

# The National Front and French working class

Until now, the National Front has never succeeded to form its own party or permanent trade union structures among the working class or even among other classes like the traditional petty-bourgeoisie (shopkeepers, craftsmen, etc.). In the 1990s, it had a policemen's trade union for a few years (1995-1998) but it was banned. The National Front tried to build trade unions in public transports in Paris and Lyon (1996), in prisons (1996-1998) among post office workers, tenants, teachers and small bosses, but all these projects failed. So its members were obliged to enter the most reactionary – scab, right Christian or anti-Communist – trade unions with little success. Apparently, during the last ten years, they recruited some militants inside the CGT, former Communist Party trade union. This evolution was revealed when these militants announced their candidacy for last municipal elections.

There are presently only a few towns in France where the National Front has succeeded to become locally rooted in working-class districts. At last municipal elections in March 2014, it won 1,500 municipal councilors and 14 mayors but I have no idea if they were all in working-class towns so I will take only the example of Vitrolles and Hénin-Beaumont today.

Until now, National Front militants have experienced difficulties to appear publicly as such. They encounter all sorts of problems, inside their own families, at work, in their building, in their neighbourhood, as soon as they are spotted as National Front supporters. Some say they lost their jobs, others tell that the atmosphere at work became so unpleasant they were obliged to resign or were denied a promotion, a pay raise, etc. Others tell their car tires or windows were damaged, they were physically threatened, insulted, their house or car was covered with graffiti, etc. Whether these stories are partially true does not matter very much; these rumours or real strong reactions against the National Front have impeded its militants to openly act for their party until a recent period. Women, for example, often use their maiden's name not to be recognized when they represent the National Front in municipal elections; militants do not distribute leaflets and put up posters in the district where they live, but in a distant neighbourhood, etc. That maybe one of the few positive consequences of the Republican antifascist propaganda against the National Front.

Actually, the only towns where it was and is a bit easier for the National Front are those where the Reformist Left, generally the Socialist Party accumulated many flaws:

- the municipal leading team was totally discredited by its corruption: free official cars with personal driver, free restaurants, expensive travels paid by the taxpayers, hiring of relatives and friends in the local administration, fictitious jobs, an excessive number of state-financed temporary jobs, no tendering for public sector contracts;
- Socialist Party mayors were heavily condemned or, worse, put in jail;
- the Socialist Party was divided into several fractions fiercely fighting against each other, up to the point of falsifying internal elections results; the Socialist Party used more and more advertisement agencies to promote its politics instead of mobilizing its militants,
- the influence of the Communist Party was weak, dramatically declining, especially among migrant workers and their children,
- the Left mayor and municipal councilors were cut off from their working class electorate. They started, like in Vitrolles, courting the bosses and promoting pharaonic projects for their constituencies (in this case a stadium),
- unemployment raised to a very high percentage,
- local trade unions and associations were very weak, in crisis, etc.

These constituencies have been deliberately targeted by the National Front for the weaknesses of the Left and of the workers movement, but also the destruction of all social ties (for example, in Northern France, the Catholic church and mine bosses organized and controlled all the aspects of miners' daily life: company shops, company housing, company health system, holiday camps, sports teams, etc. So when the mines disappeared, it gave a death blow to all social links).

To illustrate the National Front's policy, I will take two very different examples: Vitrolles in the south of France and Hénin-Beaumont in the north.

## – Vitrolles

Vitrolles was an essential element in the struggle between the general secretary of the National Front (Bruno Mégret) and his president Jean-Marie Le Pen. Although he was supported by young nationalist-revolutionaries (i.e. fascists) at that time, Bruno Mégret wanted in the 1990s to make electoral alliances with the Right in order to become later the hegemonic force in this alliance. Jean-Marie Le Pen had a very different strategy: he wanted to provoke a serious institutional crisis during which he thought he could appear as the charismatic Saviour of France.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Vitrolles rapidly grew out from a small village into a rather chaotic urban agglomeration of 36,000 inhabitants. It attracted workers who were sacked in the North of France and offered a new job in the nearby steel industry of L'Etang de Berre; workers who had left Marseilles to buy a house with a credit, etc. It had no old Communist Party or Socialist Party tradition even if a Socialist (Jean-Jacques Anglade) was Vitrolles mayor during 14 years (1983-1997). In this region, there has always been a strong influence of the "*pièdes noirs*" – the million French people who left Algeria after 150 years of colonization and came to live in France, mainly in the South. Politically, this region was characterized by a tight cooperation between the Center, the Right and the Far Right, a rather unusual situation at that time.

This very special political climate benefitted to the National Front, transforming it into a “respectable” force as testified by the electoral agreements signed in 1986 and 1988 between the Front national, UDF and RPR.

There was also a growing difference and even a conflict between two categories of workers:

- the upper working class members living in the new districts regrouping new small houses; these categories feared to lose their job, fall down the social ladder and become unable to pay their real estate credit;
- the workers living in the older districts, in public housing flats with a strong proportion of foreign workers, unemployed, monoparental families but also militant associations which tried to preserve the unity between the inhabitants, whatever were their origins.

The aim of the National Front in Vitrolles was to deepen the differences between these two groups of the working class, the second group being denounced as “parasites,” “Social Security cheaters,” “lazy people not willing to work and living on benefits”; and the first group being hailed as hard working Frenchmen and women.

Mégret’s personal aim was to use the material means of the municipality (staff, cars, and phones, print shop) to take the leadership in the National Front.

The Socialist Party’s mayor (Jean-Luc Anglade) had ruined the local finances but Mégret and his wife Catherine did not do better when they were elected and run the town between 1997 and 2002. Apart from their financial incompetence, they also closed several active cultural centers considered as too leftist; they stopped supporting financially many local associations; they renamed streets and avenues; they opened small museums to glorify French colonialism; they promoted Provençal traditions; they generalized video surveillance (a program which was launched by the Socialist mayor) and doubled the number of municipal policemen. They sacked 80 municipal employees and waged a cultural war inside local public libraries; they stopped subscriptions to Left or liberal publications, and bought hundreds of books published by Far Right publishers, refusing even to buy children’s books when the author had a foreign name, etc. Their brutal management raised a strong opposition inside a minority of the local population (the majority was afraid), often from people who were not active in any party before and who took many risks, confronting during five years the fascist thugs hired by the mayor Catherine Mégret and her husband, Bruno Mégret. But, in 2002, the nightmare ended (as well in three other cities managed by the National Front), the two Mégrets lost the municipal elections and the Left won Vitrolles back.

#### – Hénin-Beaumont

More or less at the same time, a similar attempt to win a municipality with a strong local support was organized in Hénin-Beaumont, in the north of France. Since the 1970s, the main industries (mines, textile, and steel) have progressively disappeared in this region. Today, 60% of the local population are poor non-tax payers; 23 % receive the RSA (analogous to the Australian Newstart Allowance), that is 395 pounds per month for one person and 592 pounds for an unemployed couple.

In Hénin-Beaumont, this attempt to win a municipality was led in a much softer way by a sales representative (Steve Briois<sup>1</sup>); he did not try to wage a too violent ideological battle as his friend Mégret did, at least that it was not his main activity. He started inquiring about how the mayor managed local finances. And when his inquiry, in 2002, and his public denunciation led to a trial, he went to court every day, packing the courtroom with National Front militants, and commenting the event on his daily blog. He also organized several “happenings” on the local market; for example, once he collected oranges<sup>2</sup> for the Socialist mayor condemned to three years in jail.

In 2003, Steve Briois and the National Front started to focus on local strikes and factory closures. He tried to come at the gates of these companies and even to enter inside but was not well received by workers and CGT trade unionists.

Nevertheless, he gave locally a more “social image” to the National Front, and that was the most important element for him and his party.

Steve Briois became a municipal counselor in 1995, regional counselor in 1998, European deputy in 2014 and mayor of Hénin-Beaumont in March 2014. In this long struggle, he was strongly supported during the last five years by Marine Le Pen (who is always followed by dozens of journalists, a significant asset for any candidate...). Briois’s methods were very different from Bruno Mégret and he did not use so many fascist thugs of the skinhead type, or at least he taught them how to have a more respectable dress code and try to stay “cool” in front of their political adversaries; he recruited among former local Socialist, Communist or Right militants, thanks to his long and patient work as a municipal counselor.

The various campaigns he led in this old working-class town<sup>3</sup> enabled him and Marine Le Pen to appear as much more

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<sup>1</sup> As he states himself: “*To be active in politics is to sell an ideal. (...) Politics is marketing; it’s not my fault if society is made like that. The difference between a political activity and a commercial activity is that what we sell is free. The only thing I ask people is to get out of their house on Sunday morning and vote.*”

<sup>2</sup> In French, as a joke, we say “I will bring you oranges “when somebody risks a jail sentence.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, Hénin-Beaumont is a product of the fusion between two “communes”: Hénin-Liétard, a traditional working-class town, and a village called Beaumont surrounded by fields and farms. Few journalists noticed National Front votes were much higher in the rural area and village of Beaumont than in the working-class town of Hénin-Liétard. In such rural areas, there is no railway station or main road nearby, no police station, no post-office, no shop or pub. Very few migrants live in these areas but the inhabitants are brainwashed by all the sensationalist images propagated by the various television channels about incidents, riots or crimes involving so-called “Muslims” or “Arabs” in France. People are obliged to have a car (and sometimes two in the same family) which is a costly investment given the price of gasoline. They think they have no future, are abandoned by the state, a feeling exploited by the National Front at every election. One must also add

“moderate” than Mégret and his team in Vitrolles in the 1990s. As Briois had lived in this town since he was 13 years old, and started to be a radical-right activist when he was 16 years old, he was well known by everybody. More and more people started appearing openly as supporters and voters of the National Front. It has become easier for them as Marine Le Pen started changing the public image of her party and convincing the public, with the help of the media, that the National Front was caring about workers not only about bosses’ interests. Jean-Marie Le Pen had made once a similar move in 2002<sup>4</sup> but at that time the National Front’s economic program was openly in favour of private initiative and diminution of state intervention.

### **Feverish social demagogy**

In the recent years, this economic program has not changed much, but the official rhetoric of Briois and Marine Le Pen has tried to appear more compatible with workers’ needs: Briois demagogically said he was proud of Jaurès (a nineteenth-century Socialist leader), Pierre Mauroy (a Socialist Prime minister coming from a working-class background), and several local Socialist Party mayors and famous Second World War resistants. Supported by Marine Le Pen, he pretended the National Front:

- was in favor of the 35-hour working week and wanted to keep the retirement age at 60 years,
- wanted to “tax the rich,”
- demanded the creation of a sliding scale of wages,
- defended the idea of nationalizing the banks if necessary and obliging the companies to give back public subsidies, if they relocated their actives (in the North of France, several companies took the money of the state and disappeared),
- denounced the “evils of finance capital”;
- and demanded that the prices of basic products should be controlled by the state.

A program which could be defended by the Communist Party, the social-chauvinist Parti de Gauche and even the Trotskyists!

But we must never forget that the National Front said for many years, like the bosses union and all mainstream economists, that companies paid too much labor-related contributions and taxes, trade unions had too much power and strikes should be “regulated.”

So we shall see in the future if the National Front will go farther in this demagogic “social” direction or maintain a traditional Bonapartist attitude between the opposing interests of the social classes it pretends to represent.

### **– Restoring social links**

Obviously, in working-class districts, the National Front regularly distributes leaflets against “insecurity” (bank robberies, burglaries, night incidents involving young migrants, Franco-Arab or Franco-African youth, suburban riots, etc.), Islam and migration. And if this general propaganda has some echo among workers, it’s not enough to really make a difference on the local level.

When the National Front has devoted municipal councilors like in Hénin-Beaumont, they do pretty much the same as what the Communist and Socialist parties did in the past: they visit people systematically at their homes, listen patiently to their problems, carefully note their grievances, try to exert pressures on social services<sup>5</sup> so that people get a new flat, a domestic help at home for an elderly person, a financial help of some sort so that can send their children to a holiday camp or pay part of their debts, etc. The National Front municipal councilors create a network of “district correspondents” who inform them of all the little problems (from a traffic light which does not work to a fight in the street involving “Muslims”). Obviously, these “correspondents” can also spy on all political opponents. The National Front militants organize paying banquets for the 14<sup>th</sup> of July (a national day). They sell pins, lighters, scarves representing Marine Le Pen, etc.

When it has the financial means, the National Front opens local headquarters which are used both for political aims and as a center of local life where anybody can come and chat, drink a coffee, help to fold leaflets, etc. Their headquarters become a very lively center of the local social life, recreating links which had disappeared, playing the same role as the “People’s houses” or “Bourses du travail” run by the Socialist or Communist parties or trade unions. The National Front organizes cocktails (“apéritifs” where you do not need to dress up just to get “happy”) anniversaries, etc. And obviously, this “nice” side of the National Front is presented to, and promoted by, the media.

Steve Briois also tours the different National Front federations to promote the “Hénin-Beaumont” model in other regions.

### **– The National Front xenophobic program has not disappeared**

The difference with what the Left used to do is that the National Front puts forward xenophobic but unfortunately appealing solutions to people who are unemployed or fear to lose their job. It proposes:

- to deport all undocumented workers,

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very few journalists noticed that all the towns surrounding Hénin-Beaumont were still in the hands of the Socialist or Communist Parties, and had Socialist Party or Communist Party mayors or MPs. So Hénin-Beaumont is still an exception, even if it a dangerous one.

<sup>4</sup> He always used to say “*I’m socially right wing, economically left wing, and nationally French,*” but after he defeated Jospin in the first round of 2002 Presidential election, he went one step further and declared: “*Don’t be afraid to dream (...), you miners, metalworkers, male and female workers of all the industries ruined by Maastricht euro-globalism.*”

<sup>5</sup> “*Thanks to me, social workers have less work. We are very close to the people, like before, when it was still the party of Jaurès,*” said Briois.

- to restrict foreign workers' social rights (especially if they are unemployed, delinquents, parents of delinquents, "bad parents," etc.),
- to suppress the French nationality of the naturalized foreigners who have committed crimes,
- to extend to the private sector the French state policy (no foreigner can be employed with the status of a public employee): what was called before "national preference" has been now renamed "national priority" by Marine Le Pen but the content is the same.

Obviously, National Front mayors and municipal councilors can't apply all these measures today, because they are illegal...

So they have successively used two tactics:

- they first tried, like in Vitrolles in 1997-2002, to implement these discriminatory measures by force and were therefore condemned by the courts to pay heavy fines which contributed to the town's bankruptcy, so it was a bad move on the long term. Mégret made this choice in Vitrolles, not because he thought he could really win, but to show to the public opinion that "the UMPS establishment" was not defending the interests of French people;
- today, under the leadership of the "moderate" Marine Le Pen, the National Front militants present these measures as a concrete solution to unemployment when they will come to power and be able to change the laws.

In Hénin-Beaumont, in the north of France, like Mégret did in the South, and probably other mayors today, the National Front tries also to reactivate local traditions which have disappeared, like a parade of flowered floats ("corso") or a festival around medieval themes; for years, Briois participates to every ball and dances with old ladies; he memorizes all the names he can stock in his memory and never forgets to shake hands with his voters or kiss them on the cheeks every time he meets them.

Caring about local working-class or popular traditions is an excellent way for the National Front to get votes and also to reinforce its nationalist agenda. I have not seen Ken Loach's last film *Jimmy Hall* but from what I have read, these techniques of "bonding" with the local population have apparently a long history.

### **The National Front is inspired by the Communist Party ideology in the '50s, '60s, and '70s**

To sum up, the National Front is copying, in some working-class regions, the politics and organization of the Stalinist party in the 1950s: a strong nationalism, an attachment to local traditions, a will to defend local jobs, a certain critique of "bad bosses" (i.e. foreign bosses, multinationals or Stock Exchange speculators). Officially, the National Front is no more a racist party but its militants have difficulties to control their xenophobic and especially their anti-Islam and anti-Roma prejudices. But their ideas are not very far from what Georges Marchais, the French Communist Party leader, wrote in 1981: "*One should stop legal and illegal migration, the housing crisis is worsening, there is a cruel lack of social housing, French families can't have access to these flats, and the social benefits distributed to pauperized migrant families are killing the communes budget.*"

What's new with Marine Le Pen? The National Front has recently introduced a small dose of "tolerance" in the traditionally conservative social ideology of the Far Right: a "tolerance" towards divorce (Marine Le Pen has divorced twice and is not married with her present companion), abortion (she refuses to suppress the law which legalized it) and homosexuality (she has close collaborators who are gay; she was interviewed in a gay magazine, etc.).

### **– A right-wing drift which started in the 1970s in Europe**

Nevertheless, this modernization of the Far Right is not actually a purely French phenomenon, it happened in other countries under various forms and it is influenced by the appearance of new nationalist-populist parties.

Obviously, in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden, where there has never been any mass Communist party, and where social democracy always had a class-collaborationist policy with the bosses and the state, it does not take the same form as in Italy, Spain or Portugal, which have had mass Stalinist Parties and even militant Socialist Parties, at least at one point of their history.

But in all Europe, there are new Far Right parties who often do not come directly from a fascist tradition: the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, PVV in the Netherlands, Freedom Party (FPO) in Austria, UDC in Switzerland, Progress Party in Norway, People's Party in Denmark, even if some of their leaders may have a purely fascist past. And this development is due to the fact that European societies have known massive changes in the internal composition of the working class, in the nature of the so-called workers movement and the spatial and social organization of working-class districts.

The working-class vote for the Left has been declining in all Europe since the end of the 1970s. In France, in the middle of 1980s, it was reinforced by a change in the relation of forces between the working-class votes for the Right and for the Far Right. And this evolution was not limited to France. The profile of conservative workers, labelled "working-class Tories" has been analysed, in the early 1970s, in Britain: these workers loved their company, admired their boss, and recognized the legitimacy of the "elite" and its competence. I suppose these right-wing workers have not disappeared with the development of the crisis.

The structural transformations of capitalism and world economy have accelerated the transformation of the working class; the European Far Right has therefore focused its attention on the losers of the globalization process: the unqualified workers, and obviously the poor farmers and shopkeepers, self-employed, precarious workers of all kinds. Welfare chauvinism has been growing and it targets migrants, which are supposed to be a threat for wages and social benefits and a threat to national identity. The new generations of workers who, since the middle of the 1970s, have known mass unemployment and precarization of their living and working conditions, and have watched the decline of the trade

unions, the final transformation of social democracy into a simple appendix of the bourgeois state, and the collapse of the Stalinist parties, are much more sceptical about the Left than their parents and grandparents. They want to “give a chance” to the national-populist parties or the “renovated” Far Right parties like the National Front because their values are much more conservative than the generations of workers born before the Second World War or until the early ‘60s.

So, for all these reasons and many others, we have still a long and hard ideological and political battle to wage.