

From pseudo-left to New Right: The trajectory of France's Jean-Luc Mélenchon

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18 October 2014

The trajectory of former post-1968 student radical, former Socialist Party (PS) senator, former PS minister, and now former Left Party (PG) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a political warning. Amid an unprecedented global crisis of capitalism, the pseudo-left parties are shifting into the camp of the right and building their ties with right-wing groups, including the periphery of the neo-fascist National Front (FN).

Since resigning from the PG leadership on August 22 and founding the Movement for a Sixth Republic (MSR), Mélenchon has proclaimed the death of socialism and the left, the irrelevance of the working class, his fear of revolution, and his conversion into a politician of the "people." His adoption of these positions, which are historically associated with far-right politics, reflects a new stage in the degeneration of the pseudo-left. They are coming out as the New Right.

Mélenchon is driven by the breakdown of the entire political and geo-strategic framework in which the pseudo-left has worked for decades. Wars, economic crises, shifts in the balance of power between the major imperialist countries and world powers, and rising popular anger over war and austerity have destabilized French politics. Following the disintegration of PASOK in Greece and the fall of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), the PS in France is collapsing and the FN vote is rising, as President François Hollande of the PS imposes austerity measures in the face of popular opposition.

Mélenchon's main fear is the risk of social revolution. In a *Le Monde* editorial titled "For a Sixth Republic with Popular Sovereignty All the Way," he makes clear that the MSR's calls for a referendum to remove the president reflect concern that mass anger against Hollande will explode well before his term ends in 2017. He writes, "If, according to polls (IFOP of September 8-9), 62 percent of the French people want him to leave earlier than planned, that has to be possible without barricades going up."

In his new book, *The Era of the People*, he warns: "I am well aware that the energy of immense masses trapped in a dead end can lead to eruptions on the wrong side of the volcano."

Such comments are a counterrevolutionary defense of capitalism. As for Mélenchon's attempts to give the MSR a "progressive" nationalist gloss by wrapping it in the aura of the French Revolution—they are a political fraud. He claims the MSR will revive citizenship and French sovereignty: "Since 1789, we define citizenship as the participation of all in the exercise of this sovereignty under the control of Virtue."

What rubbish! Mélenchon's invocations of virtue are diametrically opposed to those of Robespierre over 200 years ago. The French revolutionaries cited the need for Virtue to justify guillotining aristocrats and redistributing their wealth—a prospect that Mélenchon and his friend, the right-wing billionaire Serge Dassault, must be nervously contemplating today. Since Marxism and a materialist conception of history developed in the 19th century, however, moral appeals have ceased to be the basis of left-wing politics.

Mélenchon is trying to guard against social revolution, oppose left-wing

politics, and defend capitalist property. In *The Era of the People*, he announces the death of the left. He writes: "None of the realities of the coming world can be found in its reasoning or its plans, supposing it has any." He stresses that he is not attacking just the discredited view that the PS represents socialism. For him, all of left politics is in its death throes: "The disease is in an advanced state. It will not be healed with learned explanations to distinguish the true left from the false one."

Mélenchon has death certificates ready to be issued to socialism and the working class. "Here, the people takes the place that the 'revolutionary working class' occupied in the politics of the left," he writes. He calls for "getting beyond" socialism. "The citizens' revolution, it is not the old socialist revolution," he stresses.

Indeed. While socialist revolution is led by the workers against capitalist property, Mélenchon's "revolution" is a struggle to defend capitalist property against the working class. When he explains the subjects that are important to his national citizens' revolution, he begins: "First of all, property! This is a very sensitive issue. For some people, it is a fundamental right of human beings. For us, it is only a form of user rights."

This contemptible word-juggling is just an attempt to make Mélenchon's right-wing nostrums palatable to the affluent social layers that gravitate around the pseudo-left. The FN, the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the PS defend capitalist property. Mélenchon, we are told, believes only that capitalists have "user rights." However, these positions express one and the same class standpoint.

An examination of Mélenchon's book makes clear that what is driving his shift into the camp of the right is his fear of the death agony of capitalism and a renewed struggle for socialism by the working class. He is terrified, in particular, by the crisis of American imperialism, predicting an unending series of global crises and seeing no way out besides economic collapse and world war.

Pointing to unsustainable US budget deficits and military spending, and the rising weight of China in the world economy, Mélenchon writes: "The dollar will collapse and the United States with it. It's not a question of if, but when. On this issue, things are speeding up. What remains unclear is whether the United States will prefer all-out war to try to escape their fate. Or, if their monetary system collapses, will the United States not break up into as many states as exist in the union?"

Either outcome, Mélenchon notes, would devastate French capitalism. It would be "neither gradual nor painless," he writes. "It will ruin anyone with holdings in dollars. And it will also paralyze all world transactions in a chaotic spasm." Mélenchon unenthusiastically proposes a monetary union between France and China, but he does not try to hide his deep pessimism.

In a section titled "Let's get to the end fast," he initially holds out a slender hope that a scenario of war and global collapse can be averted by imposing financial discipline on Washington and Wall Street, and austerity on American workers. He writes: "This scenario could be

avoided only by close planetary cooperation. And if the United States accepted to inflict upon itself the sacrifices that it habitually demands of others through the IMF and the World Bank.” However, he concludes, “This will never happen. So catastrophe is inevitable.”

Such remarks, which exclude any intervention by the American working class to halt a disaster, testify to the total demoralization of pseudo-left charlatans like Mélenchon. Frightened by the discrediting of the bourgeois “left” parties, accepting in a sinister fashion the inevitability of world war and economic collapse, desperate to impose austerity on the workers, they hysterically insist that socialism is dead. This is another political fraud.

Mélenchon is well aware of the loyalties that have historically existed in the working class for socialism and which have erupted in periods such as the 1968 general strike. He knows that they still survive, despite the domination of official “left” politics in France by reactionaries such as himself. His denunciations of the left and the working class today, amid growing awareness of the failure of capitalism, are a pre-emptive strike against the possibility of a renewed mass movement for socialism.

This poses urgent questions of political perspective to workers and socialist-minded intellectuals and youth. Mélenchon denounces any attempt to “distinguish the true left from the false one.” In fact, the central political issue facing the working class is the gulf between the perspective of world socialist revolution advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the right-wing nationalism of false, pseudo-left reactionaries like Mélenchon.

However limited the value of Mélenchon’s predictions, there is no doubt that the world working class faces an unprecedented and deadly crisis of capitalism, raising all of the unresolved issues of the 20th century. Escalating financial crises, the US “pivot to Asia” to isolate China, and NATO’s military stand-off with Russia over Ukraine show that economic collapse and world war are imminent dangers hanging over working people.

However, as the ICFI wrote in its statement “Socialism and the Fight Against Imperialist War,” “the same contradictions driving imperialism to the brink provide the objective impulse for socialist revolution. The globalization of production has led to a massive growth in the working class. Only this social force, which owes no allegiance to any nation, is capable of putting an end to the profit system, which is the root cause of war.” With this statement, the ICFI dedicated itself to building the ICFI internationally and in France as the leadership of a socialist struggle of the world proletariat against the danger of war.

On the other side of the barricades, Mélenchon is denouncing socialism and associating with openly right-wing forces—praising the controversial far-right journalist Eric Zemmour, befriending nationalist UMP strategists like Patrick Buisson, and making overtures to FN leader Marine Le Pen.

This can be understood only as the culmination of Mélenchon’s career in deeply corrupt pseudo-left and bourgeois “left” politics. He joined the Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI) as a student youth in 1972, a year after the OCI had broken with the ICFI and Trotskyism. At the time, the OCI had the nationalist and class-collaborationist perspective that it could build a revolutionary movement by pressuring the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the newly-formed PS to join together in a “Union of the Left.”

Like many OCI members at that time, Mélenchon left the OCI to join the PS, in his case in 1976. He later said he was won over by the speeches of PS leader and future French president François Mitterrand. He became a senator after Mitterrand carried out his “austerity turn,” attacking the working class, in 1983. The two repeatedly met to coordinate political strategy. He later became a minister in the unpopular PS-led Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002), before leaving the PS to found the PG in 2009 as a pseudo-left satellite of the PS.

While the ex-OCI members inside the PS retained from the OCI a taste for nationalist demagogic, from Mitterrand they acquired ties to the most

terrible crimes of European fascism. Mitterrand had been an official in the fascist Vichy regime during World War II, winning its *Francisque* decoration. After the war, he kept up his ties with wealthy pro-Vichy business families and figures like Vichy chief of police René Bousquet, who helped organize with the Gestapo the infamous 1942 Winter Velodrome deportation of over 13,000 Jews from Paris to the Auschwitz death camp.

These ties exploded in the late 1980s, as Mitterrand used the FN to win a second term despite his unpopular policies. He split the right-wing vote, giving a green light to media coverage of the FN and changing electoral laws so that the FN would win a higher profile and take votes from the conservatives in the 1988 presidential election. These deals were done by a series of go-betweens, involving discussions between Mitterrand’s right-hand man Roland Dumas and FN leader Roland Gaucher. (See: “Cahuzac tax scandal, neo-fascist ties stagger France’s ruling Socialist Party”).

Amid the various scandals that emerged in this period over Mitterrand’s Vichyite background, Mitterrand defended Bousquet, who was charged, but ultimately shot before going to trial by a troubled writer, Christian Didier. This occurred in 1993, towards the end of Mitterrand’s second term.

These events exposed the full political and historical implications of the pseudo-left’s capitulation to the PS. They stood on the other side of the barricades from the workers, and the various ex-OCI members who were close associates of Mitterrand had nothing to say publicly on the matter. Lionel Jospin blandly commented on it as follows: “One would like to dream of a simpler and clearer itinerary for the man who was the leader of the French left in the 1970s and 1980s.”

For his part, asked later about how he saw his relationship with Mitterrand during the latter’s presidency, Mélenchon replied: “I was blinded by affection and my Romanesque perception of my proximity to him. But I do not regret anything.”

This capacity to completely ignore the criminal historical legacy represented by his associates was clearly instrumental in Mélenchon’s role in bourgeois “left” politics. It underlies his association with extreme right elements amid the crisis provoked today by the collapse and discrediting of the PS.

Hollande has fallen to 13 percent in the polls, and even PS allies like the pseudo-left New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) are openly asking whether the PS will suffer the fate of PASOK and collapse to a minor position in political life. In this context, Mélenchon has emerged as one of the more public go-betweens linking the PS not only to the NPA, but also to far-right circles. He has played a key role in the campaign to integrate far-right politics into mainstream political debate in France.

Mélenchon has publicly defended the far-right journalist Zemmour, whose recent book, *The Suicide of France*, attacks Robert Paxton, the highly respected historian of Vichy France, as anti-French. In 2010, Zemmour attracted public criticism for defending racial profiling on Canal+ television, stating: “Immigrant Frenchmen are stopped more often than others by police because most drug dealers are black and Arab. It is a fact.”

Mélenchon commented: “I know Zemmour. He should say he made a mistake. The guy isn’t racist. He’s a brilliant intellectual, but like all intellectuals, he’s as stubborn as a mule.”

As *Le Point* revealed in 2012, there was a quid pro quo. Zemmour helped secure an invitation for Mélenchon to meet the UMP’s Henri Guaino at the Arab World Institute in Paris. Guaino, then a top advisor to right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was pushing for a strategy of appealing to the FN voter base by organizing a reactionary “national identity” debate, discreetly met Mélenchon for lunch.

According to *Le Point*, “This lasted two hours, and topics included France’s role in the NATO military command, Europe, and French political life, the two men finding that they had much in common... This

lunch gave rise to a true complicity between these two fervent defenders of the French Republic, who are on a first-name basis.”

This was not Mélenchon’s only link to forces sympathetic to the far-right inside Sarkozy’s UMP. He also developed ties with Patrick Buisson, another top Sarkozy advisor, who was a former journalist at the far-right weekly *Minute* and devotee of the pre-World War II anti-Semitic publicist and far-right *Action Française* member Charles Maurras. Buisson also supported Sarkozy’s “national identity” campaign.

In 2012, when Mélenchon was the Left Front’s presidential candidate, *Le Nouvel Observateur* reported that in 2007, Buisson had invited Mélenchon as a friend to attend the ceremony where Buisson received the Legion of Honor. *Le Nouvel Observateur* explained: “The Left Front candidate and the very right-wing counselor of Sarkozy had been on friendly terms since before 2007, when they both appeared together on the ‘Politiquement show’ broadcast on LCI television.”

Mélenchon’s most public outreach in the direction of the far right, however, has undoubtedly been his repeated public appearances with Marine Le Pen. She formally took over leadership of the FN at a congress in Tours in January 2011, which elements within the FN tried to pass off as similar to the 1920 Tours congress that founded the Communist Party.

Marine’s role was to give a more publicly acceptable face to the FN than its previous leader, her father Jean-Marie, whose repeated moves to question or deny the Holocaust had earned him the dislike and distrust of a broad majority of the French people.

Mélenchon was one of the main accomplices of these reactionary maneuvers to “de-demonize” the FN. After he accepted an initial debate with Marine Le Pen on BFM-TV on February 14, 2011, he went to several more, and made sure that he kept his political options open with Marine Le Pen.

In April 2012, they met for a friendly video handshake in front of the TV cameras of Direct8 at the European Parliament. “You must be happy to see the system tremble,” Marine Le Pen told Mélenchon. “The pressure on you will be very strong,” she added.

“It will be even stronger on you,” Mélenchon replied, offering to organize another debate.

Le Pen thanked him, but said she was “tired of being called a fascist,” as Mélenchon had called her in the weeks before the meeting.

Mélenchon replied, “I’m tired of being called a Le Pen supporter, so I understand.”

Such exchanges provide context to understand the content and significance of Mélenchon’s recent decision to begin denouncing socialism. He was, of course, a supporter of the PS, social austerity, and French imperialism throughout his career. However, in response to the global crisis of capitalism and the unprecedented collapse of the PS within France, Mélenchon is crossing a political Rubicon.

The working class faces the emergence of a violently reactionary New Right, led by pseudo-left figures who are no less compromised than the FN by their association with the crimes of European capitalism in the 20th century. This underscores the correctness of the ICFI’s warnings that the working class can organize its struggles only independently of, and in opposition to, the reactionary forces of the pseudo-left.

Mélenchon is creating his MSR not as a party that lies somewhere in the political spectrum between the PS and a truly left-wing party, but as a party that can disorient mass opposition to capitalism and drive it into the dead end of alliances with right-wing parties.

This underlies Mélenchon’s enthusiasm for Podemos, a reactionary new pseudo-left party in Spain founded earlier this year by Stalinist professors around party leader Pablo Iglesias and the Anti-capitalist Left (IA), the NPA’s Spanish affiliates. Podemos also recruited advisers to the Venezuelan regime of the late President Hugo Chavez. Profiting from massive media promotion and the discrediting of the PSOE and the Stalinist United Left (IU), Podemos has shot up in the polls and is poised

to overtake the PSOE in terms of its electoral weight.

Podemos announces that it is willing to work with anyone—including not only the PSOE, but also the army and the Popular Party (PP), the right-wing party that emerged from the National Movement of fascist dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco. Last month, Iglesias announced that Podemos is ready “to talk to the PSOE and to the PP, because responsibility to the state moves us... We are not sectarian. On programmatic issues, we will not have problems with anyone.”

After Iglesias declared himself a “patriot” in a speech to assembled businessmen at the Ritz Hotel in Madrid, Podemos began recruiting in the Spanish army. Its branch inside the army published a statement online on August 20, declaring: “The army is necessary today, and we do not want to get into the anti-militarist debate.” Instead, it called for recruiting based on “what we believe can embrace all the ideologies that exist inside the army.”

Such a comment is all the more remarkable in that the Spanish army today descends from Franco’s army, which in the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War killed hundreds of thousands of Spaniards in a counterrevolutionary uprising to crush the Spanish Republic.

Iglesias’ comments fired Mélenchon with enthusiasm, however. He invited several leaders of Podemos to attend the PG’s summer school at the end of August. At the Festival of *L’Humanité*, the French Communist Party’s daily, Mélenchon told the media of his admiration for Podemos.

“They say what I have never dared say,” he declared. “They are showing the line of a new confrontation.”

The stench of social reaction emerges from such comments. What type of “confrontation” will Podemos organize based on alliances with the PSOE, the PP, and recruits gathered within the Spanish armed forces on the basis of “all the ideologies that exist within the army?” It will be the confrontation between a hated political establishment and the working class.



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