France’s Jean-luc Mélenchon announces a “New popular union” with the capitalist Socialist Party

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On Friday night, on the France2 news station, Jean-Luc Mélenchon announced the New Popular Ecological and Social Union (NUPES) between his party, Unsubmissive France (*La France Insoumise*—LFI), and the Socialist Party (PS). He declared that it was a lasting alliance between LFI and traditional capitalist governing parties in France: the Greens, the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the PS.

Mélenchon tried to present the NUPES as a tool to fight against the social attacks launched by Macron. He defined it as a “rallying response in the face against social abuse: 20 hours of forced labor per week for unemployment benefits, retirement at 65, and so on.” But he confirmed that the purpose of the NUPES was to make the alliance with the PS, a pro-European Union party from which Macron himself emerged, permanent.

Mélenchon explained that the differences between the PS and LFI were not deep enough to prevent them from working closely together. Asked by France2 if the union with the PS would be sustainable, he replied, “Yes, that’s what we all want to do. The good news is that when we started to discuss, we realized that the other party didn’t conform to the caricature we had of each other.”

By forming an alliance with the PS, a bourgeois party, in which Macron was economy minister during the presidency of François Hollande, Mélenchon is turning his back on the promises he made to his voters. In the first round of the presidential elections, he received 22 percent of the vote, or almost 8 million votes, especially among young people in working class neighborhoods around the large cities. He denounced Macron, criticized his repression of Muslims, and put forward popular slogans such as retirement at 60 and a raise in the minimum wage.

The Socialist Equality Party (PES) has explained that Mélenchon is in a powerful political position due to the massive vote he received. If a Trotskyist party were in Mélenchon’s place, it would pursue an active policy, aimed at mobilizing workers in struggle, and overcoming the national trade union apparatus. A strike by the LFI electorate against war and the draconian austerity pursued by Macron would bring the French economy to a halt and could spur an international mobilization of workers against the NATO war against Russia.

But Mélenchon has refused this policy and, since the first round of voting, has been working to demobilize his forces. He has stated that he is ready to serve as prime minister under the next president, be it Macron or Le Pen, which amounts to accepting the diktat of that president on foreign policy. Yet all the most essential questions facing workers are international: the NATO-Russia war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and exorbitant price inflation around the world.

By forming a union with the PS, Mélenchon is reaffirming his decision to turn his back on his electorate and align himself with the EU. On France2, Mélenchon stressed that the basis of the negotiations with the PS had been support for the EU and the euro. He said: “We realized, for example, that on Europe, we all agreed that there is no question, in a mandate like this one and in the current context, of leaving Europe or the euro. That is not the issue. On the other hand, if we make a commitment to the French population on a program, we stick to it.”

This prospect is nothing but a political trap for the workers. In reality, Mélenchon has little chance of becoming prime minister: polls indicate that the NUPES, whose vote is highly concentrated in the big cities, would win at most a hundred of the 577 seats in the Assembly. But, above all, even if the LFI-PS alliance won a majority in the Assembly, it would inevitably disappoint its voters.

Indeed, the LFI-PS agreement that produced the NUPES endorses a policy of militarism and austerity. First, it aligns itself with NATO in its war against Russia in Ukraine, which involves massive expenditures and threatens the world with nuclear conflict. It states that “in an international context of tension and war on the European continent and in the face of

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atrocities decided by Vladimir Putin, we defend the sovereignty and freedom of Ukraine."

Admitting that "European treaties (are) incompatible with our social and ecological ambition legitimized by the people," the agreement declares its support for the EU: "As a founding country of the European Union, France will assume its responsibilities in this framework. The government that we will form for this legislature will not have as a policy the exit from the Union, nor its disintegration, nor the end of the single currency."

While Mélenchon promises to "disobey" European treaties, he approves of the threat of war with Russia and the framework of European austerity. The French state went into debt to the tune of 115 percent of its Gross Domestic Product to give hundreds of billions of euros to the financial aristocracy during the pandemic. Implementing the reforms Mélenchon mentions would therefore require an assault on the wealth of the super-rich, something that the PS and the NUPES will reject.

The massive vote of urban workers and young people for Mélenchon has exploded the myths of French politics that the working class is moving massively to the far right. Across the world there is deep anger and a radicalization among workers. But everywhere the ruling elite puts forward parties that offer them nothing but intensified policies of war, mass coronavirus infection, and austerity.

Among the established parties in France, workers unhappy with Macron are faced with the poisonous choice between, on the one hand, parties presented by the media as being of the "radical" left but in fact close to the PS; and on the other, especially for urban and rural workers disgusted by the PS's austerity policies, the social demagogy of Marine Le Pen.

Mélenchon's role in these elections has laid bare the mechanisms through which the ruling elite still manages, for the time being, to block a mobilization of workers, despite an explosive political crisis. It puts forward parties that the media present as "popular" or "left," but which reject a mobilization of the working class and move towards right-wing compromises with bourgeois parties.

A class gulf separates the politics of the PES, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), from Mélenchon and the NUPES and its various satellites. The PES advocates an international mobilization of the working class, the formation of action committees independent of the national trade union apparatuses and of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees, and a revolutionary struggle to transfer power to the workers. Against a Trotskyist line, LFI and the entire NUPES capitulate to imperialist war and the EU.

This is linked to the rejection of Trotskyism by forces coming from the petty bourgeois youth after the general strike of May 1968. Mélenchon first joined Pierre Lambert's Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI), shortly after the OCI broke with the ICFI in 1971. The OCI supported the Union of the Left between the PS and the PCF, on the nationalist perspective of forming a PS capitalist government in France. In 1976, Mélenchon joined the PS, which came to power in 1981 and made its "austerity turn" in 1982; he became a senator, then a PS minister in 1997-2002.

Mélenchon left the PS in 2009, but without abandoning the capitalist perspective of union with the PS, even after the ultra-reactionary turn of the PS under the presidency of Hollande. It was Hollande who imposed the labor law that is at the origin of the austerity measures planned by Macron, and the state of emergency with the militarization of police repression. By also attempting to constitutionalize the power of the state to strip nationalities—a measure that justified the deportation of Jews and the repression of the resistance under Vichy—Hollande betrayed his sympathies for the far right.

Today, Hollande finds himself Mélenchon's ally in the NUPES, which attempts to stifle the opposition of workers and youth to the rightward turn of the ruling elite. Mélenchon's declaration between the two rounds that he would accept to serve as prime minister to a president Marine Le Pen constitutes his participation in the enterprise of restoring the image of the extreme right led by Le Pen.

The PES, on the other hand, campaigned among workers during the presidential election for a boycott of the second round between Le Pen and Macron. It rejected the false argument that Macron would be a roadblock to the far right and maintained an uncompromising opposition to both candidates. It turned to the anger growing internationally among workers against intolerable price rises, the mass death of the pandemic and the growing danger of open war between Russia and NATO.

A powerful working class movement is in the making. While Mélenchon is doing everything possible to strangle an eruption of class struggle, he is also creating the conditions for the workers to move outside the framework of all the anti-Marxist parties now grouped in the NUPES. The alternative to the impasse produced by Mélenchon and the PS is the construction of the ICFI as the revolutionary vanguard of the working class, and in France of its French section, the PES.

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