

What was French Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon's campaign?

Alex Lantier in Paris
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After obtaining 11 percent of the vote in Sunday's first round of the French presidential election, Left Front candidate and former Socialist Party (PS) minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon has openly fallen into line with PS candidate François Hollande.

On election night, Mélenchon unconditionally endorsed Hollande against incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy in the May 6 run-off. Hollande even thanked Mélenchon for not asking the PS for anything in return for his support; polls show Mélenchon's roughly 4 million voters will overwhelmingly vote for Hollande. Having declared himself to be "very dangerous" to the banks, Mélenchon is now fully backing an individual who called himself "not dangerous" in talks with London bankers in February.

These events provide an appropriate setting to draw an initial political balance sheet of the Left Front—a coalition of long-time PS allies such as the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), Mélenchon's Left Party (PG), which split off from the PS in 2008, and a faction of the petty-bourgeois "left" New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) led by Christian Picquet. It also puts into context the praise various petty-bourgeois "left" parties have showered on the Left Front.

Thus the British Socialist Workers Party headlined its article on Mélenchon: "Left surge shakes French ruling class." It described him as a "radical left politician who has upset the balance of France's presidential campaign."

In the United States, the International Socialist Organization's Lee Sustar praised Mélenchon as the center of a "left-wing surge." He enthused that Mélenchon had "forced the entire political debate to the left ... Mélenchon's campaign platform marks a break from the Socialist Party's typical pro-business rhetoric. He calls for a 20 percent increase in minimum wage, a ban on layoffs by profitable companies, a heavy tax on financial transactions, and annual limits on incomes to \$472,000, with anything over that amount going to taxation."

In fact, the Left Front did not shift the "political debate to the left," because its own campaign was at bottom a political lie. Mélenchon always stressed that he intended to call for a second-round vote for the "left" candidate with the most votes—that is, Hollande. In a campaign dominated by two uninspiring candidates, Hollande and Sarkozy, Mélenchon's job was to provide a bit of demagogic "left" rhetoric that would have no impact on what Hollande would do, but that would generate false hopes in the population and strengthen the PS vote.

This explains why Mélenchon can now unconditionally back a candidate of the financial aristocracy, who is committed to €115 billion in budget cuts and will not implement any of the demands for which Mélenchon

ostensibly campaigned. Mélenchon observed yesterday that he might be "erased from the new political landscape." More to the point, now that he has handed his voters over to Hollande, he sees his role in the presidential election as completed.

Such transparent political cynicism is one of the reasons why large numbers of French voters are now likely to register a protest vote not with the bourgeois "left" parties, but through a vote for the neo-fascists. Mélenchon finished fourth, behind neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen (18 percent), whom he had vowed to surpass.

This predictable outcome of the maneuvers carried out by the Socialist Party's "left" satellites did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm for Mélenchon in the French and international petty-bourgeois "left." What these forces saw in the Mélenchon phenomenon—besides the possibility that a few more Left Front officials might win seats in the June legislative elections—was a campaign based on virulent hostility to Marxism and the political independence of the working class.

This is the product of Mélenchon's unsavory political history. He started out in student politics after the 1968 general strike, joining 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*. At the time, the OCI was operating on a false, nationalist perspective: by pressuring the PCF and the newly-formed PS to form a "Union of the Left" and take power, the OCI could build a mass revolutionary movement.

Mélenchon subsequently joined the PS in 1976, working under President François Mitterrand. He became a Senator after Mitterrand carried out his "austerity turn" against the working class in 1983, and then a minister in the 1997-2002 Plural Left government. From his time in petty-bourgeois "left" politics, however, Mélenchon retained a talent for combining unserious protest slogans and French nationalism, couched in a pseudo-left vocabulary hostile to socialism.

Mélenchon laid out his program for the 2012 elections in two documents, the Left Front's 2012 election program, *Humanity First*, and a longer book, *They Should All Go Away—Quick, a Citizens' Revolution*. This refers to the "citizens' revolution" upon which Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa has based his presidency, and which Mélenchon admires.

The term "citizens' revolution" itself immediately makes clear that what Mélenchon has in mind is not a movement based on the working class, but on all the citizens of the nation. Such a perspective has nothing to do with Marxism.

Even viewed purely in the context of French history—where every great revolutionary struggle after the French Revolution of 1789 saw a violent confrontation between the working class and the capitalists—such a program can only have a right-wing character. Its thrust, as Mélenchon makes clear, is the claim that the exploiting and exploited classes in a nation have common interests.

He notes that the notion of a “general interest” common to the entire nation is criticized by those who believe that “the social interests of the dominators and dominated are necessarily in conflict. For them, the general interest can only be an illusion in the service of the dominators to make their interests appear to be the common good. ... I think that political ecology has the advantage of settling this debate. Yes, there is an objective general interest, common to all of humanity, which affects every aspect of life: it is saving the ecosystem on which human life depends. The citizens’ revolution is oriented by political ecology.”

Characteristically, Mélenchon avoids identifying who and what he is arguing against: the ABC of Marxism, which argues that the interests of capital and labor are in conflict. On the contrary, the “citizens’ revolution” aims to reconcile the “dominators” and the “dominated,” as Mélenchon calls them, on the basis of suppressing social revolution.

Calling for the “primacy of the ballot box,” he writes: “The revolution that I desire is a citizens’ revolution first of all in this, that if it is rooted in the social movement, it is triggered and develops through ballots and elections.... It is not shouting, in an old-fashioned way, ‘the mine to the miner and the earth to the tiller.’ ... We must tear ourselves from all our prejudices and personal interests.” He denounces those who “stupidly” associate revolution with “an armed ‘great night.’”

Briefly put, what Mélenchon calls “revolution” is using trade-union protests (“the social movement”) to affect the outcome of elections to the bourgeois state. This is not revolution, but the conventional course of political life under capitalism in France and many other European countries.

To the extent that Mélenchon refers to the heritage of classical Marxism and 19th-century revolutionary struggles, it is simply to hold that up to mockery. Despite his empty bluster about taxing the rich, Mélenchon has no intention of giving “the mine to the miner” or, more broadly, democratic control of the economy to the working class. Such demands have no place in Mélenchon’s plans for “revolution” through the ballot box.

His crude denunciation of those who believe in an “armed ‘great night’” is not directed against acts of individual terrorism, to which the term “great night” is not applied, but against social revolution. The fact that Mélenchon’s “citizens’ revolution” can do without a storming of the Bastille, or the *Aurora* firing on the Winter Palace to signal the Red Guards to take power in revolutionary Russia, signifies simply that it is not, in fact, a revolution.

An experienced politician, Mélenchon knows well that the demands he is ostensibly advancing for greater social equality cannot be realized save by massive social upheaval, to which he is hostile. How can he then continue to advance his slogans? Mélenchon explains, “I consciously treat my desires as if they were reality. This makes them contagious. I find this method stimulating. It is radicalness as I understand it: very concrete and governmental.”

This extraordinary comment goes to the heart of the political lie that was

Mélenchon’s campaign. Listening to Mélenchon speak is, by his own admission, entering into a land of political make-believe, in which he can propose anything to win support and, ultimately, to tie the working class to the PS or similar bourgeois, pro-austerity parties. This is not the “method” of a revolutionary, but the *modus operandi* of a careerist operative without any political convictions.

Armed with right-wing social demagogic inside France, Mélenchon steps onto the world stage, where he reveals himself to be a vulgar defender of imperialist war. By his own account, he holds the view that war as a basically unavoidable feature of human society.

In *They Should All Go Away*, he explains: “The permanent drive to fight one’s neighbors, both internal and external, each time there is a conflict of interest, still deeply divides human communities. The world is already driven by the conflicts between the major powers. They will be as exuberant tomorrow as the explosion of the number of humans. Do you realize? There are as many people living today as have existed since the beginning of humanity ... And you think that History will calm down?”

At first glance, Mélenchon’s foreign policy musings have two main targets: the United States and Germany. A closer examination of his positions soon reveals a difference, however.

His anti-American outbursts and his call for “global” independence from Washington have not prevented him from supporting France’s participation in recent US-led wars—both the NATO bombing of Libya and operations to back pro-imperialist forces in Syria. Nor has Mélenchon made any real criticisms of the recent imperialist interventions France has spearheaded with US support in its former colonies, such as in Ivory Coast. Mélenchon is, in fact, fully on board with French imperialism’s recent alignment with Washington’s foreign policy.

Mélenchon refers extensively to a confrontation with Germany, writing: “Unfortunately I do not think Europe is destined for peace ... We Frenchmen must realize that the generation of rulers of reunified Germany is no longer that which was brought to reason by remorse and contained by the division into two states. To uninhibited German leaders we must oppose disillusioned French leaders.”

Despite his chauvinist pretenses that France is a “universalist” nation, he makes no appeal for international class solidarity to German workers against the risk of war inside Europe. Rather, he entertains the possibility of annexing eastern Belgium, to beef up France against Germany.

Dismissing Belgium as an “artificial state,” he writes: “One could easily imagine that if the Flemish seceded from Belgium, the [Francophone Belgian] Walloons could vote to join the French Republic. Many Frenchmen, like me, are enthusiastic ... It would make a really big France.”

Foreign policy, Trotsky remarked in an interview with an American newspaper a few months before his assassination by a Stalinist agent, is an “extension and development of domestic policy.” Mélenchon’s plans to redraw the map of Europe, are in their own way the most telling commentary on the class character of Mélenchon’s “citizens’ revolution.”

His goal is not revolution, but to exploit the political confusion created by the long domination of “left” politics by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties to control the working class at home and promote the global interests of French imperialism. This is why Mélenchon lines up behind a more influential imperialist politician, Hollande, and why his presidential

campaign has attracted the support of middle class, ex-left forces on an international scale.



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