

France's “yellow vest” protests expose Jean-Luc Mélenchon's pro-capitalist populism

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The eruption of mass protests against President Emmanuel Macron is fast exposing the bankruptcy of the corrupt, petty-bourgeois anti-Marxists that for decades have passed for the European “left.”

Protests by workers, retirees, and small businessmen against fuel tax hikes and pension cuts were organized via Facebook, outside the control of the union bureaucracies and official political parties. These forces held aloof from the “yellow vest” protests, which they neither expected nor wanted. Their hostility to the “yellow vests” was epitomized by Stalinist union official Philippe Martinez's refusal to march with the “yellow vests,” which he justified by slandering them as neo-fascists.

So, when Unsubmissive France (LFI) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon said he would attend “yellow vest” protests, one protester replied on Twitter: “You're trying to exploit the movement and kill it off, go back and chat with your pal Macron.” And this weekend, Mélenchon posted a note on his blog titled “On the citizens revolution of the yellow vests,” proclaiming socialism dead and the working class politically irrelevant.

He wrote, “I'm jubilant. Current events are in my view the confirmation of the theoretical schema set up in the theory of citizens revolution as summarized in my book *The Era of the People* ... This conceptualization breaks with the traditional dogmas of the traditional left and far left on this subject.” The book “posits a new actor, the 'people',” Mélenchon adds, and carries out a “break with the centrality of the proletariat and socialist revolution as the inevitable pair in History's dynamic.”

Mélenchon's boasting about the superiority of populism over Marxism is absurd. If he had the superior theory, why was he taken by surprise by the eruption of mass protests among the working class and oppressed sections of the middle class, and why are the protesters turning on him and telling him he is an arrogant careerist?

In fact, the eruption of the “yellow vests” protests has not confirmed Mélenchon's populism, but blown it apart. Protests against tax increases affecting drivers and

pensioners directed explosive class anger against Macron, social inequality and the privileges of the financial aristocracy. Class is discussed today more than ever. White-hot outrage is mounting at gross social inequality, capitalist exploitation and the arrogance of the ruling class that predominate in France and across the world.

Bourgeois politicians like Mélenchon have, however, dominated what passed for “left” politics for decades, suppressing Marxism and Trotskyism. As a result, the “yellow vests” claim to be “apolitical” and a movement of the “people” instead of the privileged, in order to signify their hostility to all the established capitalist political parties. Mélenchon's ideas thus continue to exercise a definite influence, even among protesters who are legitimately mistrustful of him personally.

Mélenchon's proposal of a national people's revolution as an alternative to international socialist revolution by the working class is, however, a reactionary block on the development of the struggle against the capitalist financial aristocracy. Even as “yellow vest” protests spread across Europe and growing sections of workers in France strike in support of the “yellow vests,” it divides French workers from fellow workers internationally and from foreign workers inside France.

Its aim is to tie the emerging movement to capitalism and to the French state. The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste*, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has called for the formation of committees of action in the working class. Such bodies, independent of the trade unions, could draw together growing strike action, and defend protesters and working-class neighborhoods from police brutality and unjust police detention. These committees could form the organizational framework of an international movement to transfer political power to the workers.

Mélenchon's word-juggling aims to protect the financial aristocracy, the police, and the current capitalist state from revolution. He declares, “my work does not say how the state power can fall under the blows of such a [populist]

movement. Especially as, in my view, the result must be peaceful and democratic. That is, in all cases, it is a matter of finding an institutional resolution to the crisis.” He continues, “Our first duty is to use the existing democratic methods ... for instance with a motion of censure by all the opposition parties demanding just one thing: new elections.”

With this demand for new elections to the National Assembly, it must be said, Mélenchon is giving another try at the strategy he proposed last year: becoming Macron's prime minister. It is a slap in the face to the “yellow vest” protesters—one of whose main slogans is “Macron, resign”—as it would leave Macron in power.

Bitter experiences of the international working class underscore that this perspective is a dead end for the working class. Mélenchon—a former 1968 student radical who passed from Pierre Lambert's *Organisation communiste internationaliste* after its nationalist break with Trotskyism and the ICFI, to a long career as a senator and minister in the big-business Socialist Party (PS)—is the French ally of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

The record of these parties is a warning that the populist perspective Mélenchon is peddling is a trap for the workers. After four years in power, Syriza prime minister Alexis Tsipras is infamous for his imposition of European Union (EU) austerity policies, his complicity in Middle East wars, and his brutal persecution of refugees trapped in Greek detention camps in appalling conditions. As for Podemos, it pursues at the regional level in Spain the same reactionary policies Tsipras imposed at the national level in Greece.

As the “yellow vests” protest high taxes, low purchasing power, and Macron's taxes designed to raise funds for a European army, proposing such a government in France is an unmistakable sign of Mélenchon's hostility to the movement. The only way forward for the working class to advance the broadly felt demands raised by the “yellow vests” is to seek to take state power.

For such a struggle, the working class needs to build its own socialist and Trotskyist party. The record of Mélenchon and his allies makes clear that it is not socialists who are the corrupt operatives hostile to the workers, but reactionary populists like Mélenchon. His cynical article aims to use his own bankruptcy to give the “left” and “socialism” a bad name, while promoting populism in the defense of the existing social and political order.

No less than Martinez, Mélenchon is quite consciously hostile to the “yellow vest” protesters. He argues for new elections based on the view that this strategy, compared to the alternatives, will require making as few concessions as possible to the protests.

Examining “the question of possible solutions to the crisis,” he writes, “one sees there are three of them. First,

there is demoralizing and demobilizing the movement, which is dangerous and already too obvious. Second, dissolving parliament and voting. This is a democratic logic. As neither the protesters nor the government and its parliamentary majority want to give up; democracy should decide. Finally the third: giving in to the movement. This would be the simplest, but one must admit that as the days pass, the scale of protesters' demands has grown very broad. So much so that, really, voting would be the best option, or anyway the most peaceful.”

Mélenchon, whose LFI party includes broad sections of the police unions, some of whom are now calling for the army to intervene against protesters, concludes: “From all of this, I remember only one objective: to always act responsibly to find the best possible exit from the crisis.”

It is clear that the main task Mélenchon sets himself in this crisis is to rescue and defend the Macron government amid a deep, potentially fatal crisis. He warns the reader of the potential “refusal of the security forces to obey orders” to crack down on the protests, adding: “Of course such fragility does not come from nowhere. That is the case now. Thousands of hours of unpaid overtime, over 100 suicides in the police, just as many in the other security agencies, tense trade union elections in a few days, everywhere the situation is explosive.”

Echoing the police unions' calls for more aggressive policing against “yellow vest” protests this coming Saturday, he adds: “In any case, current policing arrangements for yellow vest Saturday protests are unsustainable in the long term.”

These statements are a vindication of the ICFI's and the PES's warnings on the reactionary role of pseudo-left forces like Mélenchon. These defenders of the capitalist state against the upsurge of social anger in the masses stand, not only figuratively but also literally on the other side of the barricades.



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