

Unsubmissive France summer school promotes Islamophobia

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At the summer school of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, philosopher Henry Peña-Ruiz advanced the call for a "right to be Islamophobic" in a conference he was leading on secularism. A tweet by an LFI member on the subject provoked a major political debate. After a waiting several days, several leading LFI figures finally took up positions on the issue.

The move by considerable sections of LFI towards essentially racist positions underscores the reactionary character of its populist and nationalist political orientation. On France Info, LFI legislator Clémentine Autain in Seine Saint-Denis said: "The word 'Islamophobia' is used to mean rejection of Muslims in everyday language. We cannot act as if there was no far-right offensive to stigmatize Muslims and as if there were not press campaigns from morning to night against this religion."

But many LFI officials defended Peña-Ruiz's remarks. Bastien Lachaud stressed that Peña-Ruiz's comments "are unambiguously based on the criticism of dogma. And it is not to be racist to critique the doctrinal content of a religion, either piecemeal or overall."

In a *Le Monde* column, Peña-Ruiz persisted in asserting "the right to be Islamophobic" and, more broadly, to present racist views in a positive light. Denouncing "misrepresentations of my views for purposes of character assassination," he wrote: "Islamophobia, Judeophobia, Cathophobia, atheophobia are not racism but the liberty to criticize a vision of the world, or even reject it vigorously. The 'phobia' suffix, unfortunately established in public opinion, is not very pertinent because it stigmatizes this liberty."

Mélenchon, traveling in Latin America, remained silent, reflecting his tacit support for Islamophobia. Indeed, amid the wave of anti-Muslim declarations by the ruling elite after the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Mélenchon said: "It is a total error to mix up Islamophobia with racism, or calling Islamophobia racist. ... One has the right or, for some of us, the duty to mercilessly criticize religions which in my opinion have made an incredible contribution to wars between human beings and mutual hatreds."

The LFI leadership's defense of the pro-Islamophobic comments of Peña-Ruiz is hypocritical and reactionary. What is unfolding in France is not a struggle for the freedom to comment on "the doctrinal content of a religion" or of carrying out theological or philosophical debate. It is that LFI plans to participate in Islamophobic media campaigns and support imperialist wars and the longstanding legal persecution of women wearing the Islamic veil by the French and European ruling elite.

LFI's insistence that it has a "duty" to be Islamophobic because Islam supposedly breeds war and intolerance is a filthy political lie. It is the NATO imperialist powers, including France, that launched wars

targeting Muslim countries like Libya and Syria in 2011 or Mali in 2013—not the other way around. The ruling elite in the imperialist countries, including the LFI leadership, decided to launch and support wars against historically oppressed, former colonial countries in the Middle East and Africa.

It is the militarist offensive of the imperialist great powers—who use for their own covert purposes Islamist networks, allowing them to establish themselves in Europe to obtain recruits for their dirty wars in Syria and beyond—and not Islam that produced terror attacks in France and across Europe.

After the imposition of a state of emergency, which Mélenchon's party voted in the National Assembly after the 13 November 2015 attacks, French police launched raids on thousands of families of Muslim origin that had nothing to do with the attacks. The draconian police powers of the state of emergency were then used to repress workers and youth in struggle against the labor law and rail privatization, or also the "yellow vest" movement. This intolerance and violence were not produced by Muslims, but by the reactionary operations of imperialism against the international working class.

Peña-Ruiz's comments come not from any clumsiness on his part, but from the right wing and anti-Marxist orientation the predominates in the affluent middle class layer in which LFI is rooted. The legislators, academics, trade union bureaucrats and media professionals in this layer are adapting to the bourgeoisie's promotion of far-right nationalists, a process epitomized by the nationalist evolution of Mélenchon and his allies in Europe and Latin America.

By promoting Islamophobia, LFI is echoing the positions of broad sections of the neo-fascist right, evolving in a fundamentally opposite direction to the working class. While workers are entering into struggle internationally—to demand the toppling of military dictatorships in Algeria or Sudan, democracy and social equality in Hong Kong, or the fall of Macron in France—the pseudo-left seeks to divide workers with nationalism.

This strategy flows from the conscious hostility to Marxism that predominates inside LFI. Mélenchon joined the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) of Pierre Lambert as it completed its break with Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1971. The OCI had adopted the false and centrist position that revisionism had destroyed the ICFI, which had to be "reconstructed" through a broad regroupment of petty-bourgeois organizations. It adopted in France the nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of forming a Union of the Left with the Socialist Party of François Mitterrand, a bourgeois party, and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). It planned thus to take power in France through the ballot box.

In his book *The Era of the People*, Mélenchon gives voice to the orientation, which led him far to the right, proclaiming the death of socialism and the left. He writes, “None of the realities of the emerging world have any place in its arguments or its plans, supposing it has any.” Accepting the false and discredited argument that the PS represented socialism, he adds: “The damage is profound. It will not be repaired with learned arguments on distinguishing the true left from the false one.”

“Now the people will occupy the place that the ‘revolutionary working class’ occupied in the projects of the left,” he wrote, calling for a nationally-based “citizens” revolution. “The citizens revolution is not the old socialist revolution,” he added, proceeding to denounce those who base their politics on the “ontological centrality of the working class.” Thus, Mélenchon rejects the working class and socialist revolution—that is to say, Marxism.

The Trotskyist-Marxist alternative to the nationalism promoted by LFI that must be built in the working class is the ICFI and its French section, the Parti de l'égalité Socialiste. As tendencies that the ruling elite falsely promoted as the left for decades promote openly Islamophobic conceptions, this is the only way to halt a rapid evolution of the ruling elite towards an authoritarian, aggressively nationalist and xenophobic government.

While LFI obtained a significant number of workers’ votes in the 2017 presidential elections with tactical criticisms of Trump’s wars or European Union (EU) austerity, it is not a workers’ party either in its perspective or its social composition. A considerable portion of its membership base consists of union bureaucrats representing the workforce of the police and intelligence agencies. However, these agencies have violently repressed the workers, notably during the “yellow vest” movement.

Mélenchon’s entourage includes Laurence Blisson, the national secretary of the Magistrates Union, and Alexandre Langlois, the head of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor’s (CGT) police union and a member of French domestic intelligence. One can add to them George Knecht, general secretary of the National Independent Union of Technical and Administrative Personnel (SNIAPT) and of the Workers Force (FO) unions’ section in the Interior Ministry (FO-FSMI).

And the nationalist and Islamist rhetoric of the LFI officials distinctly echoes the moods of the Interior Ministry and the broader security forces, most of whom vote for the far right. The international and universal character of this development underscores that Peña-Ruiz’s statement is neither an error nor a misstatement on his part, but the genuine reflection of the organizations to which he is linked.

From 2015 to 2019, one of the principal initiatives of the Greek coalition government between Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”, LFI’s Greek affiliate) with the far-right Independent Greeks was to violently repress workers, particularly immigrant workers. Before handing power back to the conservatives this year, Syriza built a network of concentration camps to intern refugees fleeing imperialist wars in Syria and Iraq.

Mélenchon applauded the xenophobic “Aufstehen” movement launched by his German ally, Sahra Wagenknecht of the Left Party. Calling to militarily reinforce the European Union and for hostility to refugees, Wagenknecht was applauded by the German far right. Mélenchon’s former geopolitical advisor, Djordje Kuzmanovic—a former paratrooper who fought in Rwanda and Afghanistan—wanted LFI to adopt Wagenknecht’s strategy, trying to get workers’ voters on an anti-immigrant platform.

to ~~White~~ traveling in Latin America, Mélenchon also hailed the Mexican government, which had in its first six months in power deported over 82,000 people, as the realization of his “citizens revolution.” A month before Mélenchon’s visit, it deployed over 21,000 troops to patrol the US-Mexico border, working effectively as an ally of fascist US border patrol forces.

Peña-Ruiz’s pro-Islamophobic statements indicate that these petty bourgeois parties are crossing a Rubicon in their anti-Marxist trajectory. Having loudly proclaimed the necessity of populist politics, they are now attempting to fabricate a fictitious and false mood of national unity, founded on right wing policies, by legitimizing hatreds of ethnic or religious minorities.

The fact that this was an essential component of fascist politics in the 20th century does not stop the petty bourgeois pseudo-left forces like LFI. Indeed, in 2017, Mélenchon publicly denied French responsibility for the French government’s deportation of the Jews towards the death camps during the Occupation, a position defended only by the far right in the recent period. “Saying that France as a people or a nation is responsible for this crime is to admit an essentialist definition of our country that is totally unacceptable,” he declared.

This attempt to whitewash the crimes of the deportation is linked to an attempt to whitewash the history and class orientation of the social forces and layers of the capitalist state apparatus in which LFI is based. French police and domestic intelligence participated during the Nazi Occupation in the deportation of Jews and Resistance fighters.

This is a warning that the extreme violence of the police repression of social opposition like the “yellow vests” in France and more broadly across Europe is not due to the obstinacy of individual heads of state. The political establishment in its entirety, including forces that the ruling class previously promoted as “left,” are moving very quickly towards an authoritarian and fascist policy. It is urgent for workers and youth to build the Socialist Equality Party as the Trotskyist, internationalist alternative to these bankrupt and reactionary forces.

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