

French presidential candidates present programs in scripted TV “debate”

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Last week saw the first “debate” of the French presidential election on TF1 television. Entitled “Facing War”, it took place in an unusual format at President Emmanuel Macron’s request, with each candidate delivering brief remarks without debating with other candidates.

This non-debate takes place amid the urgent danger of world war between NATO and Russia, and after two years of a pandemic that has killed nearly 20 million people internationally. The very title of the debate, “Facing War”, is part of the desperate effort of the ruling elites to deflect internal social crises and class conflict outwards into war. It reflects the sclerosis of the ruling establishment, and the mortal crisis of French democracy.

The fact that the opposition candidates bowed to this meaningless exercise again underlines the fact that they offer nothing to workers. Despite tactical differences over foreign policy or the pace of imposing one or another austerity measure, they all agree on a reckless policy of NATO intervention targeting Russia in Ukraine and putting the economy before workers’ health in the face of the virus. None of the candidates raised the possibility of stopping the pandemic or the danger of nuclear war between NATO and Russia.

In a further departure from democratic norms, only 8 of the 12 candidates were invited. Candidates Philippe Poutou (New Anti-capitalist Party, NPA) and Nathalie Arthaud (Workers Struggle, LO) were excluded. It was not because they offer a political alternative; the NPA and LO are aligned with NATO in Ukraine and the far-right anti-vaccine protests over COVID-19. Macron apparently felt, however, that even their empty, ritualistic evocations of the working class could have unwanted effects.

The programme was divided into three parts: a first

part during which the candidates delivered a one-minute profession of faith; then a second part in which journalists Gilles Bouleau and Anne-Claire Coudray interviewed them; finally, a two-minute closing statement.

Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the neofascist Rassemblement National (RN), with 17 per cent of the vote, affirmed her support for NATO and her desire to increase the military budget.

She said: “This war in Ukraine has revealed one thing, and that is that we are the only ones who really have an army in Europe. We are the only ones who have a nuclear deterrent and thank God we have kept it. Yes, I will increase the defence budget to €55 billion. We have increased the budget a little but to make up for very heavy deficiencies in ammunition, in the replacement of equipment and also in our armies. It is not enough.”

She hailed France’s “more than 3,000 soldiers in Mali who are fighting, who have been fighting alone, who have not been helped financially by the European Union. We are not going to do without the Americans, that’s why I don’t want to leave NATO ... You would expect Germany to buy French planes, but no, it buys American planes. France must have autonomy, independence while remaining in the transatlantic treaty.”

Valerie Pécresse of the Gaullist The Republicans (LR) party, polling at 12 per cent, criticised Macron for not listening to Washington’s predictions of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

She said: “But the US had anticipated. A number of weak signals should have alerted us, such as the Wagner militias, which are used by Vladimir Putin to destabilise French interests in particular. There was another signal, when Belarus blackmailed Poland about

migration with the support of Vladimir Putin. Would we have seen these signals if we had had a more sustained dialogue with Vladimir Putin? I think so. The response was too late, and too solitary. We should have gone to Moscow with all the European leaders.”

“The objective today is to have a ceasefire,” the LR candidate said on the war in Ukraine, because “we cannot establish a complete embargo on Russian gas and oil.” She called for “European strategic autonomy” and a “preference for Europe’s borders”. She said she did not want the EU to enlarge itself to include Ukraine and refused to accept foreigners passing through Ukraine, as is currently the case at the Polish border.

Pécresse wants to increase the legal retirement age to 65 like Emmanuel Macron and stressed that she would not propose new social spending, calling them too costly. “I am a mother, I think of future generations,” said Pécresse, who said she did not want to “bequeath them a debt that goes all the way to heaven.”

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the Unsubmissive France (LFI) candidate who is up to 13 percent in the polls after proposing to return the retirement age to 60 and freeze fuel prices, justified these positions with reactionary arguments. He stressed that his aim is to avoid strikes and mobilisations of the working class: “I campaigned against retirement at 62. I campaigned against 43 years of pensionable service. I’ll do retirement again at 60 for 40 years ... If you vote for me, you save yourself from strikes and demonstrations.”

Mélenchon, who won more than 7 million votes in the 2017 presidential elections, is not calling his voters to protest against the danger of world war. Instead, he called for “betting on the Ukrainian resistance”, which NATO is arming to the tune of billions of euros.

Mélenchon observed that there is a “danger” in integrating Ukraine into NATO on the Russian border, and Green candidate Yannick Jadot attacked him after the debate, claiming that this amounts to “nonalignment” and “capitulation” to Moscow.

However, Mélenchon’s comment is not a socialist opposition to capitalism, but an alternative diplomatic strategy for French imperialism to isolate and target Russia. Rejecting a struggle to mobilize the working class, he proposed that French diplomats pressure China and India to “isolate Russia economically and politically”. He recalled that these two countries had abstained from voting on a UN condemnation of

Russia.

Finally, as a strategy to prevent a war, Mélenchon impotently proposed a “spectacular initiative”: the urgent convening of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which brings together 57 countries from Europe and North America as well as Russia. “It either works or it doesn’t, but we have to try,” he pleaded.

While Mélenchon has styled himself as a “popular” candidate, the class orientation of his party is indicated by the government run by his Spanish affiliates, the Podemos party. This party has participated in NATO’s military operations against Russia, massively increased military spending, repressed social protests, and imposed austerity. Its policy of mass infection caused over 100,000 deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.

No French presidential candidate has progressive solutions to the danger of war, the pandemic, and the diktat of the financial markets on war, all of which are by their nature international problems that cannot be solved in a national framework. Their solution will not come from the French presidential election, but from building an international movement in the working class against war and pandemic, and for socialism.



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