

Accepting televised debate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon puts forward neo-fascist Eric Zemmour

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On September 23, far-right commentator Eric Zemmour, who has not officially declared his candidacy for the 2022 presidential election, held a live televised debate with Jean Luc Mélenchon, the leader and presidential candidate of Unsubmissive France (La France insoumise—LFI).

Zemmour’s political identity is well established. He has enjoyed wide media coverage through his roles as an editorialist for the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*, owned by the industrial corporation Dassault Group, then as a commentator on his own television show on the news channel CNews, created and run by the billionaire Vincent Bolloré. Zemmour was convicted of incitement to racial hatred for his anti-Muslim comments in 2019. He is ferociously hostile towards the historian Robert Paxton and his famous work published in 1972, *La France de Vichy*, against which Zemmour defends the policy of deportation of Jews by Vichy.

The decision by Mélenchon to debate with a political criminal who is still undeclared as a candidate for 2022 is politically wretched. The debate between the two men focused entirely on the reactionary terrain of national identity, where Mélenchon provided Zemmour with a foil for his far-right provocation and ravings.

Mélenchon justified his participation in the debate by declaring: “I wanted this debate because we are seven months away from a presidential election, I am a candidate, and opportunities to convince must be taken, especially when the country is contaminated by the absurd perspectives of a man who has become the ideologist of the right and the extreme right.” He added, addressing Zemmour: “You are a danger to our country, you have a stunted vision of France, you are a racist, you have been convicted for that.”

Despite this quip, the debate highlighted the many areas of agreement between the two men, who are former friends. Mélenchon did not criticize Zemmour’s violent hostility to coronavirus lockdowns and other public health measures to stop the pandemic by eradicating the coronavirus, even though more than 1.2 million Europeans have died from it. He also did not criticize the war in Mali, which he supported when it was launched by Socialist Party president Francois Hollande in

2013.

Mélenchon began the debate by warning that “France is entering its most terrible social and financial crisis in decades.” Mentioning in passing the 10 million poor and six million unemployed in France, he warned of the political implications of an explosion of working-class anger: “Only fools can believe that a situation like this can go on without chaos.”

Zemmour replied by inciting hatred against immigrants, as one would expect from a profascist intellectual who claims that immigration is leading to a “great replacement” of the French by foreigners.

Mélenchon attempted to respond to Zemmour on this issue by referring to Zemmour’s threats to deport France’s five million Muslims, and saying, “Mr. Zemmour, there will be many of us who will not let you do this. The torrent of figures that Mr. Zemmour cites to invoke a crisis atmosphere does not hold water. You will not drive out the Muslims, you will not force them to choose between Islam and France.”

Zemmour replied by recalling all the Islamophobic past declarations of Mélenchon himself and accusing him of hypocrisy and inconsistency: “You said yourself, Mr. Mélenchon, once, the other Mélenchon, that the Islamic veil was an act of self-stigmatization. What has become of this Mélenchon? ... Mélenchon has betrayed Mélenchon. You have converted to the ideology that you were fighting in the 80s. ... Mr. Mélenchon is against Mr. Mélenchon. ... You are always wrong and you always deny yourself.”

Mélenchon responded against Zemmour with a notion of the development of a multicultural France (“*créolisation*”) through immigration: “We are the country that openly practices a form of *créolisation*. It is nothing other than the creation of a common culture of people who live together. Different cultures arrive and form a common culture. ... Human beings come together and form something in common. What has fertilized France is this immense idea of the human being who is the creator of this history.”

However, Mélenchon’s Islamophobic positions on the veil underline that this conception of *créolisation* is not a defense of democratic rights against Zemmour. Historically speaking, it

marks a step backwards from bourgeois democratic conceptions arising from the French Revolution, according to which citizenship is a right of those who live in France and who accept the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity proclaimed by the Revolution of 1789. In order to move, work, study or live wherever they wanted, immigrants were not obliged to conform to a common national culture.

The “*créolisation*” desired by Mélenchon is a compromise with the assimilation advocated by Éric Zemmour, which requires the “Francoisation” of Islam and Muslims and the banning of first names, such as Mohamed, that Zemmour would arbitrarily declare not to be French.

Mélenchon did not denounce Zemmour for his statements in support of Vichy leader Philippe Pétain on mass murder in the 20th century, nor for his support for what the British Medical Journal has called “social murder” during the coronavirus pandemic in the 21st century. Zemmour is fiercely opposed to a science-based health policy, praising the policy of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who declared “no more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”

Mélenchon could not attack Zemmour, because Mélenchon and LFI called for demonstrations against the Macron government’s “health pass” and mandatory vaccination, organized by far-right politicians close to Zemmour, including Florian Philippot and Marion Maréchal Le Pen. Mélenchon did not warn in the debate of the danger of a military putsch threatened by neo-fascist army officers in the face of rising popular anger. On all these subjects, he preferred to remain silent.

The wretched debate shows that insofar as the working class wants to fight, it will have to oppose Mélenchon, who is totally integrated into the crimes of the French ruling class.

The fact that a political criminal like Zemmour can present himself as a presidential candidate is the product of a vast degeneration of the French ruling class, and above all of the forces that broke with Trotskyism to pursue a middle-class pseudo-left politics. Indeed, Mélenchon joined Pierre Lambert’s Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI) shortly after its break with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1971, to join the Union of the Left between the Socialist Party (PS) and the Stalinist Communist Party of France (PCF). He ended up as a PS minister before later forming his own movement.

While the PCF was discredited by its betrayal of the general strike of May 1968, the OCI supported the alliance of the PCF with the PS led by the ex-collaborationist François Mitterrand. This alliance, presented as a struggle for socialism, was in fact an alliance between Stalinism and bourgeois forces complicit in the crimes of European fascism. Although the PS was a social-democratic party, Mitterrand had Pétain’s grave in the Ile d’Yeu decorated and said that it was necessary to “understand Vichy”—while Mélenchon was still his adviser.

For almost half a century, Mélenchon has struggled to

suppress Trotskyist opposition against the austerity and war policies of the social democrats and Stalinists. But this has also involved a repudiation of any principled opposition to the legacy of French collaboration with the Nazis, as seen in the Mélenchon-Zemmour debate. Indeed, the two men know each other, and Mélenchon attended Zemmour’s 50th birthday party as a friend.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, the milieu of the PS and its satellites has shifted enormously to the right in France and across Europe. This Mélenchon-Zemmour debate should serve as a warning that the pseudo-left milieu to which Mélenchon belongs is moving ever closer to neo-fascist positions, propelled by an ever more violent movement of the entire ruling elite to the right.

A class gulf separates the workers from this reactionary ruling elite. The millions of avoidable deaths in Europe in the Covid-19 pandemic and the fear of a social explosion referred to by Mélenchon in the face of the austerity and militaristic policies of the European Union underline the extent of this chasm. Indeed, the Mélenchon-Zemmour debate provides yet another example of the fact that the rise of the far right is driven primarily by the ruling elite.

Mélenchon’s highlighting of Zemmour may suit many potential presidential candidates, including the incumbent president. Indeed, Mitterrand got himself elected for a second term in 1988 by dividing the right-wing vote through a focus on Jean-Marie Le Pen’s neo-fascist National Front. Now, as Macron hopes to win re-election against the neo-fascist candidacy of Marine Le Pen, Mélenchon and LFI, who maintain close ties to Macron, are launching a move that could split the neo-fascist vote.

The life-and-death political questions facing working people against the backdrop of a global pandemic will not be resolved at the ballot box, but through the conscious political mobilization of the working class on an international scale against the entire ruling class. This perspective animates the struggle of the Socialist Equality Party, the French section of the ICFI for socialism and against the corrupt pseudo-left represented by Mélenchon.



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