

No to war and nationalism! Build the PES!

Parti de l'égalité socialiste statement on the French presidential election

19 April 2017

The 2017 French presidential election, to be held in two rounds on April 23 and May 7, raises issues of international significance. It takes place under the shadow of war following the unprovoked US strike on Syria of April 7 and amid threats by Washington and the NATO alliance against Syria, Russia and North Korea. France is itself in a state of emergency, and leading presidential candidates have called for a French exit from the euro and the European Union and a return of the military draft.

The election is dominated by enormous popular anger against the political establishment and the traditional parties of government, The Republicans (LR) and the Socialist Party (PS). The PS, the hegemonic force in the French “left” since its foundation in 1971, shortly after the May-June 1968 general strike, is collapsing, discredited by its policies of austerity and war.

An international breakdown of established politics is underway. In Britain, a narrow majority voted last June to exit the EU. In the United States, Donald Trump was elected as president over the opposition not only of the Democratic Party, but also large sections of Trump’s own Republican Party. Since taking office, he has pursued a nationalist and militaristic “American First” program.

In France, this crisis takes the particularly noxious form of the possibility that Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), the descendant of the fascist collaborationist forces who ruled France during the Nazi Occupation, may become president. The possibility of such an outcome is the responsibility not only of the PS, but of an entire layer of pseudo-left organizations that long ago broke their historical links to Trotskyism, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Workers Struggle (LO). Abandoning all of the principles of revolutionary Marxism, they have oriented for decades to the PS, a reactionary party of finance capital.

In this atmosphere, in which opposition to the PS finds no effective political expression of a genuinely left-wing character, Le Pen is allowed to present herself as a populist and the main challenger to the ruling establishment. This situation, together with the explosive international crisis, has produced numerous shifts and crises in the election campaign.

At first, LR expected that, as in previous elections, it would benefit from the crisis of the PS. But in January, LR candidate François Fillon was badly damaged by corruption charges that surfaced shortly after he proposed an alliance with Berlin and Moscow against Washington. This set up a race between Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron of the PS-backed On the March movement. After the unprovoked and illegal US strike on Syria, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Unsubmissive France movement, formerly the Left Front) has been rising in the polls based on growing antiwar sentiment, especially among youth.

The election is now too close to call. In an unprecedented situation, four candidates—Mélenchon, Macron, Le Pen and Fillon—are in a statistical tie. Any two could conceivably qualify for the runoff.

Whatever its outcome, the presidential election will solve nothing. France is deeply polarized and class tensions are at the boiling point. Two-thirds of the French population says class struggle is a daily reality for them, 20 percent more than in 1968, just before tens of millions of workers joined the May-June general strike. Amid a deep international crisis and the imminent danger of war, bitter political convulsions and class struggles are being prepared.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), founded last year as the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is intervening to offer an internationalist, socialist and revolutionary alternative for the working class. The PES does not endorse any candidate. It encourages the broadest social struggles and opposition to war and nationalism. Its central responsibility in this election is to explain to workers and youth the class role played by the candidates and the necessity to build the PES in France and the ICFI internationally as the authentic Trotskyist vanguard of the working class.

The discrediting of the PS and the rise of the FN

The French political establishment is being torn apart by the collapse of the PS, following the path of similar anti-working class social democratic parties across Europe, from Greece’s Pasok to the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). Incumbent PS President François Hollande is so hated that, in a decision without precedent for a French president, he did not seek a second term.

Hollande’s presidency is the end product of what was from its foundation a thoroughly rotten party. The PS was founded in 1971, after the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) discredited itself by refusing to take power during the 1968 general strike. It was not a socialist organization, but a tool of the most reactionary social forces. A loose coalition of social democrats, social Catholics, ex-Stalinists, ex-Trotskyists and former officials of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, it functioned as an electoral vehicle for a leading ex-Vichy politician, François Mitterrand. In 1981, Mitterrand became France’s first PS president.

From the beginning, the PS became the axis around which countless so-called revolutionary parties revolved. In 1972, the PCF signed the Common Program with the PS, boosting the PS’s socialistic pretensions by associating it with the Soviet Union’s main political ally in France. The PCF was destroyed when Mitterrand’s PS-PCF government swiftly repudiated its promised social reforms after coming to power, declaring an “austerity turn” in 1982, and when the PCF subsequently supported the restoration of capitalism in the USSR.

All of the organizations in France that had emerged out of the Trotskyist movement repudiated Trotsky's proletarian internationalist perspective, defended by the ICFI. Instead, they capitulated to the PS.

The Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI, today the POID, or Independent Democratic Workers Party), the ICFI's former French section, split with the ICFI in 1971 on the false, nationalist perspective that the PS-PCF alliance would create a workers government. This alliance set the stage for the career of Lionel Jospin, an OCI member working inside the PS, who became Mitterrand's leading assistant and, in 1997-2002, prime minister of France.

The PS developed influence in the middle classes through a broad network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Freemasonry, social democratic sections of the trade union bureaucracy and academia. It developed close ties with the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, the predecessor of the NPA) in the 1980s via the SOS-Racism NGO, and with the OCI through the student unions.

The OCI/POID, LCR/NPA and LO, while they fought factional battles inside such organizations against the PS and expressed the discontent of sections of the French middle class with the PS's big-business policies, did not speak for the working class. At no point did they present themselves as seriously challenging the PS or seek to build a mass party of the working class against the PS. All of them functioned in the milieu of the state and its political periphery, effectively building up the PS as an alternative to building a revolutionary party.

The 2002 presidential election crisis was a decisive experience. When Jospin was eliminated in the first round, protests erupted against a runoff between the conservative Jacques Chirac and the FN's Jean-Marie Le Pen. The LCR, LO and Workers Party (PT, the ex-OCI) had collectively won 3 million votes in the first round of the election. At the same time, international antiwar protests were erupting against plans for the illegal US invasion of Iraq. The LCR, LO and PT proved unable and unwilling to do anything with this opportunity, however.

The ICFI issued an open letter to the three parties, proposing a campaign for an active boycott of the runoff. Without hiding its political differences with these organizations, the ICFI explained that an active boycott, mobilizing workers in struggle, would best prepare the working class to fight back against the wars and social attacks Chirac was preparing. The three parties did not bother to respond, however. They simply aligned themselves with the PS's campaign for a Chirac vote, supposedly to block neo-fascism from coming to power and preserve democratic rule in France.

Effectively, these parties told the millions of people who mobilized against Le Pen that they should not have bothered to march and protest. They could have simply allowed the election to take place and Chirac to take power. By adopting this policy of backing a right-wing candidate supported by the PS, supposedly in order to defeat the danger of authoritarianism and fascism posed by the FN, all three parties made clear that they had no intention of posing an alternative to the capitalist system. Instead, they pursued ever more openly pro-imperialist and pro-war policies.

Amid the escalating international crisis of capitalism in the 21st century, their reactionary role gave an opening to the FN. It was transformed from a minor party that sometimes attracted a right-wing protest vote into a contender for power.

The escalating divisions within the NATO alliance and the turn of the EU to a policy of deep austerity that developed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis gave an opening to Le Pen. She could denounce from a reactionary nationalist standpoint the economically suicidal austerity policies imposed by the EU and the PS. Le Pen also spoke to growing sentiment in the French ruling class for police state measures and against German hegemony in the EU.

In this decade, the FN also opposed NATO proxy wars in Syria and

Ukraine supported by the PS and the NPA, based on an imperialist policy of keeping Russia as a French ally against Germany. The FN is a pro-war party that enthusiastically backed the French war in Mali. It was nonetheless able to present itself as less aggressive than the PS and its "left" allies, who supported a war drive that openly involved France and the other NATO powers in a direct confrontation with Russia, a major nuclear-armed power.

Ultimately, Hollande came to rely on the FN as a mechanism to stabilize his deeply unpopular PS government. He invited Marine Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace after both of the terror attacks in Paris in 2015 and imposed a state of emergency suspending basic democratic rights. The PS then proposed to inscribe the principle of deprivation of nationality, which was the legal basis for the outlawing of leaders of the French Resistance and the deportation of the Jews to death camps during the Occupation, in the French Constitution. With such an unequivocal repudiation the traditions of left-wing politics, the PS sought to legitimate the FN as part of the political mainstream.

What do the French presidential candidates propose?

The rise of the FN is only one particularly noxious expression of the degeneration of the French capitalist class as a whole. The French bourgeoisie is politically bankrupt and has nothing to offer. Despite their bitter tactical differences on foreign policy orientation and conflicts over corruption charges, the 2017 presidential candidates are united in their support for militarism and police state rule. They all support a costly buildup of the military and the police that can be achieved only through drastic attacks on social rights of the working class won over generations of struggle.

Marine Le Pen has led a far-right, populist campaign rooted in the traditions of French fascism, allying herself with far-right forces such as Geert Wilders of the Netherlands and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and glorifying Trump. She speaks for layers of the ruling class who seek alliances with Trump and Russia to confront German hegemony in Europe. She once declared that only one word is needed in talks with Merkel: "No." She proposed a Frexit from the EU and a return to the franc before backing down in recent weeks under pressure from the banks, saying she would submit these proposals to a referendum first.

Her party is a coalition between the descendants of Nazi-collaborationist forces such as the French Popular Party (PPF) that founded the FN in 1972 and new arrivals over the last decade from PS split-offs, notably around Jean-Pierre Chevènement. She opposed the FN's traditional anti-Semitic positions and her father's stance denying the Holocaust in a pragmatic policy to "de-demonize" her party and win power. She also abandoned its free market rhetoric, claiming that she will "protect" the people, mixing attacks on Islam and calls for a massive police buildup with calls for social policies such as lowering the retirement age.

Le Pen has established a voter base in the working class due only to the reactionary role of the PS and its political periphery. Her populist attacks on the PS and LR won a broad hearing among those disillusioned with the PS. Her law-and-order and anti-immigrant rhetoric is largely indistinguishable from that of the PS. She has pledged to increase military spending to 2 percent of GDP. Her populism is a reactionary fraud. The FN's fascistic program, advanced amid a historic war crisis and collapse of capitalism, will inevitably bring it into the most violent conflict with the working class.

François Fillon speaks for pro-EU layers of the bourgeoisie with ties to Russia who are hostile to the US-led war drive against Russia and China.

He bitterly criticized Hollande's attempt to push Washington to launch air strikes against Syria in 2013 and went to Russia to meet with President Vladimir Putin, where he made a public statement denouncing Hollande's policy.

If elected, Fillon would lead a violently right-wing government closely tied to the far right. He advocates drastic austerity and massive job cuts and makes nationalistic, law-and-order and lifestyle appeals to the FN voter base. Not only did he initially propose moves to all but eliminate public health care in France, but he has relied at key points in his campaign on far-right Christian elements linked to the anti-gay marriage Protest for Everyone movement. He also plans to increase military spending to 2 percent of GDP.

Emmanuel Macron, a former Rothschild banker and PS economy minister, is the favored candidate of Berlin, which he has repeatedly visited, including for a personal meeting with Merkel. He has called for a hard line in talks with Moscow and also criticized Trump, aligning himself with factions in Berlin and the NATO alliance working with the US Democratic Party against Russia.

Macron's aggressive military policy makes clear that a German-led EU offers no alternative to the militaristic policies of US imperialism. He has called for a return of the draft and an increase in defense spending to 2 percent of GDP. He has also received the support of major figures in the security establishment who played key roles in the state of emergency and Hollande's extrajudicial murder operations. These figures include PS Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

Behind Macron, the main forces in the old French political establishment are seeking to recycle themselves. His On the March movement is clearly being considered as a possible escape route for PS politicians seeking to leave the PS and join an organization that makes no reference to socialism. Much of the PS leadership has backed Macron, not PS candidate Benoît Hamon. Macron also has support from sections of LR around Alain Juppé, who consider Fillon too close to the far right.

Benoît Hamon won the PS nomination as voters mobilized in the PS primaries against his rival, former Prime Minister Manuel Valls. He was promoted in the media and by a layer of academics because he proposed a universal minimum income for all, independent of employment. He has a pro-US, militarist, law-and-order program, proposing to raise military spending to 3 percent of GDP and boost police powers. He attacks pro-Russian statements by other candidates.

Hamon's campaign rapidly fell behind as it became clear that Hamon would not break with PS officials most closely associated with Hollande's austerity policies, such as Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri. Moreover, his universal minimum income proposal proved to be unpopular. It would have provided a miserly few hundred euros per month to workers, based on the pessimistic concept that, due to technological change, large layers of workers will never again find regular work.

Mélenchon and the dead end of French nationalism

Jean-Luc Mélenchon is, for now, being seen by a significant section of voters as the alternative to the right-wing policies of Le Pen, Fillon and Macron. His support has risen in the final stages of the election campaign largely because significant layers of youth back his recent statements against war and anti-immigrant hatred and approve of the social demands included in his election program: wage increases, student financial aid and a lowering of the retirement age. The turn to antiwar rhetoric is bound up with Mélenchon's so-called "Plan B" strategy, developed after his Syriza allies began imposing deep EU austerity on Greek workers.

The PES supports large wage increases, a reduction in the retirement

age, free education and financial aid to students. It encourages the broadest social struggle for such demands. It warns, however, that if Mélenchon is elected, workers will have to prepare for a bitter struggle against him.

Mélenchon, a long-time PS politician, is laying a trap for the working class—a specialty he has developed over an extended career, first in the OCI and, starting in 1976, in the PS. Should he come to power, he will prove to be, no less than Syriza, a determined enemy of the working class.

A brief examination of Mélenchon's record should suffice to dispel illusions that he will fight for the demands in his program. He joined the PS in 1976 after a brief membership in the OCI, becoming a PS senator. He left the PS only in 2008 to form the Left Front, together with the PCF and split-offs from the NPA. While in the PS, he worked closely with Mitterrand to defuse popular opposition to Mitterrand's policies, claiming to oppose the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq and the launching of the euro, but dropping his opposition when Mitterrand told him it was opportune to do so.

He was a minister in Lionel Jospin's unpopular 1997-2002 government and supported the 2011 NATO war in Libya. The Left Front voted to impose the state of emergency in the National Assembly in 2015.

The programs and demands Mélenchon puts forward today are so much empty demagoguery. His is a bourgeois program. A socialist policy requires the united action of the European and international working class. No serious reform measures can be taken by French capitalism, which is dependent on international capital flows and far less capable of making concessions even than it was 35 years ago, when Mitterrand made the PS's "austerity turn."

Mélenchon's foreign policy, embodied in his "Plan B," is reactionary and nationalistic. His "Plan B" is based on the premise that a French capitalist government must be willing to confront Berlin and possibly leave the euro. Discussing with *Le Parisien* the demands he would place on Germany if elected, Mélenchon said, "The Germans have no way to say no. The Spanish, the Italians, the Portuguese, the Polish, a whole series of countries have had enough. If the Germans don't want to move, I have said the Plan B is to leave [the EU] with them [the above-listed countries]."

Mélenchon is not developing an internationalist strategy to mobilize workers in France and across Europe to defend workers targeted by EU austerity, in Greece or elsewhere. Nor is he proposing an antimilitarist strategy. He is proposing to bring back the draft and prepare for war, while outlining a change of military alignments within Europe.

Mélenchon's rhetoric is a dangerous combination of social demagoguery, populism and nationalism. Under Hollande, Mélenchon has moved far to the right. He founded the Unsubmissive France movement to avoid running publicly as the candidate of the Left Front, based on the perspective, outlined in his book *The Era of the People*, that the left, socialism and an independent role for the working class are all obsolete. His friendships with right-wing, nationalist figures such as LR political advisor Patrick Buisson and journalist Eric Zemmour are a matter of public record.

To find a historic precursor for Mélenchon, one would have to return to figures like Henri De Man, the Belgian social democratic leader of the 1920s and 1930s. A nationalist who called for planning under capitalism during the Great Depression, De Man opposed Marxism and developed along very reactionary lines. He corresponded with a variety of right-wing figures, including Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Ultimately, during the decisive crisis of the 1940 Nazi invasion of Belgium, he pressed aggressively to dissolve his own party and support the establishment of a Nazi-collaborationist regime.

The bankruptcy of the New Anti-capitalist Party

To workers and youth seeking a left-wing critique of the PS and Mélenchon, the PES addresses the sharpest warnings regarding the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and other parties like it, such as LO and the POID. These are long-time associates of the PS, bitterly opposed to Trotskyism. They do not oppose war or austerity any more than Mélenchon.

The NPA descends from middle-class forces from which the ICFI split at its foundation in 1953, and which later found a social base in portions of the post-1968 petty-bourgeois student movement. It speaks for pro-imperialist layers of the affluent middle class. The conversion of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) into the NPA in 2009, a few months after the 2008 Wall Street crash, was intended to send a clear signal to the political elite: the LCR was breaking any residual identification with Trotskyism and preparing a major shift to the right in the face of the global economic crisis.

“The NPA does not claim a specific relation to Trotskyism,” the LCR wrote in its founding platform for the NPA, “but continuity with those who, over the last two centuries, have confronted the system all the way. The NPA is a pluralistic and democratic party. [There was] participation of comrades from various components of the social movement, of the anti-globalization left, of political ecology, of comrades from the PS and the PCF, from the anarchist movement, from the revolutionary left. Without becoming bland, the NPA has everything to win by opening itself even further.”

The PES has extensively documented on the *World Socialist Web Site* the NPA’s subsequent role. Together with Mélenchon, the NPA called for a Hollande vote in the 2012 runoff election. Over the last six years, the NPA has played a key role in promoting NATO interventions in Libya, Syria and Ukraine, in large part aimed at Russia. It supported the pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece. The war drive has been at the heart of the NPA’s intervention in the 2017 elections. Its criticisms of Mélenchon’s “populism,” coming as the press was attacking Mélenchon’s pro-Russian positions, were from the right, reflecting anger over Mélenchon’s criticisms of a war drive against Russia supported by the NPA.

After Trump’s strike on Syria, Phillipe Poutou, the NPA’s presidential candidate, issued a statement dissociating himself from antiwar protests in terms virtually indistinguishable from CIA propaganda. The statement slandered opponents of war in Syria as defenders of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, declaring that “without any support for or hope in the American army strikes, we will not join the protests of the French political parties, who, in order to advocate a ‘reasonable’ peace with El Assad and his minions, close their eyes to the hundreds of thousands of dead killed by the dictator and the millions of displaced and refugees.”

The 2017 presidential election campaign is an indictment of the LCR/NPA’s entire political evolution since the 2002 presidential election crisis. The LCR told workers to rely on the traditional bourgeois parties, including the LCR’s PS “comrades,” to halt the drive to authoritarian rule, war and deep austerity that masses of people feared would occur if the FN took power. But it was the PS that imposed a permanent state of emergency, carried out drastic social cuts, and waged a series of wars. And it relied on the NPA to block opposition to war from the left.

The struggle for Trotskyism in the working class will not take place in an alliance with the NPA, LO or the POID, but in bitter struggle against them.

The discrediting of the French political establishment is an initial stage in a vast political reorientation of the French and international working class, carried out under conditions of a resurgence of war and dictatorship. There is no other road but a return to the fundamental principles of revolutionary Marxism. On this centenary of the October Revolution, as masses of people are reminded of the irreconcilable struggle and internationalist perspective of the Bolshevik Party and the heroic struggles of the Russian working class 100 years ago, this is the perspective advanced by the PES.

The PES insists that the defeats and betrayals suffered by workers during the period when the PS was falsely identified as socialist, and the LCR as Trotskyist, can be explained and reversed only from the standpoint of genuine Trotskyism. The PES bases its struggle on the international continuity of the ICFI’s intransigent defense of the political independence of the working class and its opposition to petty-bourgeois pressures that led so many organizations in France to abandon Trotskyism for alliances with the PCF or PS.

Founded last autumn as the ICFI’s French section, the PES was not in a position to stand its own candidate. However, we are confident that our perspective will win increasing support amid the rapidly escalating crisis of capitalism. We appeal to workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals to join and build the PES.

The PES opposes imperialist war and all forms of nationalism. Together with its sister parties in Europe, the Socialist Equality Party of Britain and the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* of Germany, it advances the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe. It opposes both the EU and the policies of those, like Mélenchon and Le Pen, who oppose the EU on a nationalist basis. The war crisis and the EU’s austerity drive will not be solved through conflicts between states, but through the class struggle and overthrow of the capitalist class by the working class in every country, and the building of a federation of workers’ states pursuing socialist policies across Europe.

Above all, the PES seeks to build the ICFI as the revolutionary international leadership of the working class, to mobilize the working class in a struggle against war and capitalism. In line with the ICFI’s statement against war, it stresses that:

- The new antiwar movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and put an end to the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.
- The new antiwar movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.
- The new antiwar movement must, above all, be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.



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