

French anti-vaccine protests expose right-wing politics of Jean-Luc Mélenchon

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Last weekend, tens of thousands in France took part in protests against the Macron government's "health pass," which effectively legally mandates vaccination against the coronavirus. The protests were politically dominated and led by the extreme right. They mobilised both fascistic layers openly opposed to coronavirus restrictions as well as disoriented, libertarian and anti-scientific sections of the middle class opposed to vaccination.

The protests were called by openly neo-fascist parties, including Marion Maréchal Le Pen and Florian Philippot, the leader of the Patriots party. Le Pen and Philippot openly call for ending even limited measures to combat the virus. Underscoring the political forces mobilised in this movement, the weekend of the protests saw two coronavirus vaccination centres in the Isère and Pyrénées regions attacked.

But the central role in providing this movement with a "popular" image has been played by pseudo-left tendencies, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (La France Insoumise—LFI).

Macron's law requires that anyone who enters public spaces, including cafes and restaurants, public transport and shopping centres, carry with them a "health pass," consisting either of evidence of total vaccination, recent recovery from the coronavirus, or a negative test in the previous 48 hours. Health care workers are legally required to be vaccinated. In a particularly reactionary measure, coronavirus tests will no longer be free.

The Socialist Equality Party does not support Macron's law, which is not aimed at stopping the spread of the coronavirus. It is aimed at justifying his policy of fully reopening the economy, ending social-distancing measures, and allowing the coronavirus to spread, in order to support business operations and corporate profits. While vaccination in France stands at only approximately 40 percent, daily cases are already over 18,000, dominated by the more contagious Delta variant. Macron's policy of herd immunity is preparing a new wave of deaths.

The campaign by LFI against the law, however, has not

been aimed at mobilising working class opposition to this policy of herd immunity. Rather, it has supported the same policy by promoting resistance to vaccinations and undermining public consciousness of the necessity for a continued struggle against the pandemic.

Following Macron's announcement of the new law on Monday, Mélenchon and fellow LFI deputy François Ruffin released statements which dovetailed with the right-wing campaign against mass vaccination. They endorsed the protests to be held on July 17 without acknowledging that far-right forces were leading calls for the protests.

In a video address published last Thursday, Mélenchon attacked the policy of universal vaccination: "A mandatory vaccine seems to be a disproportionate measure, given that, according to the World Health Organisation, not everyone needs one, and that it is pointless to want to vaccinate everyone, when it suffices to vaccinate above all those who are most directly placed in danger by the circulation of the virus."

This is an outright fabrication of the position of the World Health Organisation, which actively campaigns for the broadest vaccination of the entire population, except those who should not be vaccinated for medical reasons. It has insisted that to prevent the spread of the virus a sufficient percentage of the population—which numerically has not been determined—must be vaccinated. Mélenchon advocates an opposed, anti-scientific policy, involving vaccinating only those most at risk of dying.

The WHO has warned that such a policy provides an ideal breeding ground for the development of new and even more deadly variants. Mélenchon dishonestly uses the phrase "above all" to confuse the question of the *prioritisation* of vaccines with the overall goal of vaccinating the population.

Mélenchon also opposes the requirement that health workers be vaccinated. "Let's look at this list—it is abhorrent—of those who must get vaccinated," he said. "We see health workers. I understand why they would be indignant. For months they were celebrated like heroes and now ... we point the finger at them like bastards."

Health workers work directly with the most vulnerable sections of the population, using the latest developments in science to save lives. It is entirely appropriate that they be vaccinated, for their own safety and that of their patients. Moreover, this has the support of more than 70 percent of the population in France, according to polls. Why health workers would be “indignant” at a requirement that would assist in their efforts to stop the pandemic, Mélenchon does not explain.

François Ruffin has also campaigned to undermine public support for vaccination. In his various interventions, he downplays the danger of the virus, asserting that it presents virtually no danger to himself or anyone his age. While he himself is personally vaccinated, he insists that this is a purely personal choice that he took to reduce the possibility of social distancing restrictions. Downplaying any dangers of the pandemic, Ruffin claimed on BFMTV that “those getting vaccinated now are doing it less out of fear of coronavirus than because they say, I want to go to the bar, to the restaurant in peace, to see my family in hospital.”

In the same interview, Ruffin said vaccination should instead be decided by the individual “when we know that there is a benefit that is superior to the risks.” But this is a fraud. In reality, the benefits of vaccines that cause harmful side effects in only a handful of people per million vaccinated is inevitably far superior to the risks of a virus that kills tens of thousands of people per million infected. Ruffin is effectively arguing against vaccination as a tool to eradicate the virus.

Defending resistance to vaccination, Ruffin argued that compulsory vaccination had “undermined a fundamental medical ethical principle: that we don’t have the right to use one person for another.”

“What is the alternative?” he stated. “Instead of vaccinating everyone, we should massively target the at-risk population.” Making clear that in any case the deadly virus would keep spreading through the population, Ruffin added that, “in any case, that would clearly help stopping the hospitals from overflowing.”

Mélenchon and Ruffin justify their policy of herd immunity using the same argument as the far right—that mandatory vaccination is an attack on their democratic rights and personal liberty.

This is not a defence of democratic rights. Their argument could be used to justify a broad variety of anti-social behaviour, including drunk driving, on the grounds that it is everyone’s “right” to do as they please.

As a point of fact, there are currently 11 viruses for which vaccines are legally mandated in France. The extension of universal vaccination throughout the 20th century, both in the Soviet Union and in western capitalist countries, was a

by-product of advances in science and the rise of health care and living standards in the population, won through major social struggles by the working class.

It is worth noting that while LFI participated in Saturday’s right-wing protests against vaccinations, they issued no similar calls for protests and strikes against Macron’s policy of “back-to-work” or the reopening of schools throughout the pandemic.

That is because their campaign against vaccines is part of their efforts to normalise the spread of the virus and justify a policy of herd immunity demanded by the corporate and financial elite.

The Macron government has sought to capitalise on the openly right-wing anti-vaccine protests in an effort to justify its own policy. Thus, spokesman Gabriel Attal denounced Saturday’s rallies of a “capricious and defeatist fringe” that would “be happy to remain in chaos and inactivity.” He counterposed this to “a labouring and voluntary” population that “wants to put the virus behind them and work.” In fact, hesitancy toward vaccination has been exacerbated by Macron’s policies, which have from the outset been aimed at protecting profits and not lives and been marked by a series of lies and 180-degree turns.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the mobilisation of the working class internationally to put an end to the coronavirus pandemic, involving the closure of non-essential workplaces, with full compensation provided to all workers and small businesses, and the broadest possible vaccination of the population. This means the struggle for workers’ governments across Europe, the confiscation of the ill-gotten fortunes of the financial elite, and the socialist reorganisation of economic life according to social need and scientific planning, rather than private profit.



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