

French presidential candidate Mélenchon calls for bringing back the draft

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On Friday, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the ex-leader of the Left Front now running as the presidential candidate of the France unbowed (*France insoumise*) coalition, unveiled his military program. Mélenchon, who is posturing as a radical populist, wants to bring back the draft in order to prepare the French army for major wars abroad and for a stepped-up intervention in police operations in France in the context of the state of emergency.

Mélenchon's announcement came barely a week after that of Emmanuel Macron, whose candidacy is backed by large sections of France's ruling Socialist Party (PS), that he would bring back the draft in France to prepare its army for the major wars to come. Mélenchon, an ally of Greece's Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government, wants to impose a 9-12 month obligatory military service on all men and women aged 18 to 25. They would be paid the minimum wage.

He proposes to draft them into a "national guard," a unit initially proposed by the neo-fascist National Front (FN): "We are thus proposing to set up an obligatory national service, which would be the foundation of a citizens' national guard... To deal with the erosion of the link between army and nation provoked by the suspension of conscription in 1997, we must give back to the nation sovereignty over its own tools for defense."

Mélenchon signaled that he would accept massive increases in military spending: "It is strategy that commands, not the budget." This would entail slashing social spending.

Mélenchon also criticized Macron's proposal for a one-month military service, from the right: "I cannot take seriously the idea that we would draft all youth in France for one month. That is not conscription, that is just a vacation."

Such comments must be taken as a warning. Amid a global capitalist crisis of unprecedented scope since the end of World War II, as NATO threatens Russia with all-out war, Mélenchon is proposing to hand massive powers to the army and expand it into a force of millions.

A class gulf separates the workers from Mélenchon, who is undergoing the sharp turn to the right made by pseudo-left parties across Europe, notably his Greek ally, the pro-austerity government of the Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") party. In his book *The Era of the People*, which came out in 2014, Mélenchon proclaimed the end of socialism, the working class, and the left, calling instead for nationalist populism. He speaks for affluent and conservative layers of the middle class who are hostile to socialism and to the class struggle.

In 2002, they were horrified when mass protests erupted against the prospect of a French presidential runoff between neo-fascist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen and the conservative Jacques Chirac, and above all by mass antiwar protests before the illegal US invasion of Iraq. Since then, they have abandoned all opposition to war or to the right-wing populism of forces like the FN. In fact, they have accommodated themselves to the police-state policies of the PS and Le Pen's National Front (FN), and more broadly policies of austerity, war, and attacks on democratic rights.

Fifteen years later, the PS has imposed a year-and-a-half-long state of emergency, and the FN is poised to compete on the second round, or even to win. In this reactionary context, Mélenchon's reactionary populist campaign serves as a mechanism to block and dissipate left-wing demands among workers and prepare for large-scale war in Europe.

Mélenchon is rising in the polls: he is credited with

about 15 percent of the vote in the first round, nearly overtaking right-wing candidate François Fillon for third place, behind Macron and FN candidate Marine Le Pen. Mélenchon is now 4.5 percent ahead of the PS presidential candidate, Benoît Hamon. According to the polls, Mélenchon's voters support him because they hope that he will be the best representative of the “ideas and values of the left.”

In fact, Mélenchon is preparing a militarist, nationalist, and anti-worker policy. He has applauded his co-thinker, Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who trampled his electoral promises to end austerity and imposed social cuts demanded by the European Union (EU). Syriza rules Greece in coalition with the far-right, xenophobic Independent Greeks party.

Above all, Mélenchon insists that despite the manifest bankruptcy of capitalism and the failure of the PS, there can be no alternative on the left for the working class. After having run as the Left Front candidate in 2012, then supporting Hollande, Mélenchon is running in 2017 “outside the parties,” “solo,” insisting that the French people no longer want to hear about political parties.

That is, for Mélenchon, despite the FN's rise, to which he has accommodated himself quite easily, there can be no political program that corresponds to the objective interests of working people: social equality, opposition to war, and a defense of democratic rights.

In *The Era of the People*, he claims the left is totally dead: “No reality of the contemporary world can be grasped through its reasoning or its platforms, supposing it even has any.” His target here is not discredited claims that the PS might represent some type of socialism. Rather, he says that all left-wing politics, of whatever kind, is in its death throes: “The disease is at an advanced stage. It will not be healed with learned explanations of how to distinguish the true left from the false one.”

In fact, Mélenchon's call for a draft, amid an escalating danger of a NATO war against Russia, testifies to the political bankruptcy of the pro-war, anti-worker pseudo-left establishment represented by Mélenchon. He has nothing to offer the workers. He seeks to block them from organizing for themselves the necessary political organizations to offer leadership to the working class in struggle against the war drive of the bourgeoisie in France and in all the imperialist

powers.

Mélenchon seeks to give a “radical” cover to his pro-war policies with a few demagogic, nationalist slogans. Now, he is claiming that he wants to preserve France's military independence by leaving the NATO military alliance: “No one in Europe apart from yours truly is willing to say that the future of defense, of the homeland...is to leave NATO and this military downward spiral.”

This is only stirring up reactionary French nationalism; France has neither the economic resources nor the military strength to pursue a totally independent policy vis-à-vis the United States, Britain, Germany, and Russia. Just like his previous flirtation with proposing an independent Franco-Russian alliance, Mélenchon's proposals are aimed above all at whipping up nationalist sentiment. They do not commit him to anything concrete.

After the February 2014 putsch in Kiev, led by Ukrainian fascist forces and backed by NATO, Mélenchon made some criticisms and took up some pro-Russian positions. In February 2016, on France2 television, he congratulated Russian President Vladimir Putin for intervening in Syria to protect President Bashar al-Assad's regime. “I think he will solve the problem,” said Mélenchon, who went on to call for an “international military coalition to defeat the Islamic State.”

Now that he is rising in the polls, Mélenchon is aligning himself with those like Macron who are supporting NATO's threats against Moscow and laying the groundwork for a catastrophic world war against Russia. Recently, Mélenchon denounced Marine Le Pen's visit with Putin in Moscow, declaring: “I have no friendship with this man, nor common points with this man that would encourage me to seek a handshake from Putin, which discredits anyone who touches him.”



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