Mélenchon quietly proposes a general strike to the French union bureaucracy

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Last night, readers of the Marseille daily *La Provence* learned that Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, has proposed a general strike for April 6. An unsuspecting reader could be forgiven for asking why this did not make front-page news in every newspaper and televised evening news broadcast in France, as explosive anger mounts with Macron's attempt to impose pension cuts against overwhelming popular opposition.

Indeed, Mélenchon received just under 8 million votes in last year's presidential election, nearly reaching the runoff against Emmanuel Macron. A mass strike by his voters, concentrated in the working class areas of France's largest cities, would shut down the economy. Such action has the support of 62 percent of the French people, according to polls. It would shatter Macron's attempt to ram through his pension cuts despite overwhelming popular opposition and strikes by millions of workers, and pose the question of Macron's political survival.

But Mélenchon's call for a general strike was not reported in France's major media yesterday, because he did not tell anyone about it.

Mélenchon made clear that he is not serious about this demand at all: he buried it ten minutes into a YouTube video he posted yesterday afternoon, and whose title did not refer to any call for strikes. *La Provence* learned of his general strike proposal not in a call from one of Mélenchon's many political assistants or press attachés, but by listening to the video on his YouTube channel.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), advocates the preparation of a general strike as key for workers to realize the central task of the hour: bringing down Macron. But one key political lesson emerges from this ludicrous episode with Mélenchon: the preparation of a general strike cannot be left in the hands of a former Senator and capitalist minister like him. It can only be carried out by building a mass movement of rank-and-file workers, rebelling against the political establishment.

Mélenchon's proposal was not addressed to rank-and-file workers, but to the French union bureaucracy, and above all to the Stalinist bureaucracy of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union. In his video, Mélenchon repeatedly praised the CGT, hoping its leadership would emerge unscathed from its ongoing congress, which has collapsed into bitter infighting.

CGT leader Philippe Martinez has backed French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) boss Laurent Berger's attempt to orchestrate a sellout of the struggle against Macron. Berger is calling for "mediation" with Macron to "cool down" explosive anger that is mounting in the working class against Macron, and thus prepare a sellout.

Mélenchon did not refer to the explosive anger mounting in the working class at Macron's attempt to rule against the people, or criticize Berger's treachery. However, Mélenchon's own account showed that he is well aware that Berger is trying to sell out the movement against Macron.

The March 28 one-day strike, Mélenchon claimed, saw "a fall in the number of participants in the demonstrations." He said that strikers are beginning to run out of savings, and noted in protests that there is "a considerable increase in the number of youth, and a fall in the number of people coming with baby carriages … because people are getting afraid of the violence coming from the cops."

Mélenchon's analysis of the state of the movement against Macron must be taken with an enormous grain of salt. The precise number of people marching in a given one-day action in France is always the subject of controversy. Moreover, no one brings a baby carriage to a protest under Macron: the explosion of a tear gas canister or a police stun grenade inside the carriage could prove fatal to the baby. Above all, there is still enormous determination among workers and youth to continue the struggle against Macron, in defiance of Berger's call for "mediation."

Nevertheless, it is clear that by delaying the next one-day protest until April 6, and refusing as always to pay strikers any strike pay, the French union bureaucracy is trying its best to strangle the movement against Macron.

Mélenchon said, "We must not give the spectacle of a gradual dying-down of the movement, because that would be to sell it out. The struggle continues, we need to demonstrate initiative, give perspectives for an offensive." Supposedly to provide such an offensive perspective to the workers and avoid a union sell out, Mélenchon proposed to declare the one-day strike called by Berger and the CGT leadership on April 6 to be a general strike.

Mélenchon's proposal is politically absurd and dishonest. Clearly, he intends to leave the preparation of his "general strike" to Berger, Martinez and the French union bureaucracies. But these union leaders, whom his own analysis shows are aiming to stabilize Macron's regime and organize a sellout, will not suddenly turn 180 degrees and organize a general strike against Macron. Mélenchon's unserious call for a general strike is just cynical word-juggling, aiming to hide his alignment with Berger

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and other accomplices of Macron.

In 1935 in *Whither France*, before the outbreak of the 1936 French general strike, Leon Trotsky poured scorn on those who played around with references to general strikes. Such individuals did not have in mind a real general strike, he ironically wrote, but only "a little strike, quite peaceful, just exactly suited to the personal requirements" of one or another member of the political establishment. In contrast, he wrote:

> The general strike, as every Marxist knows, is one of the most revolutionary methods of struggle. The general strike is not possible except at a time when the class struggle rises above particular and craft demands, and extends over all occupational and district divisions, and wipes away the lines and the parties, between legality and illegality, and mobilizes the majority of the proletariat in an active opposition to the bourgeoisie and the state. Nothing can be on a higher plane than the general strike, except the armed insurrection. The entire history of the working-class movement proves that every general strike, whatever may be the slogans under which it occurs, has an internal tendency to transform itself into an open revolutionary clash, into a direct struggle for power. In other words: the general strike is not possible except under the conditions of extreme political tension, and that is why it is always the incontestable expression of the revolutionary character of the situation.

Explosive anger emerging among broad layers of workers against Macron's attempt to rule against the people places the eruption of a general strike on the order of the day. The majority of the working population, across all divisions of occupation and geography, is seeking a way to impose its will on the diktat of Macron and the banks. Ever-broader layers of workers understand that in this struggle, the union leaders are not allies, but enemies seeking to prop up Macron.

The decisive questions to mobilize the working class against Macron are building new organizations of struggle among the rank and file, and fighting for Marxist political consciousness in the working class.

This requires mounting a political struggle against Mélenchon, who advocates French populism and a "citizens revolution," against an orientation to the international working class and socialist revolution. Indeed, it is worth in this context recalling how Mélenchon's book *They Should All Go Away* defines his "citizens revolution." It is, he makes clear, a process where strikes and protests serve not to overthrow capitalism and capitalist governments, but to install a new capitalist government in France via elections. He writes:

> I want a "citizens revolution" in France. The adjective "citizens" indicates both the means and the ends of this action. These two comments are decisive because of the childish imagery that stupidly associates revolution with I-don't-know-what plot for an armed insurrection. … The revolution I want is a citizens revolution in that it is rooted in social movements, and it is triggered and carried out by ballots and elections.

Mélenchon repeatedly stressed that he is opposed to workers taking control of their industries and workplaces and expropriating their private capitalist owners. He arrogantly dismissed this essential component of socialist revolution as a capitulation to "special interests." The "citizens revolution," he wrote, is "not either a question of shouting, old-style, 'The mine to the miner and the earth to he who tills it.' One does not break a dictatorship of the shareholders to establish a government by special interests."

The key political demand Mélenchon raises for his "citizens revolution" is to rename the legislature a "Constituent Assembly," i.e. one that can change the constitution. But this policy, he makes clear, aims to lull to sleep workers rising up against the state authorities, by holding out the promise that the capitalist political establishment will itself carry out a deep-going democratic reform. The goal, ultimately, is to prop up the existing state machine and avert revolution via a change of personnel at the top.

Or, as Mélenchon writes himself, he was initially unsure on his trip to Latin America why the call for a "Constituent Assembly" was necessary. However, he writes, "The explanation was given to me once I arrived on the scene. It was the precondition for the authorities to be legitimate again."

This is how Mélenchon tries to paint a defense of the capitalist state in "revolutionary" colors. This reactionary perspective has nothing to offer for millions of workers and youth who are rebelling against Macron and the dictatorship of the financial oligarchy. A key precondition to building the rank-and-file organizations and the revolutionary political leadership necessary to prepare a general strike, and fight to bring down Macron and build workers power, is to reject the counterrevolutionary populism of Mélenchon.

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