numerous and that the general theoretical arguments cited by Marx remain valid as to why the working class can revolutionise society. Then comes the twist in the tail!

"In reality", declares LO, "the social category which has failed its task in the course of the past decades is much more that of the intellectuals than the proletariat... It is essentially the intelligentsia which has not played, in recent decades, the role which

should be its own..." The degeneration of the Communist Parties was "largely imputable to the fact that there were not, among the intellectuals of these CPs, people capable of seeing the bureaucracy's move away from communist principles, and worse still, there was none with the courage to oppose it". Since 1945, most rebel intellectuals have chosen politics which offered them careers, and "even the most devoted have tailed fashionable nationalist currents, made the fortunes of Maoism, and turned aside from the Trotskyist movement or diverted it..."

Several things are incoherent in this account, not least the exaggerated role allowed to "intellectuals"! Crucially, however, a critical examination of the role of "intellectuals" (of worker or petty-bourgeois origin) in giving political direction to revolutionary minorities, and enabling those minorities to seize or bungle opportunities, has been replaced by a moral denunciation of the slackness of intellectuals of petty-bourgeois origin. Theoretical investigation, beyond the basic business of recalling what Marx wrote about the working class, has been replaced by moral strictures.

The moral strictures have some value: they did, after all, help to generate the energy and seriousness which enabled LO to reach out to 1.6 million with basic socialist ideas. Without proper theoretical and political rethinking, however, we will not be able to build an adequate movement out of those millions. ■

The French left sums up

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS loom much larger in French politics than local-government polls do in other countries, partly because all the major political leaders take part in them as well as in national politics: prime minister Alain Juppé stood this time for mayor of Bordeaux, Jacques Chirac was mayor of Paris before becoming president, and over half the MPs in France's Chamber of Deputies are also mayors.

Lutte Ouvrière summed up the results like this: "The left, socialist and communist, held its own overall, but is far from reconquering the positions it has lost over recent years. On the other hand, the most striking result was the confirmed or even strengthened implantation of the National Front... If these are really working-class voters who are letting themselves be misused... that introduces the worst of divisions into the ranks of the workers... Racist or anti-foreigner preju-

ices are truly the vermin of thought..."

Rouge noted the effects of the "discredit" of the whole "political class": "Traditionally, the municipals were the elections with the best turnout. It was not like that on the first round, abstention reaching the record figure of 35 per cent... [and higher] in the big cities."

"The far right", it continued, "appears as the great victor of these municipals. Its local implantation is spectacularly confirmed. Its network of bigwigs has now gained sufficient weight that it can rake in a vote clearly superior to that of the caudillo at a national election."

Rouge protested, however, at the "Republican Front" policy followed in a few areas where the National Front did well in the first round, like Dreux, with the Socialist and Communist Parties withdrawing from the second round to back the mainstream right against the NF. "The 'united left' is retreating, disappearing, resigning, giving it out that the RPR right-wing [Chirac's party] would be the final rampart against the NF".