

Voters shun Socialist Party's left unity referendum before French regional elections

By Stéphane Hugues
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The ruling Socialist Party's (PS) referendum last weekend, which tried to get a mass vote for unity around the PS of all supposedly "left" parties in the first round of regional elections, has been a resounding failure. The parties targeted by this unity call were the PS's traditional allies, the Greens, the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party (PG) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Officially, only 250,000 voters participated in the poll, of which 135,027 actually went to the 2,500 polling booths across France and 116,300 voted on the Internet. Unsurprisingly, the referendum led to a landslide victory of 90 percent for "yes": voters willing to participate in the referendum were mostly supporters of the longstanding alliance between the PS and its political satellites.

Three years of austerity under President François Hollande of the PS have undermined what was left of the PS's electoral base.

The two rounds of the PS presidential primaries in 2012 each mobilized 2.5 million people. As he organized the referendum a month ago, the PS head of elections, Christophe Borgel, dared only to hope for 500,000 voters. PS first secretary, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, revised this figure downwards, first to 300,000 and then to just 200,000 voters only days before the referendum. This is barely one and a half times the size of the PS membership.

Even the official figure of 250,000 voters is suspect: several journalists at *Le Monde*, *L'Obs*, and *Huffington Post* verified that it was possible to vote multiple times.

One could input data for a first vote and then, after having voted, just change the email address and vote again. A journalist from *L'Obs* was able to vote 10 times; in reality, the operation could be repeated infinitely.

The president of Europe Ecology Greens (EELV), Emmanuelle Cosse, was surprised to have received a confirmation email informing her of her participation in the vote. She tweeted on the evening of the vote, "So I just received an email from 'referendum Unity' thanking me for my vote?!?!? Ballot stuffing ... I'm afraid."

Despite the very low turnout, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis strove at all costs to put a brave face on it: "Even if it was reviled, this referendum has placed the PS at the center of the debate!" He concluded, "This is a success, it's cool, it's not a flop!"

Even PS members complained about the referendum. PS Deputy Christian Paul said he was "appalled by the referendum ... It's a non-event. Tomorrow we must get back to business. It has diverted energies of [regional election] campaign activists for nothing; because this referendum has no effect on reality."

The organizers of the referendum presented it as a way of unifying the "left," which would be essential to prevent the neo-fascist National Front (FN) controlling areas that hitherto were controlled by the PS. The FN is in a position to win the presidency of two of the 12 new French regions, Nord-Picardie and Provence-Côte d'Azur.

This referendum was a cynical attempt to present the PS as tacking to the "left," by underscoring its alliances with the Left Front and EELV, while encouraging a PS vote by warning that a PS defeat could lead to a FN victory. This strategy has resulted in a resounding failure.

The parties to which the PS turned itself are largely discredited in the eyes of the majority of the population, among whom they arouse no enthusiasm. Masses of people instinctively feel that the policy of a government led by the PCF or PG would not be

significantly different from that of the PS, with whom they have forged close alliances for decades.

These parties, who represent affluent layers of the petty bourgeoisie, have all applauded Syriza even after it negotiated with the European Union to impose savage austerity measures on Greek workers.

The PCF has supported Syriza for years. The leader of the PCF, Pierre Laurent, was present with Podemos at the last meeting of the electoral campaign of Syriza in Athens on September 18, as president of the Party of the European Left. He said: “Your vote is expected by 27 other European countries and their peoples for which a victory for Syriza is a symbol of hope and struggle! Reelect Syriza and Alexis Tsipras as they continue to fight against the old political system.”

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, an ally of the PCF in the Left Front and the leader of the Left Party, has maintained his support for Syriza even after Tsipras had accepted the measures dictated by Berlin. He issued a statement that cynically presented Tsipras’s capitulation to the EU as a courageous act of defiant resistance, declaring: “The government of Alexis Tsipras has stood toe to toe like no one else has done in Europe today.”

The argument that a PS vote would be the best way to bar the rise of the FN is also losing its influence. After three years of relentless austerity against the working class, of hysterical promotion of law and order with army patrols on national territory, and repeated wars in the Middle East and Africa, the PS is implementing large parts of the FN’s program. Holland even invited Marine Le Pen, the leader of the FN, to the Elysée Palace in January, following the terrorist attack against *Charlie Hebdo*.

In these circumstances, the false argument that the PS is the best “useful vote” to block the road to the FN no longer has any effect on the broad masses of voters.

For these reasons, the referendum proposed by Cambadélis, devoid of all political content except the electoral tactics of the PS, was unable to obtain any significant reaction. It was the strategy of a discredited ruling class, isolated from the people and deeply hostile to the working class.

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