

François Ruffin runs populist campaign in Amiens for France's legislative election

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Tomorrow, filmmaker François Ruffin will run in the second round of the French legislative elections against Nicolas Dupont, the candidate of President Emmanuel Macron's The Republic on the March (LREM) party, in a constituency around Amiens in northern France. Ruffin is running with the endorsement of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the former Socialist Party (PS) minister and leader of the Unsubmissive France (UF) movement, as well as of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the Greens.

The unseriousness of Ruffin's credentials as an "opposition" figure is underscored by the fact that he has endorsed a Macron vote on television. Though Mélenchon refused to formally endorse either Macron or National Front (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen in the presidential election, while making clear that he in fact supported Macron, Ruffin said: "I would slip an Emmanuel Macron ballot into the ballot box." However, Ruffin claimed that he would be "a firm opponent of Macron the next morning, because I don't think he would bring anything positive to the people of my region."

Ruffin is a successful independent filmmaker whose film *Merci Patron* (Thanks, boss), about his shaming of businessman Bernard Arnault over the firing of the Klur family after the outsourcing of their jobs, won a César award. Despite the success of his film, Ruffin's election bid, closely tied to the old PS-linked political establishment, offers nothing new to the workers—even as the PS disintegrates and is absorbed by LREM, which advances an even more right-wing, free-market program.

In fact, it exemplifies the bankruptcy of the various political forces in Amiens that for decades have orbited around the PS and its ally, the PCF, as they oversaw the deindustrialization of the region. The constituency in

which Ruffin is running covers the larger towns of Amiens and Abbeville and a string of former industrial villages of the valley of the Nièvre, which were PCF strongholds. It regularly voted in a PCF deputy until 2011.

Factories in the area began shutting down at the end of the 1970s, as the PCF worked closely with the PS on its austerity policies during the 1980s and 1990s. In Amiens the Goodyear factory closed three years ago, the workers isolated by the unions and the PS and the PCF. Currently its Whirlpool and automotive plants are also faced with closure.

Over decades, no political tendency sought to build a left-wing movement in the working class despite escalating social misery among workers in Amiens and across the old industrial belt of northern France. This created the conditions for the neo-fascist National Front (FN) to win influence and votes across the region.

These forces proved incapable of building a political movement despite rising working class anger with the PS, not because it was impossible to find a hearing, but because they do not want to build a movement against the PS, Macron and similar forces. Their populist rhetoric aims to win a limited hearing among workers, while allowing them to coexist with the PS and similar reactionary forces.

Ruffin's campaign does not aim to lay the basis for building a movement in the working class, however. He wants to win support based on populist appeals and promises to serve as a gadfly making more exposures of the mistreatment of poor people at the hands of the political system. His campaign seeks to halt the collapse of the PCF, the Greens, and related pseudo-left forces, while working out a basis for coexistence with the FN as it consolidates its voting base.

Last month, Ruffin was videoed warmly shaking the

hands of his FN opponent in a bar where both had agreed to be photographed.

As he launched his campaign in his Amiens-based satirical magazine, *Fakir*, Ruffin made no bones about his sympathy for the political parties that for decades have pillaged the working class. He wrote, “In every place which previous voted PCF or PS ... the FN is in the lead, 35 percent in the last general elections. Against 6.5 percent for the Communist list, plus 5 percent for the Greens. How awful!”

He blamed this situation on France’s last president, François Hollande of the PS, saying that Hollande did not struggle against the banks the way he had promised, and that PS deputies in the National Assembly did not oppose it: “It’s because the deputies supported [Hollande]. Because they abandoned their campaign promises. Because they did not bring down the government.” He added that his purpose was to reverse a situation where, between the PS-allied parties and the workers, “The bond has been broken, the divorce consummated.”

He insisted that he was not building a political movement, but creating something “for the duration of the battle, to create a group, weld it together, shoulder to shoulder in the storm, comradeship just for the moment.” He added that such an “adventure” could allow him to develop a broader presence in the media and perhaps obtain his own TV or radio show.

Ruffin also does everything he can to undermine the confidence of anyone considering voting for him that a victory of the working class is possible, while making clear that he believes the region should keep close ties to the PS, PCF, and allied pseudo-left tendencies.

In a France Info interview, he explained that he was working with these parties because they “will bring me know-how, for example on how to keep accounts for my campaign. I have no idea how that works. But I always work that way: I try. I do cinema that way, with my little camera, and do-it-yourself solutions. Now I’m starting out in politics. I’m certainly not guaranteed that I won’t f*ck up, that’s for sure.”

In a recent election meeting in Abbéville, Ruffin made no mention of the rise of the FN or of how to fight it. His handshake with FN officials was treated as a non-issue. The meeting was essentially pro-Macron. Ruffin ventured no criticism of him, and the main speaker, Patrick Pelkoux, chairman of a trade union of

emergency physicians and former contributor to the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, declared: “We’ve got nothing against the President of the Republic, he’s been elected, but society must put humanity first. We are all human beings, beings made to live together.”

Ruffin’s campaign material promises little to workers if he wins, besides giving Ruffin a larger platform to make media statements. One recent campaign leaflet proclaimed, “I will kick arse in the National Assembly. ... I will be the mosquito in the house of deputies, to keep them from falling asleep.”



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