

What are the politics of French Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon?

Alex Lantier in Paris
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Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Left Front has emerged as the leading presidential candidate on the left of the French political establishment. Polls show him receiving roughly 13.5 percent of the vote, up from 6 percent in December. After organizing his March 18 “seize the Bastille” rally in Paris, he is holding a series of rallies across France.

News outlets carry continuous coverage of Mélenchon and his key social demands: a 20 percent increase in the minimum wage to €1,700 (US\$2,230) a month, a 100 percent tax on income over €360,000 (US\$472,000) per year, and the nationalization of banks and energy firms. He has called Washington the top international threat to the world and repeatedly denounced bankers.

He is attracting attention because there is far more popular support for such demands than for those of Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande—the main bourgeois “left” candidate, currently expected to win the election. Hollande wants to balance the budget, continue most of incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy’s social cuts, and keep France in NATO.

Mélenchon, who spent 32 years in the PS and knows Hollande well, has called him a “big bowl of tepid water,” though he has not ruled out negotiating a deal with him after the presidential election.

Mélenchon’s message is that workers can get better wages, living conditions, and public services by electing an outspoken but experienced politician of the French Republic like himself. He told *La Voix du Nord*, “We are not the far left, we are the left of concrete radicality.”

As any examination of his political history shows, however, Mélenchon’s promises are empty. He is promoting policies he has no intention of carrying out so as to give a falsely radical veneer to French social democratic politicians as they prepare further budget cuts and austerity policies.

Mélenchon started out in student politics in the eastern French city of Besançon after the 1968 general strike. He

joined the Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI) in 1972, the year after the OCI broke with the International Committee of the Fourth International, which today publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*. He left the OCI for the PS in 1976.

At the time, the OCI’s perspective was centered on the false conception that it could develop a revolutionary working class movement, centered in France, by pressuring the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the newly-formed PS to form a “Union of the Left” and take power. In fact, this played into the plans of PS leader François Mitterrand. A former Vichy collaborationist official, Mitterrand had rebranded himself as a social democrat and sought an alliance with the PCF to obtain a working class voter base and win the presidency.

Mélenchon was recruited on the “Union of the Left” perspective and claims to have been bowled over when he first heard Mitterrand speak publicly: “He spoke about happiness, he spoke about politics, he spoke about the beauty of snow. It liberated me. We had never dared say ‘I’ before. When I entered the PS, it was a revolutionary party.”

In reality, the PS was a bourgeois party preparing to smother post-1968 working class radicalism, and Mélenchon was making his way from petty-bourgeois “left” politics towards high state office. From his time in the OCI, however, Mélenchon retained both French chauvinism and the quick tongue and blustery tone of an ex-student radical.

When Mitterrand came to power in 1981, he carried out a wave of nationalizations and spending measures to temporarily boost workers’ purchasing power. The bourgeoisie reacted by pulling money out of France, sending the French franc plunging and breaking its parity with the German mark specified by the European Monetary System, the precursor to the euro.

Mitterrand dumped his reform policies in 1983, carrying out an “austerity turn” supported by the trade union bureaucracy and petty-bourgeois “left” parties. He implemented policies to cut purchasing power, close steel and auto factories, and privatize nationalized industries.

Amazingly, given the devastating consequences of Mitterrand’s program for the working class, Mélenchon makes the following comment on his ties to Mitterrand at the time: “I was blinded by affection and my Romanesque perception of my proximity to him. But I do not regret anything.”

Mélenchon’s explanation in his biography *Mélenchon the Plebeian* for the abandonment of any reformist program is significant. He blamed “Salvador Allende syndrome,” claiming: “We all had in mind the defeat in Chile.”

He is implying that he was afraid that, if the PS did not follow Mitterrand’s line and abandon reformist policies opposed by the ruling class, it might suffer the fate of Chile’s social democratic regime under President Salvador Allende. In 1973, Allende was overthrown in a US-backed coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. Thousands of Chilean workers and youth were massacred and Allende was shot.

This gives a far more realistic picture than Mélenchon’s election speeches of the state of class relations in modern society. The ruling class will use the most ruthless methods to preserve its wealth and social privileges. As the 1983 experience made clear, a reformist program for the working class is a political lie designed to sow confusion and demoralization. The working class can impose policies that correspond to its interests only by building of a politically independent, revolutionary working class movement to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

This applies no less to Mélenchon in 2012, amid the European debt crisis which saw Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou forced out last fall by the banks shortly after he faced the threat of a military coup, than to Mélenchon and Mitterrand in 1983.

Since 1983, however, Mélenchon and the social layer he represents have turned even more sharply to the right. The Left Front presidential candidate, who worked on PS corporate relations in the Paris area during the “austerity turn,” went on to a lucrative career. Mitterrand had taught him to say “I” very well. He joined the Freemasonry, became a senator (it is “a golden job,” he comments), and adapted his left rhetoric to the PS’s right-wing policies during the 1990s.

When Mitterrand participated in the US-led 1991 Gulf

War against Iraq, Mélenchon met three times with Mitterrand to get approval for his empty “anti-war” stance. He supported the free-market Maastricht treaty that founded the European Union (EU) in 1992 to avoid causing problems for Mitterrand, adopting the slogan: “Let’s do Europe, the social part will come immediately after.” He again dropped his objections to European financial treaties in 1996 to help the PS’ Lionel Jospin run for the premiership in 1997.

Sidelined inside the PS by Jospin’s humiliating defeat in the 2002 presidential elections, Mélenchon began to consider leaving the PS. In November 2008, his supporters split from the PS and launched the Left Party (PG). They subsequently formed the Left Front through an alliance with the Stalinist PCF and smaller petty-bourgeois groups.

Such organizational maneuvers have not, however, altered Mélenchon’s reactionary politics. For all his chauvinist anti-American rhetoric, he is a toady of US imperialism. He supported the US-led Iraq War in 2003 and last year’s NATO war in Libya. As for the EU institutions he helped build, they have emerged in the Greek debt crisis as key instruments for the oppression of the European working class by Europe’s imperialist powers.

Mélenchon will inevitably disappoint the hopes for a left-wing policy that millions of people are being encouraged to place in him. The main risk is that, if he is not politically exposed by a challenge from the left, the anger and demoralization arising from the disappointment of these hopes will provide the basis for the emergence of a powerful far-right party.



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