

French Elections Install a New Political Order, But Is It Built on Sand?

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At one level, France's 2017 elections were a huge triumph for global capital. A young and very modern neoliberal candidate, Emmanuel Macron, won huge majorities for his new political party, On the Move (En Marche), in both the presidential and the legislative elections. At another level, however, Macron's pathway forward is fraught with challenges, both from a long stagnant economic and a restive French public, many of whom stayed away from the final round of voting.

Macron's France on the Move Party Realigns French Politics

Macron soundly defeated the neofascist Marine Le Pen in the final round of the presidential election, removing a rightwing populist danger not only for France, but globally. This was no idle threat. Le Pen, although moving to distance herself from the outright fascist stances of her party like Holocaust denial, nonetheless stressed immigrant bashing, Islamophobia, and other racist appeals. Her support seemed only to increase after two ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016, which together claimed over 800 lives. She also attacked neoliberalism, the European Union (EU), NATO, and free trade pacts. Related to these stances, the National Front has for years received funding from Putin's Russia. After decades of economic stagnation, many French youth have opted out of the labor market altogether, a trend that has only increased since the Great Recession. With Trump almost openly supporting Le Pen, some feared she would pull off an upset, as had happened in the U.S. presidential elections and Britain's Brexit vote last year. But Trump's support, like Putin's Internet attacks on Macron's campaign, may have weakened Le Pen in the end. Still, she received 34% of the vote in the final round, a gain over any previous score for her party, which bodes ill for the future.

Macron is no progressive, however. As Minister of the Economy under Socialist Party President François Hollande, his 2015 "Macron law" undercut workers' rights, causing Hollande's popularity to plummet. Then Macron split from the right with the Socialist Party to found On the Move in order to mount a presidential run in 2017. He campaigned on lower taxes for the rich, "reform" of French labor law, i.e., the removal of a number of social protections from the working class. His proposals included "flexibility" in the 35-hour-week, i.e., a longer workweek for many French workers, weakening the bargaining powers of the national trade union federations, and lower wages for young workers entering the labor market. In short, he plans to lower the standard of living of French workers and their social protections in order to achieve greater economic "competitiveness," out of which he promises renewal and eventual prosperity.

If Macron is no progressive, he is not a complete reactionary either. Rather, he is an economic and social liberal in the British or U.S. sense. He included a significant number of women and people of

color in his legislative slate. He has also supported immigrant and refugee rights to a degree, and has opposed some of the most virulent forms of Islamophobia. Moreover, he advocated extra education funds to make class sizes smaller in the public schools in poorer communities. He took strong pro-European Union (EU) positions and openly criticized Trump for leaving the Paris Climate Accord. He also criticized Putin for his military encroachments in Ukraine and intervention in Syria. To his most fervent supporters in the global dominant classes and their media, Macron almost seemed to be the second coming of Blair and Clinton in the 1990s, a person who could modernize the country along neoliberal lines. Such advocates miss the fact that both the global economic situation and popular social consciousness are in a very different place today than in the 1990s, with seething anger against economic inequality in the wake of the Great Recession.

At the same time, those on the Left who held to the view that one had to stave off Le Pen, but then prepare to fight hard against Macron's neoliberalism, including this writer, certainly have their work cut out for them. This is the case not only because of Macron's political agenda, or his strong parliamentary majority, but also because of an elitist, even authoritarian streak that he has exhibited since assuming office. Within days of his victory in the final round of the legislative elections in June, Macron began to act in what many are terming a Gaullist, even Bonapartist fashion. He has announced that he will bypass parliament, enacting some of his anti-labor reforms by presidential decree. He also plans to make permanent the state of emergency that Hollande put into place after the 2015 terrorist attacks. At a more symbolic level, Macron convened and addressed both of branches of the national legislature at Versailles palace, an almost monarchical gesture not seen since the Bonapartist regime of 150 years ago. More quietly, one of his aides reportedly told *Le Monde*, France's leading and left-of-center newspaper, that Macron won't be giving interviews because his "complex thoughts" cannot be conveyed in such a setting. And he also inexplicably invited Trump to attend Bastille Day, an invitation that the beleaguered U.S. president readily accepted. (See, for example, Adam Nossiter, "'Lion and Fox,' Macron Unsettles Some in France by Assembling Power," *New York Times*, July 1, 2017; Françoise Fressoz, "Macron, plus Bonaparte que Montesquieu," *Le Monde*, June 25, 2017).

Mélenchon's France Unbowed Party: Going to the Left of the Socialist Party

Macron's authoritarian gestures and rapid moves to implement his agenda may be as much a sign of weakness as of strength, however, especially when one examines the whole process that unfolded during the two rounds of the presidential and then the legislative elections.

Going back to the first round of the presidential elections, in April, one finds no overwhelming mandate for Macron or his agenda. Four candidates received 20% or more in that vote, in a turnout of nearly 75%: Macron (24%), Le Pen (21%), the traditional neo-Gaullist conservative François Fillon (20%), and the leftwing populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon (just under 20%), with the Socialist Party candidate Benoît Hamon trailing with just over 6%. It is also worth noting that while far-left New Anti-Capitalist Party candidate Philippe Poutou garnered only 1% of the vote, his forceful class-based attack on Le Pen as a member of the French establishment in the presidential debate certainly rattled her and may have opened up a gulf between her and her supporters. Besides the emergence of Macron, the most important new development in 2017 is the collapse of the Socialist Party and the surge of the left-wing populist Mélenchon and his France Unbowed party. Not since the 1970s has a party to the left of the Socialists gotten anywhere near 20% of the vote.

While Mélenchon has the support of the Communist Party, he and France Unbowed are by no means its creature. Originally a social democrat, Mélenchon broke with the Socialist Party from the left in 2008 to form the Left Party. In 2012, his presidential candidacy garnered 11% of the vote. In 2016, he formed France Unbowed, a leftwing populist party that opposes the EU and stakes out neo-Keynesian economic policies as the answer to neoliberalism and economic inequality. While he no

longer uses the language of socialism, Mélenchon speaks forcefully of the gulf between the people and the elite, and of economic inequality and exploitation. He relentlessly attacks privatization, youth unemployment, NATO, and U.S. imperialism. One result is that his support among young voters reached over 40% in some polls, a group his candidacy also motivated to turn out in larger than usual numbers. The youth dimension was also seen in the media-savvy efforts by France Unbowed to bypass the traditional media, especially through a YouTube channel with some 300,000 followers and through the use of holographic images. One result is that France Unbowed has the youngest group in the National Assembly.

Mélenchon's candidacy also gained strong support in the impoverished and racially oppressed *quartiers* or *banlieus* (suburbs) that ring French cities. One factor here was Mélenchon's call for the firing of brutal and abusive police officers. According to an analysis published anonymously in a webzine devoted to these communities [*quartiers populaires*], "The vote totals in impoverished communities.... show something that many have forgotten: a class-based vote exists in France. That Jean-Luc Mélenchon's scores in certain impoverished communities went over 40%, as seen in his first place showing in the poorest and most racialized community in France, is not insignificant. This does not signal support or identification with France Unbowed but it corresponds to a leftist 'social' vote, in short a class-based vote." In this sense, France Unbowed was able, at least to an extent, to bridge the class/racial divide between, on the one hand, trade unionists and students, and, on the other hand, France's ghetto dwellers, who are the victims of mass unemployment, poverty, police brutality, racism, and Islamophobia,

As the article underlines, this was not due to any strong organized effort to get out the vote in these communities: "No activist network from France Unbowed or the remnants of the French Communist Party organized the vote in these impoverished communities. There was no army of France Unbowed going door to door in these communities." Instead, "a leftist self-radicalization" took place ("Au Quartier on vote La Classe," *Quartiers Libres*, April 28 2017 <https://quartierslibres.wordpress.com/2017/04/28/au-quartier-on-vote-la-classe/>). Although there was no such organization, the results of the election point to the possibility of leftist organizations sinking deep roots not only in student and trade union sectors, but also in these deeply alienated — and potentially revolutionary — communities of color.

Mélenchon's politics are not without their contradictions, however. He advocates at best a Keynesian radical reform of capitalism and no longer uses the terms socialism or even anti-capitalism. His opposition to the EU sometimes takes on nationalist, anti-German overtones. He also leans toward Putin and Assad in the Syrian war. In short, he is a left-wing populist with nationalist overtones, who tends to counterpose "the people" as an undifferentiated category to the elites. (See Patrick Le Moal and Ugo Palheta, "Premier tour des présidentielles 2017: le système politique français dans la tempête," *Contretemps: Revue de critique communiste*, April 28, 2017 <https://www.contretemps.eu/presidentielles-macron-lepen-melenchon-hamon-poutou/>.) Mélenchon, unlike his Communist Party allies, also failed to call upon his supporters to vote for Macron in order to stop the neofascist Le Pen in the final round of the presidential election, when only those two candidates remained on the ballot.

Overall, though, the Mélenchon candidacy has tapped into a deep well of anti-capitalist sentiment, similar to the Corbyn and Sanders campaigns in the U.S. and the UK, albeit with some particularly French characteristics. This has exploded the false choice between the neoliberalism of the political establishment, both neo-Gaullist and Socialist, and rightwing populism with fascist overtones.

What Next?

In France today, the Socialist Party is in free fall, the consequence of its decades of compromise with

neoliberalism and betrayal of its traditional base among workers and youth. The neo-Gaullist conservatives are doing better, but not by much. Three political currents have the wind in their sails: Macron's neoliberal centrism, Mélenchon's leftwing populism, and Le Pen's rightwing populism with fascist overtones. The first two of these forces are entirely new, at least for France. This shows the political system's overall instability, which is rooted in the economic and social stagnation and uncertainty that have marked the twenty-first century, in France and globally.

Macron's victory in the second round of the presidential election saw his percentage of the vote rise from 24% to 66%, but the vast majority of this increase was not so much pro-Macron as anti-Le Pen. Moreover, as Mélenchon hammers home almost daily, there were a large number of blank or null ballots in the second round, reaching an unheard-of 11.5% of the total. (Frédéric Lemaître, interview with Céline Braconnier and Jean-Yves Dormagen, "Présidentielle 2017: 'L'explosion du vote blanc ou nul est spectaculaire,'" *Le Monde*, May 9, 2017.) Mélenchon has also emphasized the fact that the legislative elections saw a record abstention rate of 57% in the second round. He therefore shouts to the skies that Macron lacks "the legitimacy to perpetrate a social coup" that would wipe out decades of gains for French workers (Michel Noblecourt, "Jean-Luc Mélenchon, la légitimité à géométrie variable," *Le Monde*, June 24, 2017).

France Unbowed and the Communist Party have formed a parliamentary group that is sure to use that platform to denounce Macron's anti-labor austerity policies, as well as his incipient authoritarianism. It is also unclear if all of the newly recruited deputies in Macron's party will follow him in a disciplined fashion on every policy, or whether they will be swayed by public opinion.

On the streets, the powerful General Confederation of Labor (CGT) has called for mass actions on September 12 against Macron's anti-labor changes to French labor laws. Other social protests are sure to emerge as well.

To be sure, with Macron's victory, the French political party system has undergone a major reorientation, which has all but destroyed the Socialist Party and severely weakened the neo-Gaullist conservatives as well. But Macron's victory is built on sand. It is hardly likely that his mix of youthful energy and neoliberalism will be able to fulfill extravagant promises of a modern technocratic economy that will bring vast improvement in the conditions of life and labor of the French people, this in a period when global capitalism has produced decades of economic stagnation and diminution of the living conditions of working people. Nor are the forces of the left exemplified by the Mélenchon campaign going away, whether at the ballot box or in the streets.