

# France: Jean-Luc Mélenchon launches the Left Party

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Senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon and approximately 1,000 supporters have split from the French Socialist Party and set up a new party, the *Parti de Gauche* (PG; Left Party), copying the example of the German *Die Linke*. Oskar Lafontaine, the leader of *Die Linke*, was present as a guest of honour at the founding conference of the *Parti de Gauche* in Saint-Ouen on November 29.

In his address to the founding congress, Mélenchon called for the foundation of a "melting pot" party (*parti creuset*) where Socialists, Communists, ecologists and republicans "mix" the histories of their political organisations "to make something new". He proposed "a revolution by elections" through a "new political majority" built through "a left front". The aim of this "left front" was to oust the Socialist Party from its dominant position in the parliamentary left by overtaking it in the European elections in 2009 and by "putting social-liberalism into quarantine".

Like its German counterpart, the real purpose of the *Parti de Gauche* is to block a political turn by the masses to the left and to foment new illusions in the program of capitalist reforms that has so miserably failed with the Socialist Party.

The *Parti de Gauche* explicitly backs the trade unions. In his speech, Mélenchon called "to strengthen the trade unions, which are fighting on the front line".

The programme proposed by the new party was summed up at the end of Mélenchon's speech. He called for a social shield (a minimum income for all) and promised a ten percent redistribution of wealth from the capitalists to the workers. He envisages a world, not where the banks are put under social ownership, but where somehow the bankers' greed has been tamed, where "the creators and the intellectuals are at the head and the financiers bring up the rear." Or, as Oscar Lafontaine put it in his speech: "We must civilise capitalism."

Both Lafontaine and Mélenchon praised François Mitterrand, French president from 1981 to 1995, as a model. Mélenchon declared: "We do not forget that it was to the victory of the Common Programme [of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party] that we owe retirement at 60." Lafontaine glorified the 1971 Epinay congress, where Mitterrand took over the leadership of the Socialist Party.

Lafontaine called for "the participation of employees in the capital of their enterprise" and advocated "a mixed economy where private enterprise, by far in the majority, exists alongside nationalised enterprises."

Mélenchon, with strongly nationalist undertones, called for the strengthening of European borders: "Just as against the economic liberal Europe, open to all the winds of an absurd free market which

lets everything in, we must demand a customs filter at the frontiers of the Union during this exceptional period, which will block social and environmental dumping."

## A safety mechanism on the left

Mélenchon's decision to leave the Socialist Party (SP), of which he has been a member for 31 years, is a reaction to the general disintegration of the official French parliamentary "Left", the Socialist Party and the Communist Party (CP), and the loss of their previous social base.

Since the 1970s, the alliance of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, in and out of government and with the trade unions largely under their political influence, has served as the main prop of French capitalist rule. But their continuous shift to the right has resulted in the political alienation of the mass of the French working class from these parties.

This came to a head in the 2002 presidential elections, when SP candidate Lionel Jospin was relegated to third place by the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, and ten percent of the electorate voted for candidates nominally describing themselves as Trotskyists. This spelled the end of the official "Left", the mechanism through which French capitalism had maintained its rule after the revolt of 1968.

In 2005, during the referendum on the European Constitution, an attempt was made to form a broad alliance on the left of the official Socialist Party comprising sections of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Pabloite *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR) and other political formations. Several factions of the Socialist Party, with Mélenchon playing a prominent role, defied the official party line and campaigned for a "No" vote, sharing platforms with CP-leader Marie George Buffet and LCR-spokesman Olivier Besancenot.

But even though this campaign was successful and the European Constitution was defeated, the attempt to merge the "No" camp into a new party, which was heavily promoted by the LCR, failed. The factions of the Socialist Party that had backed a "No" vote, including Mélenchon and his supporters, quickly reconciled themselves with the party leadership. And the Communist Party made clear that it was not ready to break its alliance with the Socialist Party, on which its parliamentary seats and ministerial posts depended.

As a result—and after a relatively sizeable vote for Olivier Besancenot in the 2007 presidential elections—the LCR decided to establish a New Anticapitalist Party (NAP) on its own. This project,

which is to be formally launched in January 2009, has found a wide response in the media, while Besancenot has received high ratings in opinion polls. Mélenchon's decision to form the *Parti de Gauche* is a reaction to this.

Although Besancenot and the LCR have gone to great lengths to repudiate any connection to revolutionary politics and have explicitly rejected the heritage of Trotskyism, there are considerable reservations amongst ruling circles about conceding too much space to the LCR. France has been badly hit by the world economic crisis, and a further radicalisation amongst French workers and youth, renowned for their militancy, is to be expected.

While Besancenot has been transformed into a celebrity by the media and is treated with great respect by ruling circles, there are considerable doubts over whether the party he is forming will be able to control and derail a militant movement of young people and workers. Unlike the SP and the CP, it does not have a strong bureaucratic apparatus with hundreds of well paid, case-hardened functionaries at its disposal. Hence, there arises the need for additional left-wing instruments to derail a social movement.

The *Parti de Gauche* represents the third launch of a new "left" party this year. After the LCR announced its plans for the New Anticapitalist Party, the *Parti des travailleurs* (PT, Workers Party of Pierre Lambert) established a *Parti ouvrier indépendant* (POI, Independent Workers Party) in June of this year. The aim of the new party was to better integrate local state bureaucrats, to whom the PT had appealed in the 2007 presidential elections, when it presented its candidate Gérard Schivardi as the candidate of France's 36,000 mayors.

## A political operator

Jean-Luc Mélenchon himself is an experienced political operator. Like many leading figures in the French "Left" he received his initial political training in one of the radical groups falsely describing themselves as Trotskyist.

Born in Tangiers in Morocco in 1951, Mélenchon was a high school student leader in the youth revolt of May 1968. He joined the OCI (International Communist Organisation) led by Pierre Lambert and was active in the student unions.

In 1971, the OCI ended its affiliation with the international Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and supported the Socialist Party, whose leadership was taken over by François Mitterrand in the same year. Many OCI-members were covertly sent into the Socialist Party, among them Lionel Jospin, the later prime minister.

Mélenchon followed them in 1977, having been expelled from the OCI. From then on he was a staunch Mitterrand supporter. He was elected senator in 1986 and, apart from a four-year spell out of office, has remained a senator to this day. He served as a junior minister in the Jospin government from 2000 to 2002. He has actively led or participated in many different groupings on the "left" of the SP.

Mélenchon and his collaborator Marc Dolez, a deputy from Nord, the department in the far north of France, announced their decision to break from the Socialist Party and to form the *Parti de Gauche* after the motion endorsed by Benoît Hamon, who claims to represent the left wing of the party, received only 19 percent of the members' votes

in the run-up to the Socialist Party Congress at Rennes. Twenty-nine percent backed the motion led by Ségolène Royal, the 2007 presidential candidate, and 25 percent supported that of Martine Aubry, the Mayor of Lille and present party leader. Both, Royal and Aubry, are staunch supporters of the European Union.

Given that Mélenchon has accepted every twist and turn in the party's line for three decades, the official reason for the break is obviously bogus. The real reason is the rapid disintegration of the Socialist Party, which is split down the middle between the supporters of Royal and Aubry and locked in bitter factional enmity.

Aubry won the national membership ballot for the post of first secretary in November with only a wafer thin majority over Ségolène Royal. Aubry has the backing of the heavyweights in the party—from IMF-head Dominique Strauss-Kahn to the former Prime ministers Lionel Jospin and Laurent Fabius—while Royal is basing herself on new members, who were attracted by her right-wing course and joined the party through the Internet. Royal wants to take the SP into an alliance with the centre-right MoDem (Democratic Movement) of François Bayrou.

Under the conditions of a Socialist Party in deep crisis, Mélenchon is attempting to revive the project of a broad alliance on the left that failed after the referendum on the European Constitution. It would involve the Socialist Party—or some sections of it—a as well as Besancenot's NAP.

Immediately after the founding of the *Parti de Gauche*, Mélenchon and Dolez made a call for "the setting up of a front of left forces for the European elections". Mélenchon declared that his aim was to make the 2009 elections to the European Parliament "a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty". Dolez left the Socialist Party group in the National Assembly and joined the Communist Party-Greens group of deputies.

The Communist Party has responded positively to the invitation of the *Parti de Gauche*, proposing its own "Progressive European Front". As the Communist Party is already in an electoral alliance with the Socialist Party and the Greens for the European elections, this brings the *Parti de Gauche* back to where it came from—with one noticeable difference: its invitation for a "front of left forces" explicitly includes Besancenot's NAP and the Lambertite POI, which support its line on the Lisbon Treaty. The virulently anti-EU POI is in regular discussion with the *Parti de Gauche*.



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