SEP public meeting on “Europe in revolt” provokes wide-ranging discussion

Our reporter
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Alex Lantier, national secretary of the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES) in France, addressed an online meeting hosted by the Socialist Equality Party (UK) on Wednesday evening, discussing the continent-wide eruption of the class struggle and the political tasks posed before the working class. Participants joined from across Europe, North and Latin America, Australia and Asia.

Lantier opened with a brief survey of the situation across Europe. France, he said, has passed through its deepest political crisis since May 1968: two months of student and worker protest, met by nearly 13,000 arrests, curfews, protest bans and the deployment of soldiers. Spain held its first nationwide strike in 14 years, involving four million workers. Dockers at 113 ports in 22 countries struck against war, more than 120,000 young people marched against conscription in Germany, and strikes are planned this month in Italy, Belgium and Greece.

His report addressed the political tasks facing this movement. Pointing to the drop in turnout between the two recent French strikes, from 575,000 who marched on November 5, to 146,000 on November 19, he argued that this did not manifest any decline in social anger. Instead, it was the result of a deliberate strategy by the union bureaucracies: isolated one-day strikes, weeks apart, with dates agreed with the government. “The problem is not the absence of a will to fight,” he said, but the absence of organisations and a revolutionary perspective through which it can be expressed.

Lantier said the Macron government’s refusal to make concessions reflected the bankruptcy of the French state, whose debt stands at €3.5 trillion. European states were also borrowing to finance an expanding war against Russia, with interest rates rising, and the working class paying the bill through cuts to social spending, “War abroad and class war at home are two sides of the same crisis of world capitalism.”

He described a two-track strategy by the ruling class: repression on one side and, on the other, the political disarming and demobilisation of the working class by trade union bureaucracies and pseudo-left organisations, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s France Insoumise (LFI). Union leaders had met with Prime Minister Lecornu to discuss policing the protests. CGT leader Sophie Binet had promised workplace general assemblies, but these were not organised. At Gare du Nord, a station with about 10,000 workers, about 100 people attended, and no strike motion was tabled. Groups such as Révolution Permanente, Lantier said, call on the bureaucracies to produce a “battle plan,” which they have no intention of providing.

Lantier described Révolution Permanente and similar groups as “orbiting around Mélenchon” and channelling the movement into his 2027 presidential campaign. Mélenchon was holding up the 1968 Grenelle Accords as a model, accords that Lantier said had allowed the Communist Party and the CGT to betray the general strike. He also noted that Mélenchon had dined with Bernard Arnault, France’s richest man, and TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanné on the day of the strike, his audition before the oligarchy.

Mélenchon presents his campaign as the only way to block the National Rally and win social concessions from the bourgeoisie. At the dinner, Mélenchon told the oligarchs they were “condemned to live together” and said there were some “really good ones” among them, citing the billionaire defence contractor Dassault. “That is the voice of a bourgeois politician aspiring to run the affairs of French imperialism,” Lantier said.

He warned that the issues raised by the movement would not be resolved by elections, but only by a direct challenge to the wealth of this capitalist oligarchy. The ICFI’s call for a European general strike, Lantier said, “is no abstract slogan.” He called for action committees in workplaces, schools, universities and neighbourhoods, elected by those in struggle and independent of the unions and the bourgeois parties.

Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), he said, these committees could link struggles across borders. He cited Trotsky’s *Whither France*, written before the 1936 French general strike, which describes such committees as a “revolutionary parliament” in which the parties are “tested in action.”

Lantier concluded that a genuine European general strike would inevitably pose the question of state power. He quoted Trotsky’s warning that the alternative was “complete capitulation or revolutionary struggle for power.” A progressive outcome required expropriating the financial oligarchy and replacing the European Union with the United Socialist States of Europe.

After Lantier’s report, Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), hosted a 90-minute question-and-answer session. Participants from France, Ireland, Britain, Norway and elsewhere posted questions and spoke.

Marsden opened by asking Lantier why Marine Le Pen leads the polls for the 2027 presidential election, despite mass opposition to a far-right presidency.

Lantier traced the rise in support for National Rally to the decade-long record of betrayal by social democracy, Stalinism and the pseudo-left. He cited the 2023 pension cuts, which Macron imposed by decree against the opposition of up to 90 percent of the population. Once the law was promulgated, the union bureaucracies called off strike action. Mélenchon responded with a letter-writing campaign to Macron. He “made a brief reference to a general strike,” Lantier said, “but he never called any of his 8 million voters to take strike action.”

Many workers saw clearly that Macron had no intention of backing down, yet Mélenchon “adapted himself completely to the trade union sellout” and offered no alternative. The result was “disillusionment and a lot of anger at organisations that claim to be left but clearly do not pursue left-wing policies.”

Lantier said that because no one apart from the ICFI offers a socialist critique of these betrayals, “the prevailing critique that’s made of this type of sellout is the critique of the far right.” He warned against treating RN voters as “hopeless fascists.” He said the unification of the working class in struggle was “the basis on which the neo-fascists can be fought,”

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and that the RN's programme of impoverishment and police powers "has to be explained in class terms."

Mélenchon and the pseudo-left present the far right simply as "a sign of racism." The ICFI is irreconcilably opposed to racism, he said, but the danger had to be analysed "above all in class terms," as an attempt to impose a far-right dictatorship to block the independent interests of the working class, the historic role of fascism in the 20th century.

When a participant from Ireland suggested ways the French ruling class might escape its debt crisis, Marsden replied: "You can have all sorts of thought experiments on how the bourgeoisie extricates itself from this crisis, but our responsibility is to ensure that it doesn't."

German imperialism might say "to hell with France" on many questions, he said, "but the one thing they won't take that position on is the threat that emerges from below, from the working class." He recalled Edmund Burke's call for "the most severe quarantine" against the French Revolution and said that was no longer an option in an interdependent world. "When we say that the socialist revolution is unfolding on a European and international plane, the counter-revolution will unfold on an international plane." If the German bourgeoisie were needed to help suppress a movement of French workers, they would answer the call.

In response, French workers must turn to German workers and to workers across Europe and the world. "You can't fight the bourgeoisie unless you seek to mobilise the European and international working class in a common political struggle. That is the absolutely fundamental essence of our perspective, what differentiates us from all sorts of tendencies that throw around words like revolution. We are the advocates of the world socialist revolution and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism."

Natalie, from a working-class family that once voted Communist, said that relatives and neighbours on her council estate who had voted for Mélenchon in 2017 had now turned to Le Pen.

Lantier explained that Mélenchon began his political life in Pierre Lambert's Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), the former French section of the ICFI, after it broke with Trotskyism to align with the Socialist Party and a "democratic" perspective. This was "not a left-wing or Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism," but an orientation to the French capitalist state.

When the Socialist Party came to power in 1981, it quickly abandoned its reform agenda and imposed austerity. Lantier said the Trotskyist alternative had been "walled off from the French working class" by such social-democratic and pseudo-left tendencies.

In response to Greg, a supporter in France who asked for practical assistance on publishing PES leaflets for distribution in his town, Marsden explained that this request revealed something fundamental:

"There is a rethink taking place among the most advanced workers and young people. But that rethink has got to have an end point. There are conclusions that have to be drawn from this situation."

A revolutionary perspective, he said, "cannot be separated from the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership, to build the International Committee of the Fourth International." That meant strengthening the PES, the SEP and the SGP, and building new sections of the ICFI across Europe. Responding to questions in the online chat asking how to build the IWA-RFC and how to connect workers' struggles to the traditions of Trotskyism, he replied: "The building of the IWA-RFC is ultimately dependent on the building of the Fourth International itself… We are the advocates of the independent political self-activity of the working class under the lead of a vanguard party."

Everyone at the meeting, he added, was "animated by this significant development of the class struggle after a long time in which it seemed like the bourgeoisie could just get away with whatever the hell it wanted." But the success of the fightback "depends upon the development of a revolutionary movement in the working class… It's the only process that fundamentally matters."

Matthew, who joined the meeting from Durham, quoted Rosa Luxemburg's Reform or Revolution, making clear that reformism is based on "a different goal," namely, "Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society, they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society."

Lena asked about protesters invoking May 1968 and the 17 October 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris.

Lantier agreed that these showed "a significant shift clearly to the left in mass consciousness." He noted the French protests were inspired by school protests in Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana. Those interviewed by WSWS reporters in France had identified as "left-wing, progressive, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, and generally anti-war."

John from Merseyside asked whether support for Le Pen indicated support for the war in Ukraine. Lantier said Le Pen was benefiting from her declared opposition to the pro-war agenda of the traditional parties, and that anti-war sentiment was common to the National Rally and Mélenchon's France Unbowed. The overwhelming sentiment among protesters was anti-war. But without a political understanding of the war, the question "is NATO helping Ukraine?" remained hard for many to answer.

A genuine anti-war movement could not rest on "spontaneous consciousness that, well, it's not good to fight a nuclear war." It required an understanding of the dissolution of the USSR and of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution that "is completely unique to the ICFI." He added that "French fascism is not historically an anti-war tendency."

David asked whether the UK student walkout on November 20 was a genuine step towards rank-and-file mobilisation or a gesture that "lets off pressure and then dissolves." Walid asked how socialists in Norway could organise when even pseudo-left parties brand opponents of militarisation as pro-Russian.

Lantier's answer was clear: whether the walkouts lead anywhere "depends, I think, above all on the actions that we take," and on how youth come to understand the issues discussed at the meeting. "We have to speak to the youth about what our perspectives really are," and fight to turn radicalised youth towards the working class, to factories, ports and stations.

"If we intervene and fight for the perspective of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International in the protests that are emerging," he concluded, "we can be confident that we'll find a growing response."

In closing, Marsden returned to Greg, who had asked for a QR code for joining the party to be embedded in downloadable leaflets, adding that there was no local section where he lived in France. Marsden replied, "Well, that's going to change."

The common thread that emerged during the Q&A was "what can I do practically to take forward this struggle?" That was, Marsden said, "of enormous significance." Workers and youth are clearly rethinking their politics and looking for a way to take part in the struggle. This was "an individual manifestation of general social process".

Marsden concluded: "If this meeting has done anything to convince you, then take the decision today to join the Socialist Equality Party and join us in the task of building a new revolutionary leadership in the working class."

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