

Why did Mélenchon retire after nearly reaching the French presidential runoff?

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Shortly after 8 p.m. on Sunday evening, with the first round of the French presidential elections still in the balance, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Unsubmissive France (LFI) party rushed to concede and endorse France's reactionary incumbent president, Emmanuel Macron. Shortly afterwards, LFI suddenly announced Mélenchon's political retirement.

The timing of these announcements was extraordinary. Mélenchon would go on to win 22 percent of the vote, only 300,000 votes behind neofascist candidate Marine Le Pen, and hundreds of thousands of Mélenchon votes in the Paris area were only beginning to be counted. Yet Mélenchon immediately conceded defeat and called to support Macron against Le Pen. In front of rolling TV cameras, he repeatedly chanted, "We must not give a single voice to Mrs. Le Pen."

Later in the evening, as Paris area votes were counted, Mélenchon's votes surged ahead: it was unclear until after 1 a.m. on Monday whether Mélenchon might not defeat Le Pen and advance to the runoff against Macron. LFI's decision to concede defeat under these conditions and announce the retirement of its leader and presidential candidate was astonishingly self-defeating.

To argue that Mélenchon has lost, and the issue is settled is to falsify the political situation. LFI, viewed objectively, is in a very powerful position. With 7.7 million votes, it carried the youth and the working-class districts of 10 of France's 16 largest cities, including the Paris area, Marseille and Toulouse. These forces will undoubtedly play central roles in strikes and protests that will break out against either France's "president of the rich" or its first neofascist president.

What is revealed in these events is the cowardly, petty-bourgeois character of LFI and Mélenchon, and the class gulf separating LFI and other, similar pseudo-left parties in France from a Trotskyist party oriented to the working class. Instead of seeking to consolidate its vote and build a movement in the working class, LFI is desperate to throw away all the strength built up and to jump into bed with Macron.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has called for an active boycott of the Macron-Le Pen runoff. Whichever candidate wins will form an extreme-right government that will violently attack the working class. The PES calls on workers and youth not to vote in these elections, to reject the poisoned choice between the "president of the rich" and France's best-known neofascist, and to campaign to build a movement in the working class against whichever candidate wins.

Mélenchon and LFI, on the other hand, clearly reacted with shock and horror at the result. In late March, when Mélenchon was still stuck around 11 percent in the polls, he gave a campaign speech in Marseille in which he noted that, though he is turning 70, he still intended to continue playing an active role in French political life. Mélenchon said he "would no doubt go on other campaigns" after the current elections were over.

Mélenchon's enthusiasm for his political future evaporated, however, after masses of workers and youth rallied to his campaign in the two weeks before the election. Speaking to his supporters on Sunday night, as he found himself suddenly in a very strong electoral position, possibly advancing to the second round, Mélenchon took on a deeply pessimistic and discouraged tone.

After conceding, Mélenchon made an obscure reference to the Greek myth of Sisyphus and stressed his fear of the anger of his supporters. He said, "The only task that we have to give ourselves is the one accomplished by the myth of Sisyphus, the stone falls to the bottom of the ravine, we take it back up. I know your anger, do not let it make you commit errors that would be irreparable. As long as life continues, the fight continues."

Mélenchon's reference to the myth of Sisyphus perhaps said more than he intended. In this myth, Sisyphus is condemned in the underworld to roll a heavy stone up a hill, but the stone always rolls down just as it reaches the top. It is worth asking: why does Mélenchon compare LFI members and supporters to a man eternally fated by the gods

to fail just as he reaches his goal?

The financial aristocracy that Mélenchon worships is very happy for millions of workers to vote LFI and push it up the hill, as long as LFI rolls back down as it reaches the top. LFI and Mélenchon get access to the media and state posts because everyone in the ruling establishment, from Mélenchon's associates in the billionaire Dassault clan to the LFI leadership itself, knows the terms of the deal. Mélenchon must fail to get elected, and workers supporting him are to emerge from the elections disappointed, demoralized, and passive.

Mélenchon's fear of his supporters' anger on election night stems from the fact that the mass support he obtained threatens to disturb this bargain. There is clearly mass support for a left-wing policy, and more radical demands could win him support not only in the cities, but from angry small-town workers now voting for Le Pen. Millions of workers could emerge not disappointed and isolated, but energized and expecting a left-wing policy from Mélenchon, including him becoming president. This, Mélenchon cannot tolerate.

In a remarkable outburst, Mélenchon tartly told his supporters he would abandon them if they expected him to do better than third place: "Of course the younger ones will tell me, 'So we haven't gotten there yet.' You think it's not far away, huh? Well, do better yourselves, thank you."

Asked about this embittered remark, LFI officials diplomatically told the media that Mélenchon was inviting younger generations to take over the job of LFI presidential candidate, as Mélenchon would not run again. Speaking to *Le Parisien*, they speculated that after leaving politics, he might open up a foundation with a large initial capital, the La Boétie Institute, aiming to train "political cadre, high-ranking government officials and launch international debates and initiatives."

Yesterday, LFI sources walked back these remarks, saying that Mélenchon is considering running in the June 12 legislative elections, where campaigning will begin just after the presidential elections, and in other elections as well. It seems that in reality, Mélenchon's retirement will last only until a right-wing or neofascist president is installed.

A Trotskyist party in his position could call its millions of voters to mount protests and strikes against the danger of a NATO war with Russia, rapidly rising prices for energy and food that are ruining workers, or Macron's failure to fight against COVID-19 contagion. Such strikes, mobilizing broad sections of workers in most of France's major cities, could rapidly bring the French economy to a halt. It could become the starting point to a powerful, international struggle by the working class against war, the pandemic, and the impoverishment of the population.

Mélenchon is not a Trotskyist, however, but former social-democratic minister and anti-Marxist "left populist," leading a middle-class party that rejects socialist revolution, proclaiming instead an "era of the people," not the working class. As such, Mélenchon opposes mobilizing working-class opposition to war, austerity or the pandemic.

Mélenchon is not inactive in the presidential elections, moreover, but working behind the scenes in secret talks with representatives of the super-rich. Yesterday, at a campaign stop, Macron said he is exchanging text messages with Mélenchon, though Macron refused to say what they discussed, stating that it was a private discussion.

Remarkably, Mélenchon is not even engaging in bankrupt horse-trading over what conditions he will demand Macron meet before agreeing to call his voters to vote for Macron. He places no limits on what measures Macron will take against the workers. Rather, he plans to deliver his voters, bound hand and foot, to France's widely despised "president of the rich."

This entire episode makes very clear the reactionary political mechanics through which the French ruling elite divides and suppresses explosive working-class opposition and manages to install right-wing candidates like Macron or Le Pen despite mounting working-class anger.

It is also a confirmation of the correctness of the PES's analysis that there is a powerful basis in the working class and youth for a left-wing, revolutionary policy that can and must be mobilized. Since pseudo-left parties like LFI cannot and will not mobilize this opposition, it is critical instead to support the campaign of the PES for an active boycott, mobilizing workers against both Macron and Le Pen, and to build the PES as the alternative to LFI.



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