

After brutal suppression of anti-police riots, French pseudo-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon defends capitalist state

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During the riots that affected France for six days following the police murder of Nahel M, veteran pseudo-left politician and leader of Unsubmissive France (LFI) Jean Luc Mélenchon played a cynical political role in defending the capitalist state against a wider revolt by workers and youth.

Contrary to his presentation as an “extreme-left” politician by the bourgeois press in France, Mélenchon is an established capitalist politician. While he occasionally criticises particular policies of the Macron government, he is fully behind all of the reactionary policies of French imperialism, including social attacks, the remilitarization of French society, French intervention in the Sahel and the maintenance of France’s huge police state.

Refusing to lift a finger to mobilize his millions of voters against police violence and the unpopular Macron government, Mélenchon instead promotes illusions in the possibility of reforming fascistic elements within the police such as the CRS, BRAV and RAID units, and presents himself to the French bourgeoisie as the best candidate to restore order.

Just as during the mass struggles against the pension reform, the Macron government relied on a violent crackdown by its police state forces to suppress youth riots in all of France’s major cities. In the week after Nahel’s murder, 45,000 heavily armoured police were deployed every night throughout France. Police turned a blind eye as far-right vigilantes clashed with protesters and, according to some reports, delivered captured youth to the police for arrest.

The repression was brutal. Police killed a young man in Marseille with a grenade and shot another with a “bean-bag” bullet, putting him in a coma from which he has not recovered. They arrested more than 3,400 individuals.

Five people were blinded in the clashes. Those arrested were rushed through arbitrary conviction and sentencing, with 95 percent found guilty and two-thirds put in prison. More people were arrested in this week of clashes than in the entire struggle of the Yellow Vests in 2018.

At the height of the tensions, Macron’s government raged against left-wing opposition, accusing Mélenchon of “pouring fuel on the fire” for merely stating that the police were “out of control.” Macron and Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin met with and pledged support to police chiefs, even as the police unions fascistically derided the working class as “savage hordes.” Macron blamed youth anger on poor parenting and video games, and threatened to censor social media.

When the police in Marseille went on strike to protest the arrest of one of their colleagues, who savagely beat an unarmed man during the riots, Macron refused to condemn the police unions’ call for police exemption from civilian law.

Under these conditions, Mélenchon seeks to keep up his left-wing appearances by denouncing police violence. While doing so, however, he

does everything he can to keep opposition to Macron and his police state within the framework of French bourgeois politics, even though the bourgeois politicians are opposed by the majority of the French population.

In an interview with Mediapart last month, Mélenchon warned, “We are in danger because the government no longer controls the police. It is afraid of them. It is subject to them.”

However, rather than calling for a mobilization of the majority of the population, including his own 8 million voters, who oppose Macron’s rule and the far-right turn of the state apparatus, Mélenchon appeals to the man widely derided as the “president of the rich” to call off his legions.

in a post on his blog in late July, Mélenchon stated:

All the parties of the so-called “republican arc” are speechless before the record of irresponsible encouragement of the highest police organizations. We can now legitimately ask what “order” the forces that behave in this way against the people and institutions [represent].

He then appealed to “the authorities and their allies in the so-called ‘republican arc’” to “pull themselves together and break with their complacency before the fascist and violent police organizations.” He continued:

They must restore republican obedience and discipline in the police. These parties must clearly condemn what is happening and take a position in defence of the Republic.

Mélenchon’s call to the Macron government and its ‘republican’ allies “to pull themselves together” rests on the absurd premise that the massively unpopular president has an interest in challenging the police apparatus he has built up with money, personnel and legal protections to more effectively and ruthlessly defend his unpopular rule.

Just as he did during the struggle against the pension reform, Mélenchon works to subordinate opposition to Macron to the institutions of the bourgeois state. His priority, in his own words, is “defence of the republic.”

This is a criminal and bankrupt perspective, which paves the way for fascism by disarming the working class politically. The institutions in which Mélenchon promotes illusions—the Assembly, the Senate, the presidency, the judiciary—have promoted the far right for years and have

funded the creation of a fascistic police force across multiple governments.

Under conditions in which every other major French political party—including his own political allies in the United Left coalition—is either covering up or endorsing the fascistic declarations of the police, Mélenchon appeals to the majority of workers and youth who are concerned about the rise of fascism. However, in doing so he seeks to block them from taking the political step required to fight against the far right: a break with all political parties that support the capitalist state.

Against this, Mélenchon insists on the necessity of maintaining the current French police force, explaining to Mediapart:

There is a need for a police force in every society. That's been obvious for as long as cities have existed... So we need to overhaul the police force, starting with training, getting supervision back under control, reinstating [ex-interior minister] Pierre Joxe's code of ethics.

This is not just a total repudiation of the Marxist view of the state, but a direct signal to the members of the French bourgeoisie that should it need him to protect them from the working class, Mélenchon will be a “safe pair of hands” who will leave the instruments of class rule untouched.

Based on his association with opposition to Macron and social reaction, in the 2022 election Mélenchon won 8 million votes, mostly concentrated in the working-class quarters of France's major cities. The refiners' strike in 2022 and the wildcat strikes that followed Macron's use of an obscure law to impose his pension cuts without a vote in the National Assembly showed that even limited strikes in critical industries can bring the French economy to a halt. Earlier this year, 62 percent of the population supported a general strike to defeat Macron.

Any genuinely socialist politician in such circumstances would demand the immediate disbandment of this fascistic apparatus and the overthrow of the unpopular Macron government. If Mélenchon called for a general strike of his supporters, the working class could bring down the Macron government and force the disbandment of the police state. Why then does Mélenchon refuse to do this?

The leader of LFI defends the social interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class, concentrated in the union bureaucracies and academia, which are more afraid of the threat a working class revolution poses to their comfortable lives than the capitalist state's promotion of fascism. As a defender of these interests, Mélenchon will not support the popular call for the dissolution of the fascistic apparatus built up by the ruling class, and instead seeks to disarm workers' opposition to it.

The historical bankruptcy of Mélenchon's position is most cruelly expressed in the only action he advocates—pleading with Macron and Darmanin to reel in the very fascistic police units they have created and promoted.

Mélenchon understands the trajectory being pushed by Macron and the ruling class in France, but proposes no way to fight against it. In his Mediapart interview, the leader of LFI draws a parallel to the 1930s:

The republican front was reversed, transformed into an “anti-popular front.” I use this expression because it recalls the situation of 1936, when all the others united against the Popular Front, under the slogan “Better Adolf Hitler than the Popular Front.”

He concludes:

When you have fascists on the street, it's time to wake up, isn't it? We must be able to put up non-violent resistance. But to be effective, it must be ten, a hundred times more massive than that of the violent ones.

This argument can only be persuasive to those without any memory of the events of 2023 in France. Millions marched peacefully for months against Macron, wildcat strikes broke out across major industries, and everywhere the police bludgeoned the working class to force strikers and protesters off the streets and back to work. In response to this, Mélenchon defends the ruling class's “right” to its armed police force to defend its profits, but demands that struggling workers and youth take a pacifist pledge!

Mélenchon's historical parallel to the experiences of the 1930s unintentionally exposes the total impotence of his own bourgeois politics in fighting the rise of fascism in the twenty-first century.

In May 1936, the Popular Front government came to power in France. The Communist Party and the reformist socialist party (French Section of the Workers' International--SFIO), which at that time were mass workers' organizations, joined the bourgeois Radical Party in a coalition government led by Léon Blum. A week later, a general strike erupted as the working class went on the offensive.

However, this government, far from vindicating parliamentary reformism in France, defused the general strike by subordinating the working class to supposedly “progressive” and democratic sections of the bourgeoisie, paving the way for the victory of fascism. As Leon Trotsky explained at this time, the only way to fight the rise of fascism was working class revolution.

Against this revolutionary perspective, the Popular Front government prevented the working class from pursuing its own policy against the ruling class and disarmed it politically, leading to the capitulation of the entire French bourgeoisie to Hitler in 1940.

Even as Mélenchon warns about the similarities with 1930s France, he is committed to the very politics that doomed the Popular Front and the French working class. Nearly a century has passed, but the lessons of the past are lost on anti-Marxist pseudo-left politicians like Mélenchon.

Now, as then, parliamentary democracy is being eclipsed by the consolidation of fascism on one side and a massive movement of the working class on the other. In the preface to *Whither France?* Trotsky explained that the fascist riots in 1934 and the general strike of 1936 signaled the two historic roads open to the French working class at that time:

These two milestones show the way in advance to two possible roads: the Italian or the Russian. Parliamentary democracy, in whose name the Blum government now functions, will be crushed into powder between these two great milestones. Whatever the specific stages to come, the transitional combinations and groupings, the partial attacks and retreats, the tactical episodes, there henceforth remains the choice only between Fascism and the proletarian revolution. That is the meaning of this book.

It is indeed time to wake up! But this requires an understanding that it is not just Macron and a few police chiefs that are incompatible with democracy, it is capitalism. There is no middle road to fighting against fascism. As the ruling class turns to fascism and millions of workers enter in strikes against government reaction, Mélenchon's call for the French bourgeoisie to voluntarily return to democracy is a historical fiction.

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the world is once again

on the brink of world war and the working class internationally is in open revolt against declining living standards and political reaction. The sharpest expression of this movement has been the strikes and demonstrations of millions of workers in France against Macron's pension cuts and their suppression by fascistic elements within the police apparatus.

For all the important differences with the 1930s, the most essential historical facts are the same: The working class must fight for an independent revolutionary policy or it will be crushed by fascist reaction. In such conditions, a decisive break must be made with all parties and politicians of the capitalist state, especially those such as Mélenchon who divert workers from this crucial political perspective and muddy the perspective of socialism with their pro-capitalist politics.



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