

# Head On: The French Left After the Referendum

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“Social Democracy is incapable of defending its own historic gains.” Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Parti Socialiste Left (*France-Inter*, 16 June 2005)

ON 29 MAY 54.87% of French electors rejected the proposed European Constitutional Treaty. Four days later 61% of Dutch voters gave the same response. The European Union (EU), from the Council of Ministers, the Commission, the Parliament, to the 25 member states, has been profoundly shaken by these results. There are deep divisions about the EU's institutional shape, over further integration, the pursuit of economic and social reform, and the place of the EU in the world. Centre stage at the moment is a clash between Tony Blair and France's President Jacques Chirac over the European model. The Gallic conservative appears, in British eyes, to defend Europe's social gains against the Prime Minister's efforts to abolish constraints on economic dynamism.

Engels once wrote of the process of social and political causality that “what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one intended”. It has been said, against Marx's collaborator's thesis, that the EU was conceived to preserve the power of nation states, and pool without loss the sovereignty and wishes of all.<sup>1</sup> Now, with an outright clash over fundamentals, with no one side likely to win outright, Engels may be proved right. What the electorates willed, the *intentions* of the EU's pro-Treaty governmental actors, their victorious opponents, and the consequences, are each far from clear. The present “pause for reflection”, postponing ratification of the Constitution, leaves open the future development of the Union.

The French campaign on the Constitutional Treaty, and its aftermath, has faced head-on these issues. France offers a prism that, above all through the left, reflects and splits Europe, from the run-up to 31 May to the fall-out from the vote.

Nowhere was the Constitutional Treaty more hotly debated than amongst the French Socialists, the Parti Socialiste (PS) – the party that it is heg-

emonic within the Parliamentary left (141 out of 178 left deputies in the National Assembly, 120,000 individual members). After the defeat of PS candidate Lionel Jospin in the Presidential Elections of 2002 two radical internal currents were founded, Nouveau Monde (New World) and Nouveau Parti Socialiste (NPS, New Socialist Party). Both made Europe their central concern. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, of Nouveau Monde, was previously a leader of the left group, the Gauche Socialiste (GS, Socialist Left) that promoted an alternative Europe-wide Social Republic, stating “We cannot make the Social Republic in a Single Country”. Grounded on “people's sovereignty”, dominating capitalist globalisation, it offered a raft of measures to develop public services, investment, welfare and the environment.<sup>2</sup> Nouveau Monde has increasingly defined this project in opposition to the path taken by the EU. The smaller NPS advocates a more democratic Sixth Republic and a priority to the transformation of the Socialists' organisation.

In 2003 the two tendencies won around 40% of the PS conference vote (which is reflected proportionally in their “Parliament”, the Conseil National). However, a former leader of the GS, Julien Dray, went over to the centre Majority of Party Secretary, François Hollande, and became the Socialists' official spokesperson. The influence of Jacques Delors' more market-friendly pro-European views – while defending its “social dimension” – remained dominant.<sup>3</sup> During the negotiations on the Constitutional Treaty the PS advocated – out of government – the protection of public services, fiscal harmonisation and cultural support against the multinational media. The PS left's position was reinforced when the Constitutional Convention's draft Treaty was modified last year. Pushed by Tony Blair it watered down Union powers, social rights, and labour market regulation in the name of flexibility (*Le Monde*, 18 June 2004). Nevertheless an internal PS vote in December 2004 saw 58.8% of members supporting the final Treaty.

On the non-Socialist left the majority has been hostile to the direction the EU has been taking since

the French Maastricht Treaty referendum (1992). This, which brought to the fore opposition from Communists, Trotskyists, the resignation of Socialist Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, was only approved by a whisker. This time an alliance emerged of the LCR, the PCF, Nouveau Monde, thousands of local committees, appeals and the intellectual energy of the think-tank the Fondation Copernic, and European Social Forum sponsors, ATTAC (launched by the monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*).<sup>4</sup> Two of the trade union federations, the CGT (after an initial attempt to adopt a neutral stand) and Force Ouvrière, joined the Non camp. Former Prime Minister (1984-86), Deputy Socialist Leader, Laurent Fabius, and his friends, urged blocking the Constitution: its threadbare approach to social and labour rules left no room for amendment (*Le Monde*, 30 November 2004). The themes that united – at least superficially – these groups were the defence of a Social Europe against the Treaty's concessions to neo-liberalism (enforcing competition, eroding public services), ambiguities over social rights, its democratic deficit, and alignment with NATO. Chevènement's much reduced Mouvement Républicain et Citoyen continued to defend state sovereignty. The Parti des Travailleurs ("Lambertists") mounted its own initiatives to promote France's national Jacobin traditions.

The Oui camp was led by the main parties in the National Assembly, from Chirac's UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire), his allies the UDF (Union pour la démocratie Française), to the PS majority. A desperate President increasingly directly intervened in the campaign as it began to founder. Socialist leaders called in their friends in European social democracy to rally support. From the UK Europe Minister Denis MacShane joined in, and made a thorough fool of himself. The Green party, les Verts, favoured the Treaty, though most of its left minority was caught up in the groundswell for a Non. The centrist union federation, the CFDT, endorsed the Constitution, as did the influential Islamic association, the UOIF (Union des organisations Islamiques de France) which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood and Britain's MAB. These forces, by no means exclusively from the political élite, lacked popular resonance. Any momentum the Oui may have had evaporated when speculation grew about a "Plan B" to deal with a Non win.

The triumph of the Non was followed by joyful declarations and agonised autopsies. All analysis of the popular will is, in the land of hypertrophied opinion polls, contentious. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) lost little time in declaring that the Treaty opponents were, in the majority, of the left, trade unionists, youth and most of the work-

ing class (64% of left electors, including 54-56% of the pro-Oui PS, 62% of the 25-29 age group, 79% of workers). Unemployment loomed large in people's concerns (46%), French conditions (52%) and the economically liberal nature of the Treaty (40%). The Oui supporters were wealthier, overwhelmingly supporters of the conservative Raffarin government, and likely to live in comfortable urban districts (*Rouge*, 10 June 2005, *L'Humanité*, 1 June 2005). For Nouveau Monde 75% of the total left voted Non (Nouveau Monde website, 7 June 2005). Writing in the pro-Constitution *Nouvel Observateur* Claude Weill claimed by contrast that for 100 Non electors only just over a half backed the Parliamentary left, 5% the extreme left, and that 20% were far-right Front National supporters, 18% of the Parliamentary Right and 12% had no preference (9 June 2005). They indicated that many middle class voters (58% earning between 2,000 and 3,000 Euros a month) cast their ballots for Non. Of the 48% of French people who consider there are too many foreigners in the country 67% voted against the Treaty. Weill asserted that the common thread was loathing of "liberalism", a term so widely used that it had become meaningless.

Whatever the validity of these partisan interpretations they do indicate that a powerful left impulse was at work. However, the Referendum result was not the act of a unified class subject. Political affiliation, class and civil society support and motivations were more diverse than some on the left believe. It is not surprising that many Non voters were right-wing. The ultra-conservative Mouvement pour la France of Philippe de Villiers was very prominent during the Referendum, and the less active Front National was equally opposed. Underlying the left Non result, was an undefined belief that some kind of new Constitution or change in European and French institutions could be obtained. It is precisely because of this lack of clarity that real difficulties lie ahead.

If the atmosphere inside the PS had been heated before 31 May it became a furnace afterwards. After rows and insults swamped their Web Forum the Socialists were obliged to close it down (*Le Monde*, 3 June 2005). ATTAC was threatened with the removal of public subsidies. The PS was all the more affected in that it had appeared to be gathering strength by winning all but one of the regional councils last year. The Socialist Majority blamed the present defeat not on the Treaty but on dissatisfaction with the UMP government, and asked why the rest of Europe should suffer for Chirac's domestic policies. Despite 71% of PS sympathisers being against sanctions, on 4 June Laurent Fabius was evicted from his No.2 position and his allies were removed from the Bureau National (167 for, 122 against and 18 abstentions). Benoît Hamon, of the NPS, which had respected

party discipline and did not campaign outside the PS for a Non, accused the leadership of “autism” faced with the results of the referendum (NPS website, 7 June 2005). A special PS Congress on 18 November will draw up a new party Project to prepare for the 2007 Presidential Elections. The position of François Hollande is by no means secure, though it is hard to see the left rallying to a challenge by Laurent Fabius with his Prime Ministerial record as a proto-Blair.

The Non left, socialist or not, has been reinvigorated, from the declining PCF, to the Ligue, which last year fared badly in European and regional elections. This left has announced its intention to sustain a unitary campaign. The LCR proposes initiatives with the PCF: a programme of a “rupture with capitalism”, and a possible electoral alliance of all the Non campaigners. Nouveau Monde supports renegotiations of the Constitution on the basis of popular power, a halt to the liberalising Lisbon agenda and deregulation along the lines of the Bolkestein Directive, economic integration of the new Union members, and an alignment and rally of the Social Europe left. Conscious that its 21 National Assembly members depend on the electoral goodwill of the Socialists the PCF is warier, and more modestly backs continued mobilisation. The poorly attended Parisian Non march on 16 June indicates the limits of these appeals.

François Hollande argued during the campaign that the French left had few allies with any power who could influence Europe in a better direction than that offered by the Constitutional Treaty. In the absence of any levers in the Council of Ministers, and inter-governmental talks, it is difficult to see how the Non campaigners – in both France and the Netherlands far from office – can determine the outcome of the negotiations on Europe’s future. Yet a *tertium quid*, social Europe, is a widely shared objective on the Union’s left whatever the stand on the ratification process. There is a good case for

a European social republic. 1970s programmes, the UK Alternative Economic Strategy, Chevènement’s take on the Projet Socialiste, for the national control of the economy, could not grapple with the global flux of capital. A social Europe with the architecture to grapple with these problems, that can promote public ownership, investment, the upgrading of social rights and welfare, internationalist economic measures, and a progressive foreign policy, requires institutions, not just activism. Despite Mélenchon’s pessimism it remains to be seen if all social democracy can be excluded from their construction. In their absence voices offering something other than “Anglo-Saxon” capitalism, or an already liberalising Europe, will struggle to be heard.<sup>5</sup>

#### Notes

1. Marx-Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Progress Publishers 1975, p.395. Engels to Bloch, 21 September 1890. This use of Engels to describe how the decisions of the European Union work out is made in Keith Middlemas, ed., *Orchestrating Europe: The Informal Politics of the European Union*, Fontana Press 1995. On EU nation states see Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, Routledge 1994.
2. Gauche Socialiste, *Democratie et Socialisme*. See particularly, ‘Pour une République Sociale Européenne’, February 1999.
3. George Ross, *Jacques Delors and European Integration*, Polity Press 1995. For Delors’ backtracking see John Grahl, *Notes on Financial Transformation and Social Citizenship in the EU*, London Metropolitan University 2002.
4. See ‘Décodage de cinq points clés du traité’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2005.
5. At its gloomiest foreseen by John Palmer (*Guardian*, 28 May 2005). See his *Europe without America*, Oxford 1987, for a sustained left pro-European argument.

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