

What conclusions must be drawn from French racist pundit Éric Zemmour's presidential bid?

Alex Lantier

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Éric Zemmour has not yet announced that he will run for the French presidency, but his campaign has already revealed a deep political crisis.

Zemmour came to prominence as a high-paid pundit on billionaire Vincent Bolloré's far-right CNews TV channel. An open defender of France's Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, he was convicted of inciting racial discrimination in 2011 and hatred of Muslims in 2018. He boasts of his skepticism of vaccines and his hostility to social distancing to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. He is, in short, one of the sewer pipes through which the financial aristocracy vomits its nationalist hatreds across the television screens and onto the French people.

As the 2022 presidential campaign begins, Zemmour's denunciation of "left elites," immigrants and refugees are reported, discussed and pored over with respect and seriousness in mass media. It has propelled this convicted criminal to 18 percent in the polls, distancing Marine Le Pen, the neo-fascist candidate in 2017, to become for now Macron's leading electoral challenger.

This thunderous promotion of Zemmour marks a new, dangerous stage in the crisis of French democracy. The ruling class is beset with international problems for which it has no solutions. It is staggered by military defeats it has suffered in Afghanistan and in Mali. Above all, it fears working-class anger at the deaths and social devastation caused by its murderous policy of "living with the virus" during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has cost over 1.3 million lives in Europe.

In this context, ever broader layers of the ruling elite find Zemmour's articles and onscreen behavior irresistibly fascinating. He currently faces charges over his foul tirade earlier this year against child refugees: "They do not belong here; they are thieves, murderers, rapists." Yet he is regularly invited onto TV news studios and receives dedicated commentary in newspaper editorial pages.

To understand the Zemmour phenomenon, it is worth recalling some of his statements in recent years, which the media hide with references to Zemmour's supposed "love for history."

Last year, he questioned the outcome of the historic Dreyfus Affair, insinuating that Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer falsely convicted by anti-Semitic officers of espionage for Germany in 1894, might have been guilty. This was a way of criticizing the decades-long struggle, in which the socialist workers movement led by Jean Jaurès played a leading role, to clear Dreyfus's name. Zemmour lied, "Many were ready to declare Dreyfus innocent, but it's murky."

Though Zemmour is Jewish, he defends the Vichy regime's participation in the deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps. He said, "Vichy officials were not guilty; they had to obey the state. Otherwise, there is no more authority and obedience, do you realize?" When asked about a possible mass deportation of Muslims from France today, he replied that it was "unrealistic" for now but added, "History is

surprising."

He also denounces the resistance to Vichy and its collaboration with the Nazi occupation of France. Echoing Vichy propaganda, which reacted to the predominance of communist workers in the resistance by denouncing it as "Bolshevik terrorism," Zemmour said, "The civil war, it was the communists who started it, by executing French people who collaborated [with Nazism]."

This recourse to historical lies to attack socialism and defend genocide must be taken as a warning: Capitalism is in mortal crisis. Events of one century never exactly repeat those of earlier centuries. Yet after the authorization Macron gave in 2019 to the French army to fire on "yellow vest" protests, and the malign official negligence that has cost millions of lives in the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be criminally light-minded to ignore the lessons of history.

Why is the ruling elite inordinately fascinated by such fascistic demagoguery? It is not sponsoring an abstract historical debate. Rather, it is that the ruling class, feeling itself isolated and despised, is debating dictatorship, bloody repression and mass killings as practical tools of policy.

Zemmour and the French army's plans for a military coup

Last month, the "Officers for Zemmour" group posted a brief statement in the far-right magazine *Current Values*, calling on him to run. Addressing him as the "future leader of our armies," it stressed that "the army is considered as the last line of defense to maintain order." It continued with an apparent attempt by the general staff to work out a bargain with its candidate:

You show great force of character. Would you allow military officers and their leaders to do the same? They have only one interest, that of France, and would like to be listened to when they speak on budgets and strategy. A strong military must have the human and financial resources that correspond to its ambitions. Will we receive the resources that correspond to our ambitions? ... The interest we have in you is real, and we hope for total support and commitment from you.

Current Values has become an outlet for a fascistic military cabal around former Army Chief of Staff General Pierre de Villiers. After

retiring in 2017, he received a sinecure from the Boston Consulting Group. Its Paris office—consulted and financed “by 60 percent of the top-40 French companies on the Paris stock exchange,” including Danone and L’Oréal—pays him €5,000 per half-day of work, according to *Le Monde*. De Villiers receives large speaker’s fees from dozens of major corporations and carries out a continual press campaign against the danger of revolution.

In 2019, before the pandemic, de Villiers reacted in terror as strikes erupted in the United States, Germany, Poland, Belgium, Portugal and France. Calling for “firmness” in repression, including of “yellow vest” protests against social inequality, he demanded that class struggle be suppressed: “A gulf has emerged between those who lead and those who obey. This gulf is profound. The ‘yellow vests’ were already a first sign of this. ... We must restore order; things cannot continue this way.”

The COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger event, profoundly intensifying the crisis of world capitalism. Mass strikes broke out in Italy, the United States and across Europe in March 2020, as workers demanded the right to shelter at home to avoid the virus. Protests against police brutality erupted worldwide in June, after US police killed George Floyd in Minneapolis. In addition to provoking an upsurge of class struggle, however, the pandemic also intensified the plotting of coups and dictatorship in the ruling elite, above all, in America.

Trump threatened to illegally send the US military to attack the Floyd protests. This was bound up with his plans to contest the legitimacy of the 2020 elections and launch a far-right coup abetted by sections of the US military. This attempt unfolded on January 6, when a fascistic mob stormed through the Capitol, trying to block the certification of Joe Biden’s election as president, though it was narrowly defeated by the belated deployment of National Guard troops.

The setting into motion of the Trump coup was followed by an explosion of coup plotting across Europe. Spain was shocked by leaked WhatsApp chats in which military officers proclaimed they are “good fascists” and wanted to kill “26 million people.” In France, a fevered discussion between Zemmour and the Villiers clan unfolded in *Current Values*. Zemmour denounced the Floyd protests in France as a “race war imported from America by our elites,” while De Villiers insisted that it was necessary to prepare to suspend the rule of law to avoid a race war.

“Today, there is not only a security crisis but a pandemic, all of that amid an economic, social and political crisis where leaders no longer enjoy any broader confidence,” de Villiers wrote in *Current Values*. Stressing his fear “that various suppressed angers could all explode at once,” he said, “We must think the unthinkable. ... The rule of law is obviously respectable, but at a certain moment once has to think strategically.”

Ultimately, Pierre de Villiers’ brother Philippe issued a fascistic “call to insurrection” in April in *Current Values*, blaming vaccine makers and Swiss bankers for the pandemic. On April 21—the 60th anniversary of the failed 1961 Algiers putsch by generals trying to topple the French government and stop Algeria’s independence from France—a group of retired generals responded with a call in *Current Values* for what is clearly a coup. Ultimately, thousands of retired and also active-duty officers signed the letter or a subsequent statement of support for it.

Denouncing “race war” allegedly waged by immigrants in French cities, it warns that unless action is taken against “laxity,” there will be “the intervention of our active-duty comrades ... on our national territory.” It continued, “We see that it is no longer time to procrastinate, or else tomorrow civil war will put an end to this growing chaos, and the deaths ... will be counted in the thousands.”

Zemmour responded in *Current Values* and the right-wing *Le Figaro* paper with more fascistic lies, calling this coup threat “a call for security.” He said, “When these retired generals call their active-duty comrades to protect the French people and French civilization, when they denounce the

fanatical hordes ... who can blame them? Who can deny their sincere patriotism and legitimate concern?”

The sharpest warnings are in order about the propaganda the mass media is subjecting the French people.

French neo-fascism’s electoral rise has unfolded over 35 years. It has won votes across the population, including among workers. The Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 helped clear a path for it, notably by blunting the memory that existed among workers, in the decades after World War II, of the irreconcilable conflict between fascism and the communist movement in the working class. But 21st century neo-fascism still serves finance capital, as did the petty-bourgeois movements based on which Hitler and Mussolini came to power in the 20th century.

The center of official politics during the pandemic is the financial aristocracy’s drive to “live with the virus” and keep workers at work and youth at school, whatever the state of the pandemic, making trillions of euros in profits for the banks. The commanding staff of the bourgeoisie knows very well that it is waging a deadly conflict with the workers. The “de-demonization” of fascism, as Marine Le Pen called it, is a smokescreen behind which the ruling class plans dictatorship and repression to enforce war, austerity and mass infections.

What is to be done?

Zemmour’s rise in the polls requires a serious explanation. The media’s refrain that “Zemmour says out loud what everyone thinks quietly” is not an explanation but a lie. Industrial genocide, political anti-Semitism and coups by far-right officers do not have the support of the French people. Those who claim otherwise are covering up the class gulf separating workers from far-right coup plotters like de Villiers, and thus downplaying the threat they pose to the working class.

In reality, one of the indubitably progressive sides of economic globalization is that it encourages ever more open attitudes among workers. A Harris Interactive poll this spring found that 89 percent of French people, a record, oppose inequality in treatment between French and non-French people in the workplace. Poll after poll has found social inequality, unemployment, and economic hardship dominating workers’ concerns. One must ask, therefore, why do neo-fascists like Zemmour gain support rather than left-wing forces?

To answer this, one must examine honestly what the ruling elite promotes as “the left.”

Since the May-June 1968 general strike, it has been the “Union of the Left” alliance of the middle class post-1968 student movement, the remnants of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), and the Socialist Party (PS) founded by François Mitterrand in 1971. Theoretically, it was founded on postmodernist racial and gender identity politics. Its political line and class character was set by bankers, corporate heads and state officials around Mitterrand, a former Nazi collaborationist.

Its record was aptly summed up on the 2012 campaign trail by France’s last PS President François Hollande, who reassured Wall Street about his “socialism” by telling the *New York Times*, “Today there are no more communists in France. The left liberalized the economy and opened markets to finance and privatization. There is nothing to fear.”

After Hollande’s election, millions of workers discovered with disgust, from the kiss-and-tell-all revelations of one of his mistresses, that this “socialist” mockingly refers to workers in private as “the toothless,” because dental care is unaffordable for ever-larger layers of working people.

The PS’s ignominious electoral collapse in 2017 allowed Hollande’s economy minister, Emmanuel Macron, to become president. Offering a

“Republican salute” to neo-fascists in his victory speech, Macron continued Hollande’s war in Mali and escalated attacks on pensions, wages and other social programs. As he ordered a brutal police crackdown on “yellow vest” protests against social inequality, with over 10,000 arrests and 4,400 protesters wounded, Macron hailed France’s Nazi collaborationist dictator, the convicted traitor Philippe Pétain, as a “great soldier.”

Events have also comprehensively exposed the petty-bourgeois allies of the PS and Macron, many of whom descend from forces that, decades ago, broke with Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Such forces, like Olivier Besancenot’s New Anti-capitalist Party, not only echoed the union bureaucracy’s false denunciation of the initial “yellow vest” protests as neo-fascist. They also adapted to Macron’s rejection of a policy of eliminating the virus and his call to “live with the virus” and dismissed the significance of Trump’s coup.

It is well understood in the political establishment that these privileged pseudo-left forces, based in affluent middle-class layers of academia and the union bureaucracy, are hostile to the traditions of the socialist workers movement and dedicated to blocking a movement in the working class.

They gave Zemmour a green light in 2019, when Roman Polanski’s film on the Dreyfus affair, *J’Accuse*, came out in cinemas. While millions went to see the film, the pseudo-left denounced it. Citing Polanski’s 1977 prosecution for sexual abuse of a minor, they backed a right-wing feminist #MeToo campaign against the film, sending youth to film theaters to shout: “Polanski rapist, filmgoers accomplices!” The pseudo-left, hostile to historical truth, was making clear it would not defend the Dreyfus Affair, or anything else, against the far right.

Zemmour’s denunciations of “left elites” undoubtedly wins his arguments a certain hearing. Masses of workers feel instinctive mistrust or hatred for the boundless hypocrisy of pseudo-left politics. The media falsely labels Zemmour “anti-system” because he plays on one of its open secrets—that what it has built up as the “left” is a petty-bourgeois movement hostile to the mass of the working population. However, he does not oppose the capitalist system but seeks to use racial hatreds and historical lies to defend it.

Explosive opposition is growing across Europe and worldwide among workers to the policies of mass infection with COVID-19, austerity, war and police-state repression. The ruling class is deeply isolated. The decisive question in France and every country is the building of a Marxist and internationalist, that is to say, Trotskyist movement in the working class and youth, opposing the social democrats and the pseudo-left from the left, from the standpoint of the working class.

The working class will not overcome the obstacle posed by the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left and defeat the threats from the ruling class with a spontaneous movement. This requires alerting workers to the dangers they face, uniting them in an international movement, and imbuing them with the consciousness of their connection to the historic struggles of the working class and of the Marxist movement, to transfer power to the working class and build socialism.

The building of the Trotskyist movement in the working class and the youth is the great political task of the day. Sympathizers and readers of the WSWWS should draw the necessary conclusions and join the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* in France and other sections of the ICFI around the world.



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