

# Mélenchon gains in French presidential polls after Trump's strike on Syria

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Last week's US missile strike on Syria is shaking up the French presidential campaign, as international events again intervene to shift the poll numbers of the leading candidates.

Right-wing candidate and former favorite François Fillon has collapsed since he was targeted on corruption charges in January after calling for a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis against Washington. For a time, the race was dominated by neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron, a former banker and economy minister backed by the ruling Socialist Party (PS) and supported by Berlin. He is calling for deep austerity and a revival of the military draft. Now, both Le Pen and Macron are fading after the Syrian strike and last week's presidential debate.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a former PS minister and leader of the Left Front who is now heading up the Rebellious France (*France insoumise*) campaign, is rising in the polls, from 12 to 18 percent, overtaking Fillon. PS candidate Benoît Hamon has said he would endorse Mélenchon in the second round. Were Hamon's voters (9-10 percent) to vote for Mélenchon, he would easily qualify for the run-off, facing either Macron or Le Pen for the presidency in the second round of voting.

The most significant aspect of Mélenchon's rise in the polls is the fact that it is in response to his criticisms of war and the pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment stoked by the PS under France's state of emergency, as well as by Le Pen's National Front (FN). Mélenchon held an election rally over the weekend in Marseille that attracted 70,000 people, according to organizers. He devoted much of his speech to criticizing war and the abuse of refugees.

Mélenchon attacked Trump and European leaders, including French President François Hollande, who have supported the strike on Syria. "I am the candidate of peace," he said.

"Remember these days when you go vote, these people

went behind him to hail Trump's intervention, which has no foundation, no international legitimacy, which was done by a single person and could drag you into a war," Mélenchon declared to applause from the crowd. "Think well about it: if you want peace, do not pick the wrong ballot in the voting booth. If you choose one for war, do not be surprised it war finally comes to you."

He also referred to the drownings of thousands of refugees fleeing the war in Syria in the Mediterranean due to the callous and reactionary anti-migrant policies of the European Union. "Good sea, how is possible that you have become the graveyard of 30,000 people who perished under the waves?" he asked, observing a minute of silence for the dead, and adding, "Listen all of you, that is the silence of death."

On the stirring up of hatred against immigrants, Mélenchon said that it is "up to us to reply that emigration is always a forced exile, it is suffering."

The surge in support for Mélenchon reflects deep opposition within broad sections of the population to PS policies of war, austerity and appeals to racist and law-and-order sentiment. That these sentiments are coming to the fore refutes the narrative that the rise of the FN reflects a constant and accelerating shift to the right by an irredeemably racist French population. In fact, powerful left-wing, socialistic sentiments exist, above all in the working class, though they have been suppressed throughout Hollande's presidency.

Five years of war and austerity under Hollande and 17 months of a state of emergency have produced an explosive social and political crisis. A poll last year found that two-thirds of the French population believes that class struggle is a daily reality of life. Despite constant official appeals to anti-Islamic hatred under the state of emergency imposed after terror attacks in 2015 in Paris, there is powerful opposition to nationalism.

After last year's mass protests against the Socialist

Party's regressive labor law, there have been protests and riots this year against police brutality, including the police rape of Théo in Aulnay-sous-Bois and the murder of Liu Shaoyo in Paris.

At the same time, the sharpest warnings must be made: Mélenchon cannot serve as a vehicle to advance workers' social aspirations. He has a long record, both inside and outside the PS, of betraying the sentiments he is now seeking to exploit, including popular opposition to the 1991 Gulf War and the launching of the euro.

His promises to be an anti-war or pro-immigrant candidate are false. His anti-Marxist populism—which rejects socialism, a politically independent role for the working class, and even the distinction between left and right—has proven to be a reactionary tool of the propertied classes. In power, he would prove an enemy of the working class.

Mélenchon's Greek ally, the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, won an election in January 2015 based on promises to end EU austerity programs that had devastated Greece. Tsipras utterly betrayed his election promises, beginning with his alliance with the right-wing Independent Greeks. He extended the EU austerity memorandum only weeks after taking office and imposed deep social cuts in the summer of 2015, defying a referendum he himself had organized in which over 60 percent of the Greek people voted “no” to austerity.

His Spanish allies, Podemos, are recruiting significant sections of Spain's officer corps and obtaining numerous posts in local and regional government, where they are proving to be tools of the banks, religiously paying back debts while smashing workers' strikes.

While Mélenchon claims to be a candidate of peace and tolerance, he is running based on calls to reinstate the draft. He is relying, moreover, on the support of the Left Front, whose deputies voted for the state of emergency in the National Assembly in November 2015. The significance of his call for a return to the draft, now that Trump's strike on Syria has directly raised the danger of a clash between NATO and Syria's nuclear-armed backer, Russia, is clear. He is seeking to prepare France for what Macron called an “era” of major wars.

The tears he is shedding over the fate of refugees in the Mediterranean are particularly hypocritical, in that he aggressively backed the NATO war drive against Libya and Syria in 2011 that has forced millions of people to flee their homes to Europe. The Left Front has also been a leading force in stoking anti-Muslim racism, supporting

laws banning the veil and the burqa.

Despite his invocations of opposition to xenophobia, Mélenchon is himself a nationalist politician. His program can do nothing to halt the drive to war, which is rooted in the outmoded character of the nation-state system and the deep contradiction between the division of the world into nation states and the international character of economic relations.

At his Marseille rally, he proposed to address the war threat by holding a “conference of security in Europe [regarding] all the problems that are emerging or have emerged from the Atlantic to the Urals.” This, he said, “would allow us to repulse the horrific threat that is coming into view thanks to the light of reason and discussion... We, the French, we would have to say that we want no wars, not small, medium sized, or big ones, on the Old Continent.”

This only begs the question: On what could Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the European heads of state agree if they sat down at such a conference? The US Democratic Party and the leading European governments pushed Trump to turn 180 degrees from his earlier talk of good relations with Russia and the Syrian regime and launch air strikes on Syrian forces. This points to the irreconcilable character of these antagonisms, rooted in the conflicting material and strategic interests of the major capitalist powers.

The decisive development today, however, is not Mélenchon's rise in the polls, but the growing opposition in the working class, in France and internationally, to war and the social depredations of capitalism. What is urgently required is the building of an anti-war movement and a Marxist political leadership in the international working class. This, in turn, necessitates a careful analysis and exposure of the bankruptcy of Mélenchon's anti-Marxist politics.



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