Trump-Putin summit exposes Mélenchon's New Popular Front

Alex Lantier
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The shift in US foreign policy with the holding of the Trump-Putin summit in Alaska triggered an outburst of anger from Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the France Unbowed (LFI) party and its New Popular Front (NFP) alliance. He did not call, however, to mobilize workers against US war threats against Iran or Venezuela, or the escalation of war and military spending from Paris to Moscow. He issued nationalist calls for France to grab a bigger share of the spoils of war.

His article, titled "In Alaska, the cruel beginning of a new world order," lays out a policy that, in its content if not in its rhetoric, could be embraced by right-wing politicians. Denouncing the United States, the NATO alliance, Russia and Germany, Mélenchon demands that the French state get more "cards of power," writing:

> For us more than ever, relying on anyone other than ourselves to defend us is an act of naïveté that will cost us dearly. The USA, Russians, Germans and others will all get some juice from this new distribution of the cards of power. France, for having failed to develop a realist policy, ambition, and an understanding of the moment, is the exception. …
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> This is the real balance sheet of all the chatterboxes who since 2005 have drowned us in declarations, intolerable pro-NATO arrogance, and their bland chanting on the marvelous future of their plans. Time is up for them, and for their plans. A LFI government will be free to engage an entirely different policy, entirely differently, so that France can offer a policy of a different globalization and non-alignment. A totally different Europe can arise.

Workers and youth must take this comment as a warning: struggles against austerity and war must be waged independently from social-democratic, Stalinist or petty-bourgeois populist parties and union bureaucracies who in France are grouped in the NFP. These forces do not oppose the vast increase in military spending now underway in France and across Europe.

He who wants the ends wants the means. Macron's plan to double French military spending by 2030 is to be financed by Prime Minister François Bayrou's plan for €45 billion in social cuts, just as Berlin's plans for €1 trillion in military spending are to be financed by attacks on German workers. Supporters of militarization like the NFP will try to delay, disorient, disorganize, and ultimately disband workers struggles against austerity and military-police rule.

In an era of globalized supply chains and global war, there is no national road to salvation. Were he teleported into the Elysée presidential palace, Mélenchon claims, the French capitalist state would fearlessly defy Washington, Moscow, Berlin all at once, and capitalism would suddenly be different. This is what he says, but what is the situation, and what does his record show?

On what class basis does Mélenchon oppose the Trump-Putin talks?

Defeats suffered by the NATO-backed regime in Ukraine and Trump's summit in Alaska have exposed the European imperialist powers. They spent hundreds of billions of euros to boost their armies, staking everything on winning a war with Russia alongside the United States. Now, they have been wrong-footed, as the far-right US president tries to broker a peace deal to end the war they made their key justification for austerity and plans to wage "high-intensity war."

LFI, in line with similar middle class parties across Europe like the Left Party in Germany and Podemos-Sumar in Spain, did not oppose this policy. While Left Party officials applauded German re-militarization, and Podemos sat in a government that sent anti-tank missiles to the Ukrainian neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, LFI formed the NFP alliance with the bourgeois Socialist Party (PS), the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the Greens. Mélenchon wrote into the NFP's election program Macron's wildly unpopular call to send French troops as "peacekeepers" to Ukraine.

Mélenchon's criticisms of the Alaska talks flow from the failure of his previous, reactionary policy. He bitterly complains that China's economic rise has confused the US foreign policy establishment, keeping it from pursuing the consistent war policy that the European powers hoped would benefit them, by allowing to absorb Ukraine and perhaps Russia itself. Washington's setback, Mélenchon complains, has left an opening for Germany to dominate Europe:

> China or Russia, [the United States] had to choose which one was the true "systemic adversary." Dithering, hesitation and waffling muddled its policy. Now it is too late. Putin has won the war, because Ukraine cannot win it without US participation on a scale that is no longer possible due to China. The USA cannot therefore get out of it posturing as the victor. They will have to accept that a new map of Europe will be drawn. … More than ever it will be a German Europe, that is to say, nothingness.

Mélenchon's singling out of Germany as the principal threat is as reactionary as his complaint that US imperialism was not single-minded enough in targeting China. He makes no distinction between German imperialism's leading and reactionary role in the European Union, and historically-rooted opposition to militarism and austerity in the German working class.

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German workers, like workers in France and across Europe, will be plunged into bitter class struggles in the coming months. To spend trillions of euros on the army while protecting the obscene fortunes of the financial oligarchy, the European imperialist powers must destroy social programs on which hundreds of millions of working people rely. Given the mass opposition this will provoke, they will also vastly accelerate their building of a police dictatorship.

As workers in France prepare strikes against Bayrou this autumn, their best allies are their class brothers and sisters in Germany and internationally, not the NFP's union bureaucracies and openly pro-austerity parties like the PS. Workers in France must coordinate their struggles against imperialist war, austerity and police-state dictatorship with workers in Germany. For this, workers on both sides of the Rhine will have to build new organizations of struggle and adopt a Trotskyist political perspective against the nationalism promoted by Mélenchon.

Anti-Trotskyist roots of Mélenchon's Germanophobia

Mélenchon's orientation to imperialism and his Germanophobia are rooted in his anti-Trotskyist politics. He began his career in Pierre Lambert's *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI), at the time of its 1971 split with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the leadership of the world Trotskyist movement. Lambert's OCI backed the newly-founded PS led by François Mitterrand, supporting its Union of the Left electoral alliance with the Stalinist PCF.

Mitterrand had drawn from decades in capitalist politics, including in the Nazi occupation of France, a deep concern for limiting German power. He was notorious for his role as an official in the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, as well as for ordering executions of independence fighters in France's 1954-1962 colonial war in Algeria, during which Algerian independence fighters found refuge in West Germany. Mélenchon ultimately left the OCI to join the PS in 1976, becoming a top Mitterrand aide during his 1981-1995 presidency.

Though Mitterrand worked with Berlin in the 1991 US-led Gulf War against Iraq and the 1992 launch of the European Union (EU), he also discussed with UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher his opposition to German reunification in 1990. He gave limited support to Serbia to hamper German influence in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Mélenchon, who has spoken openly of his admiration for Mitterrand even after leaving the PS in 2009, retained this anti-German orientation.

To retain a cynical and empty verbal reference to Trotskyism, Mélenchon speaks inside LFI and sometimes publicly of his ties with "the Old Man." This was the affectionate term Trotskyists in France and internationally used for Trotsky before and during World War II. However, Mélenchon uses it not to designate Trotsky, but Mitterrand, the architect of France's 1982 "austerity turn." This symbolizes how LFI substitutes for socialist internationalism a defense of French imperialism.

In a 2016 interview in *Marianne*, Mélenchon recounted how his "Old Man" Mitterrand only had to utter one word, "happiness," to politically seduce Mélenchon the very first time the two met:

> It was Besançon in 1972. I was a very audacious student union official, I was afraid of no one. … I was sent to intervene in Mitterrand's speech at a meeting in our university. When he started, the Old Man began speaking—about happiness. I guarantee you, I am not a fragile person. But that moment, my doctrinaire armor was pierced.

If this account is to be believed, it indicates that, primed by the OCI's orientation to the "Union of the Left," Mélenchon was desperately looking for an entry into capitalist politics. That, it must be said, he well and truly found. He became a PS senator, then a minister in the 1997-2002 pro-austerity government of PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, another ex-OCI member. These are the roots of Mélenchon's Germanophobia.

No one with any knowledge of European history and Nazism can ignore the danger posed by German imperialist domination of Europe. But Mélenchon's love of Mitterrand and his blanket attacks on Germans are utterly alien to Trotskyism. During the Nazi occupation of France, French Trotskyists and their German comrades underground in France fought to win both French workers and German soldiers to the struggle for socialist revolution. It is by reviving such traditions that European workers can fight austerity and imperialist war.

A settling of political accounts on the Ukraine war

Pessimistic and embittered by the failure of the NFP's war policy, Mélenchon is terrified of the effect Trump's sudden shift towards talks with Moscow will have in Ukraine. He writes:

> [Ukraine] now knows what to expect. It cannot win, not only because of the military reasons we explained. Above all, its political system is hanging by a thread. Everything points to collapse: trade unions and opposition parties were banned, keeping Zelensky in power though his presidential term in office was finished, having tried to save the corrupt elements making money off the war effort, the mass desertions [from the Ukrainian army]. All this broke the link between the Zelensky system and his people at war.

This amounts to a devastating self-indictment of the NFP's own call to send French "peacekeepers" to prop up the Zelensky regime. There was no "link" between the Ukrainian people and Zelensky. He runs an oppressive puppet regime funded to the tune of hundreds of billions by Washington and the European powers, and which lacks a shred of democratic legitimacy.

Zelensky dragooned hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to their deaths, with the aid of far-right militias like the Azov Battalion, in a hopeless war with Russia. Since reports emerged that NATO officials led by then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson torpedoed peace talks the Kremlin offered to Zelensky shortly after invading Ukraine, it is clear the main force pressing for war was not Moscow, but NATO. With contempt for the lives of the Ukrainian people whose freedom they were claiming to defend, the NATO powers tried to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian.

Mélenchon's statement raises serious political questions. Mélenchon has, of course, often criticized NATO. But why, if LFI knew Zelensky's regime was a repressive dictatorship, did they not aggressively denounce Macron's lies about defending Ukrainian freedom and reject using money from social cuts to upgrade the French army for "high intensity warfare?"

The working class must have a settling of political accounts with petty-bourgeois anti-Marxist groups implicated in imperialism's crimes in Ukraine. The truth must be bluntly stated. The entire NFP, including LFI, is complicit not only in Macron's lies about Ukraine, but also in his agenda of militarization. This turns them into bitter enemies of the working class. Due to their nationalist support for French great-power politics, they acquiesce to Macron's policy of plundering of the workers

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to strengthen the military.

In perpetrating this fraud, LFI had the assistance of a host of middle class, pseudo-left descendants of renegades from Trotskyism, who hailed the formation of the NFP last year on a pro-Ukraine war program as a step forward for the working class. These include the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), Workers Struggle (*Lutte ouvrière*, LO), the Grantite Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR), and the Morenoite *Révolution permanente* group.

What is Mélenchon's record? Apart from vague hopes that a LFI government may in the future change the situation, he offers nothing to the 8 million people who voted for him in the last presidential elections in 2022, roughly a quarter of France's electorate.

In 2023, a historic crisis emerged in France when Macron adopted a defense law increasing military spending and then financed it with a bill slashing pensions. When Macron rammed through these overwhelmingly unpopular pension cuts by decree, millions of workers went on strike and riots erupted in France's major cities. Even French capitalist media admitted it was France's deepest crisis since the May 1968 general strike.

Though they only adopted the name NFP later, the NFP's constituent parties were allied together at the time. But they did not call to oppose war spending, denounce Macron's lies about defending Ukrainian freedom, or call to bring down France's illegitimate president. They attended a few trade union rallies and issued a public letter to Macron asking for talks at the Elysée palace. Then they backed the union bureaucracies who baldly called off the movement once Macron, openly defying the will of the people, promulgated his pension cuts as law.

When in 2024 Macron called snap elections, Mélenchon formed the NFP to prop up the discredited PS and PCF machines. The NFP's program not only called for French "peacekeepers" in Ukraine, but refused to call the Israeli war on Gaza a genocide. On this basis, it not only managed to get PS or PCF deputies elected, but also swung rapidly to the right and, in the runoff, endorsed Macron's candidates, supposedly to block a neo-fascist victory.

Even though the NFP nevertheless won a plurality of the seats, Macron thereupon refused to name the NFP to government and reinstalled his own party in power. Macron could keep his party in government only thanks to the political assistance provided by Mélenchon.

This record demolishes Mélenchon's argument that, even amid genocide and world war, all the workers need to do is wait and hope for LFI to win the Elysée, and then everything will be different. Such subordination to the bureaucracies can only lead to disaster for the working class.

The path for the working class to fight world war, genocide and fascism is the international mobilization, from below, in irreconcilable struggle against imperialism. The workers need their own rank-and-file organizations, to liberate their struggle from the deadening grip of the NFP and its allies internationally. Amid the accelerating collapse of the existing world order, however, these struggles will immediately raise profound questions of historical orientation and political perspective.

NATO's stoking of a fratricidal conflict between the former Soviet republics of Russia and Ukraine exposes the disastrous consequences of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Less than 35 years later, world capitalism again is witnessing a genocide and teetering on the brink of a global total war. The only viable program to resolve this mortal crisis of capitalism is the ICFI's defense of the traditions of the October revolution and the program of international socialist revolution.

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