

French presidential scandal: Mélenchon defends the riot police

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On Saturday, Unsubmissive France (LFI) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon sharply attacked French President Emmanuel Macron in an interview with *Le Monde*. Discussing the illegal attack on peaceful protesters by a top Macron aide, Alexandre Benalla, who was captured on video beating an anti-austerity protestor while wearing a riot police uniform. In his comments, Mélenchon made no appeal to mass anger among workers against austerity and police repression. Instead, he advanced the demands of the police forces against Macron.

Mélenchon told *Le Monde* that the main issue behind the public outcry which has erupted over the publication of the video is that the police hierarchy has lost confidence in the president after Macron approved disciplinary action against police officials. “A political crisis has erupted,” Mélenchon said. “The National Assembly is paralyzed. The police hierarchy is also, because three dismissals have upended a rule that is as old as the high public service itself: officials serve and obey, but it is politicians that take the blame.”

Mélenchon added more specifically that Interior Minister Gérard Collomb, the civilian official charged with overseeing the police, had lost the confidence of the security forces: “The Interior Minister is already disqualified. He has lied, a lot! No policeman can believe him anymore. Of course he will resign, and many more, as well.”

Workers must be warned: a class gulf separates Mélenchon from masses of workers hostile to Macron’s austerity and militarist policies. The Benalla Affair has exposed the illegal and gratuitous character of the police forces’ repression of peaceful protests, but Mélenchon is not trying to mobilize working class opposition to the rising police state machine. He is making himself the spokesman for anti-democratic

police agencies that are increasingly trying to overcome all limits placed on their vast repressive powers.

For a number of years, and above all since the imposition in 2015 of a state of emergency suspending basic democratic rights, the ruling class has cultivated the security forces as a chief base of political support. Mélenchon postures as the defender of the legitimate interests of the police hierarchy but there is nothing progressive in the anger and complaints of police commissaries and Interior Ministry functionaries. This social layer, largely won to neo-fascism, is comprised of professionals of repression and the most aggressive defenders of the financial aristocracy.

Now, politicians who are trampling workers’ social demands underfoot are all rushing to defer to the security forces. The prosecutor’s office and the General Inspectorate of the National Police have all launched investigations and the National Assembly has launched a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the matter. They are not opposed to Benalla’s brutality, which is commonplace in the riot police, but his decision to “illegally” take over the police’s role, which he “usurped,” according to Justice Minister Nicole Belloubet.

All the official opposition parties are rallying to defend the police. On Twitter, neo-fascist deputy Sébastien Chenu complained that the video of Benalla “harms the image of the security forces” while conservative deputy Eric Ciotti said: “The courts must urgently investigate this affair, which harms the rule of law.” Socialist Party (PS) secretary Olivier Faure complained that the scandal is undermining the image of an “exemplary Republic” that he wanted Macron to defend.

On Friday, the opposition in the National Assembly demanded that Collomb and Prime Minister Edouard

Philippe testify in person. Philippe came, referred to the judicial proceedings that have been launched, and said he was pleased that the affair is “now in the hands of the judiciary.”

Mélenchon is swimming in this stream of political forces demanding that people “understand” the legitimate anger of the police. Asked by *Le Monde* whether he would now take back his occasional criticisms of the press corps, Mélenchon laughed and replied that the press is “a system that is usually hostile to us, except now, but this is an exception (laughter).”

In fact, LFI and Mélenchon are closely enmeshed in the army, intelligence and police machine. Their defense of the police is of a piece with the petty bourgeois, anti-Marxist populism promoted by Mélenchon. In the decades that have elapsed since he arrived in a bourgeois government as a member of the PS under François Mitterrand in 1981, and since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the USSR in 1991, LFI’s different political components have all become parties of the capitalist state.

Mélenchon’s security and foreign policy advisors—retired officer Djordje Kuzmanovic and Alexandre Langlois, an official of the General Intelligence (RG) domestic spy agency and leader of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor’s (CGT) police union—are integral parts of the repressive apparatus the state aims at the working class.

LFI is intervening in a deepening crisis of the police machine itself. The state of emergency was first imposed in 2015 and the vast repression of social protests like the 2016 movement against the PS labor law and the 2018 strikes against rail privatization have stretched France’s vast police apparatus to the breaking point. One sign of the crisis is the suicide rate among policemen, which is three times the national average.

The mock indignation, disarray or outright panic in the political establishment in this affair reflects their fear that the police agencies directed against the workers could collapse amid growing social struggles and amid deep conflicts between the Elysée and the police.

When asked by *Le Monde* about the potential existence of a “secret illicit security cabinet at the top levels of the state,” Mélenchon signaled that powerful factions of the ruling class would use this crisis to exert enormous pressure on or even get rid of Macron. He

insisted that the crisis is “at Watergate levels. The entire world is now aware of this. ... Mr. Macron thought the affair would stop by itself. He committed a grave error. Now no one will let this go.”

Developing the parallel between the Benalla affair and the crisis that led to the resignation of US President Richard Nixon, and posturing as a “democratic” opponent of Macron, Mélenchon provocatively insisted that Macron “is organizing a personal militia. ... We live in a Republic! We should remember it.”

He continued, “A crisis is a crisis, its outcome is unpredictable. We will have done what we should do as a democratic opposition. You have seen no provocations or exaggerations from us. We are working in the limits of parliamentarism. These are institutions that we disapprove of, but that we respect. But if they destroy them, they will have done our work.”

These musings of Mélenchon are reactionary. A “destruction” of parliamentary institutions by one or another faction of the ruling elite and its allies in the police establishment, whether or not they are tied to LFI, would not represent the opposite of a revolutionary struggle to free the working class from capitalist exploitation. All the factions of the police—those tied to Mélenchon, to Macron, or to the neo-fascists—are hostile to the working class and the youth, and the fact that Mélenchon speaks for the riot police exposes the anti-working class politics of his party.



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