

No to Macron and Le Pen! The French election crisis, the threat of fascism and the treachery of the New Popular Front

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The first round of snap elections called by French President Emmanuel Macron has produced a debacle for Macron's party and exposed the political rot of the capitalist establishment. Fully 11 million people, including 57 percent of manual workers in France, voted for Marine Le Pen's neo-fascist National Rally (RN) and its allies. Nine million voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon's New Popular Front (NFP) alliance, while Macron's party collapsed to 6 million votes.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) irreconcilably opposes both the neo-fascist Le Pen and the banker Macron, France's despised "president of the rich." It does not, however, advocate support or a vote for Mélenchon's NFP. The NFP is working to systematically disenfranchise workers and youth opposed to both Macron and Le Pen and block the building of a movement in the working class by trying to form a governmental alliance with Macron.

The RN vote among workers does not express mass support for the policies of genocide and war such as those perpetrated by the RN's Nazi-collaborationist forebears. Rather, it reflects, in a distorted fashion, outrage and hatred against Macron. Overwhelming majorities of the French people oppose Macron's deep cuts to pensions and living standards, as well as his monumentally reckless call to send troops to Ukraine to wage war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power.

Workers in the smaller cities and rural areas where the RN vote is concentrated are looking for a way to struggle. They joined in "yellow vest" protests against Macron in 2018-2019 and participated in large numbers in protests last year against his pension cuts.

That the far right is able to benefit from social and political discontent is because workers have been systematically betrayed for decades by the parties of the middle-class pseudo-left and the trade union bureaucracies.

Mélenchon and the NFP are not offering workers a way to build a mass movement in the working class against war and fascism. They are not drawing political lessons from how the union bureaucracies isolated the "yellow vests" and exposed them to bloody police repression and then ignominiously shut down mass protests against Macron's illegitimate pension cuts

last year. They are not fighting to build a militant movement of struggle by rank-and-file workers.

The NFP is instead working to strangle such a struggle. It is cutting electoral deals, constituency by constituency, to form a capitalist coalition government with Macron, in which Mélenchon might serve as Macron's prime minister. Macron has already served notice that he is prepared to invoke Article 16 of the French constitution, which would allow him to suspend parliament and the government and rule as a dictator, if an NFP-backed government advocated policies he deemed unacceptable to the banks.

By nonetheless entering into talks with Macron on this basis, Mélenchon is not preparing a struggle against neo-fascism. He is allowing the RN to argue that the "left" are accomplices of Macron and impotent tools of the banks, and that French workers must support the RN to oppose Macron. The entire course of French and European politics in the 21st century has shown that this strengthens the far right.

The PES rejects arguments that an NFP alliance with Macron is the best that can be expected and that there is not support for a left-wing, revolutionary policy. Leon Trotsky answered these arguments long ago, as he fought to found the Fourth International as the political alternative to the Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois liberal forces of the Popular Front of 1934-1938. Speaking of the danger of a movement towards fascism in the large peasantry France had at that time and their lack of support for the Stalinist and social democratic parties, he wrote:

It is false, thrice false, to affirm that the present petty bourgeoisie is not going to the working-class parties because it fears "extreme measures." Quite the contrary. The lower petty bourgeoisie, its great masses, only see in the working-class parties parliamentary machines. They do not believe in their strength, nor in their capacity to struggle, nor in their readiness this time to conduct the struggle to the end.

Today it is thrice false to assert that masses of workers are voting for the RN because they oppose a struggle against capitalism. Rather, they have decades of long and bitter experience with the anti-worker policies of the parties in the NFP. The NFP—bringing together the big business Socialist Party (PS), the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), the Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Mélenchon's France Unbowed (LFI) party—is not the Popular Front of the 1930s.

At that time as well the Trotskyists were opponents of the Popular Front, which sold out the 1936 French general strike and blocked a struggle for state power and socialism by the workers—ultimately paving the way for the French bourgeoisie's collaboration with Nazism. But the Trotskyists could, however, work within the mass base of the social democratic SFIO of Léon Blum.

Despite Blum's bitter hostility to the Trotskyists, the Trotskyists played a leading role in initiatives such as building the TPPS (Always Ready to Serve) militia to defend the labor movement from fascist attacks. In the SFIO, the Trotskyists found an audience among workers sympathetic to the Soviet Union and attracted to major social reforms proposed by the SFIO like the eight-hour day and paid vacations.

The social base of the NFP, however, is an alliance between the imperialist bourgeoisie and affluent pseudo-left layers of the middle class in academia and the union bureaucracy. Its program calls for escalating the war with Russia through “the necessary delivery of weapons” and “sending peacekeepers” to Ukraine. It endorses Macron's police state, calling for “the maintenance of all military police units” and the strengthening of France's intelligence services.

The NFP is running the widely despised former PS President François Hollande as a candidate. Hollande, the first French president to publicly invite neo-fascists to the Elysée presidential palace, infamously mocked workers who cannot afford dental care as “toothless ones.” An unabashed enemy of the working class, Hollande appealed in 2012 to bankers in London to finance his presidential bid by saying:

Today there are no more communists in France. The left liberalized the economy and opened markets to finance and privatization. There is nothing to fear.

What the NFP is laying out is a perspective not of class struggle but for a capitalist government that would collide with mass working class opposition. The NFP's rationalization for this policy—the argument that Macron, whose police state machine, starting from Interior Minister Gérard Darmanin, is stuffed full of neo-fascists, will serve as a bulwark against neo-fascism—is a political lie.

Lessons must be drawn from the 2002 presidential election

crisis, when the collapse of the vote for the pro-austerity PS led to a run-off between right-wing candidate Jacques Chirac and neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. Mass protests erupted against the presence of a neo-fascist on the ballot and the false choice presented to voters. As millions marched in the streets, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) called for an active policy of fighting for a working class boycott of the elections. It called upon

every organization seeking to defend the working class to campaign actively for a boycott of the May 5 presidential vote. No political support to either Le Pen or Chirac! Mobilize French working people and youth against this false and anti-democratic “choice...”

Why a boycott? Because it is necessary to deny any legitimacy to this fraudulent election; because it is necessary to establish an independent political line for the working class; because an active and aggressive boycott would create the best conditions for the political struggles that will arise in the aftermath of the elections.

The PS, Mélenchon, the PCF and the Pabloites all rejected this policy. Endorsing Chirac as a defender of democracy, they effectively ceded to the neo-fascists the mantle of opposition to the political establishment. This disastrous policy of embracing capitalist politicians as democrats has led to over two decades of massive growth of the far right. Its repetition today by the NFP as it makes an electoral alliance with Macron will only further strengthen Le Pen.

War and fascistic reaction can only be stopped by mobilizing the working class in France, across Europe and internationally in struggle against capitalism. It will not be stopped at the ballot box. What is being set into motion, whatever the outcome of Macron's snap elections, is an explosive confrontation between the working class and the capitalist political establishment.

This can only be waged, however, by building a movement from below, among rank-and-file workers independent of the bureaucracies of the NFP. The political basis of such a struggle is the fight by the ICFI and its French section, the PES, against Popular Frontism and the pseudo-left and in defense of the heritage and continuity of Trotskyism and the struggle for international socialist revolution.



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