

What lessons must be drawn from Mélenchon's warnings of a French neofascist presidency?

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At France Unbowed's (La France Insoumise, LFI) summer school, Jean-Luc Mélenchon made a significant warning on the emerging 2027 presidential election campaign. Noting that it will likely be a contest between himself and the neo-fascist National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN), he said: "France's back is to the wall. In each voting booth, in each conscience, a personal choice will make history. What principle will prevail: individualism or everyone together, racial supremacism or collectivism?"

Stressing that large sections of the French capitalist oligarchy aim to install a far-right dictatorship, Mélenchon compared the situation to the 1930s. He pointed to the pro-Nazi hysteria that seized the ruling class after the 1936 French general strike, leading to the fall of the Popular Front government and preparing the collaboration with Nazi occupation in 1940:

The Republic is on fire and is breaking apart. But the dominant ones have other obsessions to propose to you. We see the great conversion of the right wing and the center parties to a unified ideological bloc with the National Rally. They are already there, all of them lined up ... those who, seeing us advancing towards victory, are already starting to say: rather Hitler than the Popular Front.

The comparison between the bourgeoisie's outlook today and its reactionary treachery 90 years ago is not exaggerated. The RN leads in every poll, driven by favorable media coverage. From Ukraine to Iran and France's wars in the Sahel, a new world war is erupting. France and all Europe's major countries, facing unsustainable levels of debt, are spending tens or hundreds of billions on war while imposing austerity policies rejected by an overwhelming majority of the population.

But the comparison between the bourgeoisie today and during the Nazi collaboration shows precisely why workers cannot entrust the struggle against neofascist dictatorship, austerity and war to a Mélenchon, who is a pro-capitalist politician.

What does the experience of France 90 ago show? The enemy of the working class is at home, and it cannot be defeated by electoral maneuvers. Elections are an arena to fight for the systematic mobilization of the working class on a socialist program. The only way to defend democracy is through the full, unconstrained development of the class struggle, so workers can struggle to take power and the control of the economy out of the hands of the ruling class, via a socialist revolution.

In 1936, France elected a Popular Front government backed by bourgeois Radical, social democratic and Stalinist parties, and shortly afterwards, the 1936 general strike erupted. But the bourgeoisie used the services of the Stalinists to impose a return to work, making social concessions to workers in the Matignon Accords. It then took back these concessions with inflation and speculation against the state debt before repudiating them completely, after Marshal Pétain with the support of the entire ruling class imposed surrender to the Nazi invasion in 1940.

What is Mélenchon proposing faced with the grandsons of the bourgeoisie of 1940? He did not call for the mobilisation of the class struggle or the transformation of society via a social revolution overthrowing capitalism. Based on his anti-Marxist populism, he proposed an election campaign oriented to the constitutional refoundation of the French capitalist state, passing from the Fifth to the Sixth Republic by introducing ecological planning at the regional level:

The citizens' revolution proposed by LFI is a cultural revolution, a concrete change in the references society has. That is why our proposition of eco-regions is a central project for our Sixth Republic. The eco-region is the basis closest to the ground, articulated together with municipal governments, to do effective ecological planning.

Mélenchon insisted that this refoundation of the capitalist

state would democratize it and stop the austerity measures through which the bourgeoisie responds to the budget and debt crises. He added, “We are the serious, responsible people. ... We pledge, once we are in government, to get public finances back in order, because we are the ones who can do it, by finally imposing taxation on the tens of thousands of big fortunes and the multinational corporations who do not pay taxes.”

This policy, which avoids calling for the expropriation of the capitalist monopolies and major fortunes, is a political dead end in a struggle against neofascism and militarism.

If there is one unforgettable lesson of the 1936-1940 catastrophe, it is that the workers cannot seize the wealth of the oligarchy by using the capitalist state. Even when, faced with the eruption of the class struggle, the bourgeoisie temporarily beats a retreat, it returns afterwards with an even more violent and desperate policy. To preserve its wealth, it is prepared to trample everything underfoot, from the most fundamental democratic rights to its invocations of the “sacred honor” of the nation.

This is why the French bourgeoisie preferred Hitler to the Popular Front’s reforms in 1940 and why it is increasingly behind the RN today.

Mélenchon’s well-worn proposals for a Sixth Republic and ecological planning are not enough to address such a crisis. Mélenchon keeps a working-class electorate because he can raise, in his own fashion, the deepening crisis of the existing order. Thus, at his summer school, he said:

The major powers of the 20th century have defeated themselves. Trump and Netanyahu are beaten by Iran. Putin is bogged down in Ukraine. Everywhere around the planet, geopolitical equilibria and alliances are breaking down. ... I will add to this picture the threat of a global financial crisis even more serious than that of 2008, because of the AI bubble and the situation with the US dollar.

But this situation requires a revolutionary counteroffensive of the working class. Mélenchon did not call to mobilize the working class against war, stop the explosion of military spending on war in Ukraine and the militarization of Europe, or unmask the RN. He did not warn working-class RN voters about RN President Jordan Bardella’s €100 billion austerity plan, to fight to win them back to left-wing opposition to capitalism. This does not enter into the electoral calculations of his campaign for eco-regional planning. But it is a question of life and death for the working class.

Above all, Mélenchon turns workers’ attention away from the international class struggle. Trump’s humiliating setback in Iran and the mass mobilisation of millions of US youth and workers in “No Kings” protests against Trump are signs that a

new era of the class struggle is underway. But workers and youth cannot halt the war if they are fettered by the purely national, electoral strategy.

Workers must organize independently, at the level of the rank and file, building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This is the lesson of the union bureaucracies’ strangling of the 2023 mass strikes against Macron’s pension cuts, which unfolded amid a wave of strikes by millions of workers in Germany, Britain and across Europe.

Mélenchon limited himself at the time to raising once in a speech the possibility of a general strike. The union bureaucracies for their part, terrified by the mass protests that erupted against Macron, shut down the movement as soon as Macron’s illegitimate cuts were adopted. Turning his back on French workers’ class brothers and sisters across Europe and the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe, Mélenchon adapted to the union sellout.

But for the working class to be able to struggle on a revolutionary perspective independently of the union bureaucracies, the defenders of such a perspective must first rally together. This cannot be done based on the pro-capitalist perspective of LFI. This is the task that the Parti de l’égalité socialiste gives itself, following Trotsky’s warning in the years before World War II:

What can save the situation in France is the creation of a genuine revolutionary vanguard of several thousand men, clearly understanding the situation, completely free from the influence of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois public opinion (“socialist”, “communist”, “anarcho-syndicalist”, etc.) and ready to go to the end. Such a vanguard will know how to find the road to the masses.



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