

Mélenchon, French unions defend their support for anti-vaccine protests

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In recent days, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of Unsubmissive France (La France Insoumise—LFI), and Philippe Martinez, the leader of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) trade unions, have issued statements defending their support for the right-wing campaign against mandatory vaccination and the Macron government’s “health pass.”

The “health pass” restricts access to public places to individuals who have been fully vaccinated, have recently contracted and recovered from the virus, or can provide a negative test within the previous 72 hours (recently increased from 48). It effectively legally enforces vaccination, because negative testing will be prohibitively expensive under a reactionary decision to end free tests.

The Socialist Equality Party supports mandatory vaccination, which is an essential component of the eradication of the coronavirus. We oppose Macron’s policy as being insufficient, and not a genuine struggle to eradicate the virus. Macron is using the introduction of mandatory vaccination of the adult population as a justification for a complete ending of social distancing measures, including the reopening of schools this week and of all non-essential workplaces. (See: “Macron’s ‘health pass’ conceals policy of herd immunity.”)

Only 65.5 percent of the French population has been fully vaccinated, while daily cases number in the tens of thousands. The premature ending of social distancing measures has already produced an average of 100 deaths per day over the past week, and is preparing an even more terrible wave of deaths. Macron’s policy is not driven by a scientifically-guided strategy of ending the pandemic and saving lives, but of preserving the profits of French corporations and the wealth of the super-rich.

The opposition of LFI and the trade unions to Macron’s law, however, has been from the right, not the left. They have given their backing to the protest movement against the “health pass” that has been dominated and politically led from the outset by the extreme right. They adopt the same reactionary arguments of the extreme right: that the

introduction of mandatory vaccination is an attack on personal liberties.

Mélenchon spoke on Sunday, August 29, at the LFI Summer School, where he formally launched his campaign for the 2022 presidential elections. He declared that Macron’s response to the pandemic was a “sum of stupidities, with a complete inefficiency and an absolute brutality... We are opposed to the ‘health pass,’ because it is an attack on the liberty of the world of labour, of society, of human relations.”

Notwithstanding his reference to the “world of labour,” Mélenchon’s position toward vaccination is indistinguishable from the line of the far right. The WSWS answered these reactionary arguments in its Perspective article of July 29:

The safeguarding of public health in a mass society depends on a whole host of regulations: the wearing of seatbelts and speed limits, proscriptions against drunk driving and smoking in public places, maximum occupancies for buildings, rules for handicapped parking and many other measures... It is always the most right-wing forces that oppose the protection of social rights by raising the banner of “individual rights,” the most notorious of which is the “right of profit.”

There is nothing in the least progressive about the campaign against “vaccine mandates.” It is based on appeals to ignorance, fear and anti-scientific prejudice. Those who are campaigning against vaccinations by claiming they are an intolerable violation of personal liberty are peddling anarchism and libertarianism, which has nothing in common with the interests of the working class.

Mélenchon’s reference to “liberties” presents the question of vaccination as though it were an individual democratic

“right” to infect others with a deadly virus. The same reasoning could be employed to oppose lockdowns, contact tracing, and a host of other measures that involve restrictions of individual movement and are scientifically required in order to combat the virus and protect the lives of the working class. It should be rejected by workers and youth with contempt.

In fact, these are the arguments that are explicitly made by the far right. Mélenchon’s speech therefore had a second aim: of covering up the fact that he is aligned with the most extreme right-wing political forces, such as Marion Marechal Le Pen and the Patriots leader Florian Philippot, in their campaign against mandatory vaccination.

“We are fed up, when we go to protest, of having to listen to the lessons in good will from one side, and from the other, of supposedly supporting the extreme right and anti-Semites, whose actions and statements are nonsense,” he said. “We have had enough of the far-right and anti-Semites [at the protests]. Get out of our demonstrations! Keep your posters for yourselves!”

This is a reference to repeated instances involving far-right protesters being photographed at the demonstrations holding signs with fascist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, which have evoked revulsion in the population. Protesters have worn the Star of David in an attempt to equate mass vaccination with the Holocaust, while there have been repeated acts of aggression against coronavirus testing stations and vaccination centres.

Mélenchon then pledged to hold further demonstrations with anyone opposed to Macron’s law:

We want to be able to assemble with all those who wish to to say, “no,” to the “health pass,” without accepting their ravings. That is why I am asking the workers’ movement and associations to enter the fray, and allow us to form protected sections of the protest, free of prejudices, where anyone may come whatever their religion, whatever their political views, to defend the liberty of all the French... Do not let the far right take the head of these protests.

But if the far right has been at “the head” of the protests, it is because they have always been based on a right-wing opposition to Macron. Far-right forces have campaigned against the “health pass” by opposing even the most limited social distancing restrictions and the argument that the virus must be allowed to spread unhindered.

Mélenchon, like pseudo-left organisations such as the New Anti-capitalist Party and Revolution Permanente, provides

them with a “popular” cover by presenting what is a right-wing movement as a left-wing workers’ movement that has inexplicably been “captured” or infiltrated by the far right. Thus, they demand that the trade unions, which have enforced Macron’s “herd immunity” policy and opposed any strikes against the reopening of schools and workplaces in unsafe conditions, more openly participate in the right-wing protests.

At the same time, Mélenchon and his LFI colleagues, like Francois Ruffin, continually downplay the dangers presented by the virus and the necessity of vaccination. While they repeatedly declare that they are personally vaccinated, they insist that this is a purely personal decision. In this way, they seek to deaden consciousness of the dangers posed by the virus, rule out the possibility that it could be eradicated through scientific policies, and effectively defend Macron’s policy of allowing the virus to spread untrammelled.

The same basic argument was made by CGT head Martinez in interviews this week. Asked if the CGT would be participating in the Saturday demonstrations led by the far-right, he replied that “the CGT will not be marching with anti-vaxers who make anti-Semitic statements, who defend unacceptable conspiratorial theories. Our union does not march either with Florian Philippot.”

Yet the union would organise a protest march against the “health pass” next month, he added. He asserted that “everything that is obligatory is not efficient. On this question, the government must convince instead of mandating.” Just as significant as what Martinez said, however was what he did not say: He said nothing about the danger posed by this week’s reopening of schools, nor the fact that the virus is infecting tens of thousands of people per day and killing almost 100—and made clear the union would not launch any campaign against Macron’s policy.

The Socialist Equality Party is alone in fighting for an international, socialist response to eradicate the pandemic across the globe. Mass vaccination must be combined with aggressive local lockdown measures, including the closure of non-essential production and schools, with reopenings permitted when the virus has been eliminated, as part of a conscious effort to eliminate the virus internationally.

Such a policy does require the mobilisation of the working class on an international scale, as part of a struggle against the capitalist system.



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