

# Mélenchon and the French Left

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Jean-Luc Mélenchon

The most important feature of French politics over the past few years has been the rise of the former Socialist Party (PS) Senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon. In the Presidential elections last May, Mélenchon came from nowhere, with early polls predicting 6%, to come in fourth, with 19% of the vote, well ahead of the official Socialist Party candidate Benoit Hamon.

Mélenchon's campaigns have involved dynamic mass meetings of up to 100,000 people, and involved hundreds of new young militants campaigning and leafleting on the streets in a determined bid to change the traditional political landscape that has been dominated until recently by the social-democratic PS and the conservative Republicans (LR). But, as the results of the recent general election show, Mélenchon faces problems translating his enormous personal success into seats in parliament or in local government. His new organization, France Insoumise, or France Unbowed (FI), got just 17 seats in the National Assembly (Parliament). This falls far short of what they hoped for, given Mélenchon's vote in the presidential election. The leader of FI is far from achieving his stated objective of leading a left parliamentary majority in opposition to Macron. This article considers Mélenchon's rise in French politics and the rea-

sons for his difficulties converting personal popularity into broader electoral success for his organization so far.

The presidential election of 2017 was probably the most exciting since François Mitterrand won for the PS in 1981. At the outset, the victory for the right wing candidate of Les Républicains seemed a foregone conclusion. This continued the old rotation of government between the Socialist Party and the conservatives which has been ongoing since the 1980s. But for the first time, the two big parties organized American-style primaries. Members were able to vote for their preferred candidates. In a spectacular grassroots revolt on both left and right, the party members voted for outsiders. Arch-catholic homophobic François Fillon won the conservative LR nomination and left-wing *frondeur* (agitator) Benoit Hamon won the PS nomination.

When Fillon's corruption was exposed by the *Canard Enchaîné* newspaper and left wing online journal *Mediapart*, the accusations stuck. The Presidential election was suddenly wide open. On the right, Fillon was challenged by the fascist Marine Le Pen, who benefited from intensive media coverage. But Fillon also had to contend with the former Economy and Industry minister Emmanuel Macron, standing independently at the head of a new neoliberal party, *En Marche* (On the Move). On the left, Benoit Hamon had to compete with Jean-Luc Mélenchon whose new organization, *La France Insoumise*, was being put to the test for the first time.

More than any other candidate, Mélenchon was able to get people out on the streets. He mobilized supporters and tens of thousands of ordinary people, for mass rallies, for demonstrations, for public meetings. His demonstration for a new, sixth Republic attracted over 100,000 people on March

18th in Paris. At Marseilles on April 9th, before a crowd of up to 70,000, he held a minute's silence for the migrants drowned in the Mediterranean. He denounced the far right that 'condemns our people of different colours to hate each other.' In his meetings, he spoke convincingly on the need to defend the public healthcare system from the ravages of neoliberalism. He also called for a new ecology and the development of renewable energy sources.

Mélenchon's campaign was charismatic and innovative. Where he couldn't address meetings himself, he doubled up by using a hologram. On April 18th, just before the first round of the election, he addressed a crowd of up to 35,000 people in the Burgundy capital of Dijon. His meeting was replicated by hologram in six other cities. His campaign manager declared that she got her ideas from observing Bernie Sanders and Podemos and learning the lessons from them.

In the televised debate among the candidates, he came out as the speaker who had convinced most viewers. When the final votes in the First Round were counted, he took 19.58% was narrowly beaten into fourth place by Francois Fillon with 20.01% , 21.3% for Marine Le Pen and 24.01% for the winner Macron.

On the eve of the general election, Mélenchon's new organization, France Insoumise, seemed well placed to become the dominant force on the radical left. Like the presidential election, this election had two rounds. The first round was on June 11th, the second on June 18th.

## The PS election debacle

The most significant result of the 2017 General Election has been the implosion of the outgoing party of government, the Socialist Party. After Francois Hollande's disastrous five-year presidency, in which he was so unpopular he couldn't even stand for re-election, the PS has been wiped out at the

polls. It has gone from having an absolute parliamentary majority, 331 seats out of 577, to only 32 seats. Former ministers, like Education minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, have deservedly lost their seats. Even the most left wing PS deputies, the so-called *frondeurs*, or agitators, like Benoit Hamon, Christian Paul and former Culture minister Aurélie Filipetti, have gone.

More satisfyingly, the party right-wingers who tried to save themselves by claiming endorsements from their former Economy Minister, the new President, Emmanuel Macron, also lost. These included Myriam El Khomri, responsible for the destruction of the Labour Code which guarantees workers' rights, and Marisol Touraine, who presided over a drastic reduction of hospital beds and worsening conditions in the hospitals. PS party boss Jean-Christophe Cambadélis went, too. The electorate punished the PS for five years of austerity.

As Aurélie Filipetti said, 'when the left abandons left wing values, it gets beaten.' The responsibility for this debacle lies clearly with François Hollande and the leadership of the PS.

In 2012, the Socialist Party (PS) obtained a clear majority in government on a mandate to combat the austerity politics and attacks on the working class associated with Nicholas Sarkozy's right-wing, ultra-neoliberal presidency. Hollande claimed 'My enemy is finance'. Yet once in power, the social-democrats became social-liberals, and implemented austerity politics with even more ferocity than the hated Nicholas Sarkozy had done. As the Socialist Party veered to the right, and its vote collapsed in election after election, the need for a clear left opposition became pressing. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a rebel who left the PS in 2008, claimed it was time to get rid of the PS.

## Mélenchon and the rise of France Insoumise

Born in Tangiers in 1951, when Morocco was still a French colony, Mélenchon moved to France after his mother's divorce and participated as a school student in the revolutionary days of May 1968. The same year, he joined the Trotskyist political grouping called the Party Communiste Internationaliste, (Internationalist Communist Party, PCI), known after their leader, Pierre Lambert, as the Lambertists. He became a leader of their organization in Besançon, in the Jura. In 1976 he joined the Socialist Party - the PCI provided a significant number of cadres to the PS through its policy of entryism. These cadres included future prime minister Lionel Jospin and recent party leader Jean-Christophe Cambadélis. During his time in the Jura Mélenchon was active in student union politics and involved in a major strike by workers at the LIP watch-making factory. He later said he broke with the PCI because he no longer agreed with the Leninist method of party organization.

The Socialist Party's predecessor, the SFIO (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, or French Section of the Workers' International) under Guy Mollet had been thoroughly discredited by its brutal pursuit of the Algerian War (1954-62). It was renewed and reunited when Mollet was replaced by François Mitterrand as general secretary in 1969. Though Mitterrand had been Justice Minister during the Algerian war, and had as much blood on his hands as Mollet, he was now seeking to reunify the party. He made a conscious bid for hegemony on the left by frontally attacking General de Gaulle and adopting a left wing policy. At the Epinay Congress in 1971 Mitterrand argued for the unification of the different socialist currents, and for electoral unity with the Communist Party. At that time the PS declared itself for 'a break with capitalism'. It called for nationalisation of key eco-

nomic sectors as well as 36 banks, and the Paribas and Suez financial houses. It also called for a reduction of the working week and the reduction of time spent on national service in the army. This left unity project was interrupted in 1977 but one of its results was that the PS began to pull ahead of the PCF in elections.

Mélenchon joined the PS in September 1976 and began a close collaboration with Claude Germon, the PS mayor of Massy in the département of the Essonne outside Paris. Germon was a member of the executive bureau of the PS. Through Germon, Mélenchon rose to become secretary of the PS federation in Essonne. He became a supporter of Mitterrand, and quickly rose in the party ranks, editing the party newspaper, *vendredi*. After 1983, when Mitterrand abandoned the radical policies such as nationalisation that had brought him to power, Mélenchon became more critical of the party but remained a fervent admirer of Mitterrand.

In 1988, he founded the left-wing current La Gauche Socialiste, (the Socialist Left), along with another former Trotskyist, Julian Dray, who came from the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR). Though Dray is now on the right of the PS, the Gauche Socialiste became an influential radical current inside the party, with up to 10% of party members belonging to it. Some of the most left-wing PS elements, like Gérard Filoche, were also associated with it. Inside the PS, the leaders of the Gauche Socialiste, Mélenchon, Julien Dray and Marie-Noëlle Lienemann, opposed the Treaty of Amsterdam, arguing that it placed power in the hands of the bankers and technocrats. They demanded an internal party referendum on the ratification of the Treaty. Though Mélenchon had supported the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, he later revised his opinion and adopted positions that were more critical of the European Union. In 1998 he voted against the integration of the French Central Bank into the European central banking system. He also

spoke out against the adoption of the Euro, for which he was sanctioned by François Mitterrand.

In 1997, at the Party Conference in Brest, Mélenchon stood for the position of party secretary, which would have given him leadership of the PS, against François Hollande, but only got 8.9% of votes. Notwithstanding his criticisms of PS policy, Mélenchon became a junior minister in 2000, responsible for vocational education. He remained in government until the end of Jospin's term as Prime Minister in 2002.

As Prime Minister, Jospin was disastrous for the Left. With future IMF boss Dominique Strauss-Kahn as Economy Minister, Jospin's government continued the right's policy of privatising public companies wholesale. GAN Insurance, the Crédit Lyonnais, Total, Pechiney, Matra and others were sold off. The government also opened up the capital of France Telecom, Air France, Thompson, EADS, and the state-owned motorways, to private investment funds. Jospin – who began his political career in the PCI, like Mélenchon – went down in history as the Prime Minister responsible for privatising the most French companies, ever. He also pushed up the retirement age, which Mitterrand had brought down from 65 to 60. In the Presidential elections of 2002, Jospin was beaten into third place by the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. The conservative Jacques Chirac won by a landslide, and the right returned to power for a decade.

From 2004-2009 Mélenchon was a PS senator for Essonne. The turning point in his career and politics came with the 2005 Campaigns for a 'No' vote in the referendum on the European Constitution. While the 'Yes' vote obtained a majority within the PS, Mélenchon campaigned openly against the proposed European Constitution, alongside Marie-George Buffet of the Communist Party, Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), soon to become the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and José Bové of the small farmers' Con-

federation Paysanne. In the face of a huge media campaign for a 'yes' vote, 55% of the French electorate voted 'no'. This was a turning-point, and a severe defeat for the right. It showed what the unity of the radical left could do. But no agreement was reached on a common anti-European Constitution candidate for the 2007 presidential elections, and the neoliberal Nicholas Sarkozy defeated the PS candidate Segolène Royal. The opportunity to capitalize on the popular victory against the European Constitution was wasted.

In 2008, Melenchon left the PS to found his own party, the Parti de Gauche, or Left Party, with PS deputy Marc Dolez. At a meeting on 29 November 2008 they launched the Parti de Gauche in the presence of Oskar Lafontaine of the German radical left party Die Linke. They announced an alliance with the PCF led by Marie-George Buffet, for a Social and Democratic Europe, against the Treaty of Lisbon. This was called the Front de Gauche, or Left Front. Around the same time, the revolutionary left Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) sought to open up to a new audience by creating the New Anticapitalist Party. This venture sought to unite socialists and revolutionaries to the left of the PS under the banner of anticapitalism. The party was initially very successful and attracted up to 9,000 members. The new party voted against participating in the Front de Gauche because of the impossibility of guaranteeing electoral independence from the PS. As events were to show, the Front de Gauche ran into difficulty precisely on this question of independence from the PS. The NPA had its own difficulties to contend with. The rhythm of elections in France, with not only municipal, national and presidential elections to contend with, but also regional, cantonal and European ones, drained the resources of the party and imposed a tempo difficult to maintain. The question of Islamophobia divided the party, and many of its members were more and more tempted to join the Front de Gauche.

In the 2012 Presidential elections, Mélenchon ran a successful campaign in which he came 4th and got 11% of votes. In the General Election which followed, he challenged Marine Le Pen in her chosen constituency of Hénin-Beaumont, in the former left stronghold of Pas-de-Calais. The corruption of the local PS mayor had given the FN an opening. Melenchon got 21% of the vote compared with Le Pen's 48%. The PS finally took the seat by a narrow margin in the second round.

In the 2012 general election, overall, the Front de Gauche got 6.9% (1, 793,192) of the votes, a large drop compared with Mélenchon's vote in the presidential election. The Front de Gauche failed to win many seats in 2012 thanks to the 'vote utile' or 'useful vote' – the argument for concentrating all votes on the party most likely to dislodge Sarkozy and form a left government.

From 2014, the Front de Gauche campaigned against the TAFTA, on grounds that it opened European markets to products like hormone-injected chicken, GMOs and so on. But relations between the parties inside the Front de Gauche were strained for a number reasons. In the Municipal Elections of 2014, PCF opposition to the PS was not at all clear, with many PCF candidates standing on PS slates in the second round in order to get elected. This was despite the FG's stated opposition to austerity and Hollande's politics at a national level. In some big left-wing towns - Rennes, Clermont-Ferrand, Toulouse and Grenoble, the PCF allied with the PS from the outset. In Paris, the Communist Party voted to stand on PS slates headed by the current PS mayoress of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, with the support of PCF national secretary Pierre Laurent. In half the towns with over 20,000 inhabitants, the PCF allied with the PS for the municipal elections.

The Front de Gauche did not stop the PCF being a satellite of PS, dependent on it for seats in local government. Because of the two-round electoral system for local gov-

ernment, the PCF or any other small party of the left could stand independently of the PS in the first round, to maximize its votes, then come to an agreement with the PS in the second round. The top people on their slate could get elected on the PS list, in exchange for asking their supporters to vote for that list, and thence the dominance of the PS was never challenged. Because of its dependence on the PS for seats in local councils, the PCF's links with the PS were very difficult to break. A related problem was that the Front de Gauche was based on PCF councillors in local government who often run their towns on a clientelist basis. This creates political deserts where no-one dares to go against the chief, and party bosses act more like mafia than elected representatives. This problem was recently encountered by France Insoumise's candidate, Farida Amrani, campaigning against SP big wig, Manuel Valls in the Essonne town of Evry. People vote for the chief because they get a small job with the council, or a council flat. Clientelist politics are as much part of the PCF's politics as the PS or the conservatives.

Melenchon stepped down from the leadership of the Left Party in 2014 after he was elected to the European parliament. He said the Left Front had been a failure on account of the PCF's alliances with the PS during the local government elections. The Left Front headed into the regional elections of 2015 divided.

After the victory of Syriza in the Greek Elections in January 2015, Mélenchon had argued for a similar kind of alliance in France, involving the Front de Gauche, the ecologists EELV, the 'agitators' of the left of the PS, the NPA and others. This appeal divided EELV which split down the middle, with the more conservative leader Jean-Vincent Placé leaving to take a ministerial position in Manuel Valls's government. Melenchon was later critical of the way that the Syriza leader Tsipras had made concessions to Angela Merkel and the Troika,

but stayed on friendly terms with the Greek leader. Syriza notwithstanding, unity on the left seemed farther away than ever in France. The poor showing of the Left Front in the regional elections of December 2015 cast doubt on the viability of any strategy of electoral alliances. The combined forces of the Communists, the Left Party and Ensemble (together), a group including many former NPA members, only got 4.15 % of vote in the first round. Both Olivier Dartinolles, spokesperson for the Communist Party, and Melenchon, agreed that the Left Front was going nowhere. Dartinolles suggested that the Communists might not support Melenchon in the Presidential election, and Melenchon said a new formula was needed. In February 2016, Melenchon announced the creation of a new popular movement, *la France Insoumise*. He also announced unilaterally that he was standing in the presidential elections, inviting the other parties of the left to support him. His candidature was ultimately supported by the PCF, Ensemble, and the Parti de Gauche, though with much contestation, particularly inside the Communist Party. In some areas, PCF members campaigned separately from the FI militants. Meanwhile, Melenchon increased the antagonism of the rest of the left by claiming that he was not part of the radical left. In October 2016, Melenchon appeared at a meeting with Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, in which she explained her concept of 'left populism' and he argued for the primacy of 'the people' over 'the class'. While Mouffe made no claim to hold marxist ideas, and argued clearly for a 'people' versus 'elite' notion of social conflict which she claimed, came from Machiavelli, Melenchon tried to justify the shift from seeing class as a motor of history to focusing on the conflict between the people and the elite. Before the classes, were the masses, he said. Melenchon argued the force for social change is the masses, who with smartphones, connected by social networks are capable of revolutionizing society. The proletariat is part

of this mass, and is necessary to help it organize. But the active agent is the mass of the people. Concretely, winning over the people meant abandoning of the left's symbols – the red flag and the Internationale. At rallies, Melenchon's campaign team handed people tricolors and asked them to sing the Marseillaise. They were asked not to bring red flags. Replacing the left's symbols for those of the bourgeois republic was a conscious strategy.

The 2017 campaign – *l'Avenir en Commun* (our common future). Our Common Future was the programme elaborated on the basis of Melenchon's project to construct a 'left-wing populism' along the lines of Podemos in Spain. The front page bore the title 'the force of the people'. In keeping with the new national-popular emphasis, the programme promised economic protectionism and a tax revolution. It proposed to protect workers by promoting French production in France. Urgent measures would be taken to protect strategic industries like steel, it claimed. But there was no discussion of how the interests of workers and employers would be reconciled. 'Saving' industries means working longer hours for lower wages, to ensure profits. This goes against the interest of the workers who are called on to make the sacrifices.

Mélenchon's focus on economic protectionism led him into one of his most-criticised utterances, when he denounced foreign workers temporarily posted in France, those authorized to work in a country while their employer is based elsewhere, like Turkish building workers contracted to work on a French site, for example. He criticized these workers for coming into a country and 'stealing the bread' of the people there. While Mélenchon supporters affirm that these words were taken out of context, they are consistent with the outlook and perspectives expressed in his programme.

On the question of immigration *La France Insoumise* distanced itself from the revolutionary left. Its programme emphasised that the causes of migration had to

be dealt with, to enable everyone to live in their own country. This was a conscious decision taken by Mélenchon's campaign team, in order not to lose votes. Mélenchon stated publicly that he was not for the right of migrants to settle in France. While the party programme calls for the respect of the right to asylum, and the respect of migrants' human dignity, the emphasis is on stopping migrants coming to France, avoiding migration 'because emigration always involves suffering for those who leave home'. There was no reference to shutting down the centres for the detention of illegal immigrants.

This is in stark contrast to Mélenchon's 2012 programme, 'Humans First'. In 2012, the presence of immigrants was accepted and welcomed. 'Zero immigration is a myth which divides and weakens our country,' said the programme. Concretely, the new ambiguity on immigration does nothing to challenge the main argument of the far right and the fascists. When Hollande's government dismantled Calais, Mélenchon argued for the resettlement of the migrants in small groups around the country, which was what the government did. But sending the migrants around the country made them vulnerable to mobilisations of the fascists, who tried to whip up hatred wherever the migrants arrived. Fortunately more local people came out in support of the migrants than did fascists to oppose them.

Making concessions to the right on migration is not a way to gain votes. As EELV (ecologist) mayor Damian Carême pointed out, getting the local population involved in welcoming the migrants and refugees is the best way to counter the far right: his town of Grand Synthe was the only place between Dunkirk and Lille where Le Pen didn't top the poll in the Presidential elections, he said. In Grand Synthe, where Damian Carême had built temporary housing for migrants, and got the local population involved in welcoming them, though the camp was later burned down. This contrasts with the behaviour of many Communist and

ex-Communist mayors, who hope to cling to office by expelling migrants and witch-hunting them. One notorious example is the PCF/ Front de Gauche mayor of Dieppe, Sebastian Jumel, who has repeatedly brought in police to dismantle migrant camps in the port. Jumel was elected deputy for FI in the June general election, but there is nothing to suggest his approach to migrants will be any different at the national level than it was when he was mayor of Dieppe. Even at the height of the election campaigns, the Communist mayors continued witch-hunting migrants and attacking Roma, as they have done for years.

While Mélenchon has always confronted Marine Le Pen and not hesitated to call her a fascist, for which she sued him and lost, his insistence on secularism and French Republicanism means he often sides with the state and the right when racist campaigns are whipped up. In spite of the fact that his programme condemns the use of secularism to attack Muslims, he fell into a few traps sprung by the right and the fascists in the course of the presidential campaign. In August 2016, when Sarkozyist mayors on the Cote d'Azur were orchestrating a campaign against the burkini, Melenchon said the women who wore burkinis were engaging in an act of militant provocation. He is also for banning the burka. In the same vein, he defended Marine Le Pen's refusal to wear a veil when meeting the Mufti during a visit to Lebanon. This was just a Le Pen publicity stunt aimed at focusing debate on Muslims once again.

The other major political issue where Mélenchon is ambiguous is that of police violence. In the middle of the presidential election campaign, a march was organized by the families of victims of police violence, as part of the international weekend of demonstrations against racism on 18-19 March. Although Mélenchon had rallied tens of thousands for his demonstration for a new, sixth Republic on March 18th, there was little involvement in the demonstration for justice

against police violence on the following day. Melenchon's deputy, Eric Cocquerel, was on the demo, but there was little input from FI. Only 10,000 people marched, mostly families of victims of police violence and the organizations of the far left. The demonstration was heavily policed and people got tear-gassed as they arrived in République Square.

Despite so many concessions to mainstream politics, the final outcome of the General Election was a disappointment for FI. With 17 deputies elected, it made scant gains on the 10 seats the Front de Gauche had in 2012. Mélenchon can not claim to lead the principal party of opposition to Macron. His bid for hegemony on the left has not succeeded for the moment. The PS with its thirty-odd deputies, is still bigger. To mount an effective opposition, the divisions on the left will have to be overcome.

The constitution of FI excluded any electoral alliance and required candidates to sign up for a programme pre-determined in advance by Mélenchon and his inner circle. This, which called on potential allies to liquidate their organizations (financially), was unacceptable to the PCF, as it would have been to the NPA or EELV.

In consequence, fatal divisions emerged, notably in Paris's 18th arrondissement, where feminist Caroline de Haas was opposed by a FI candidate, neither of whom got through to the second round in spite of getting around 5000 and 6000 votes respectively. Due to lack of agreement, FI and the PCF stood against each other in 434 constituencies out of 577. The PCF got 10 deputies elected. While the NPA had called for a vote for FI or the PCF in the second round, it supported the Trotskyist organization Lutte Ouvrière in the first round, which did not contribute much towards unity.

These divisions probably contributed more than anything else to the mass abstention of left voters in the general election. While the conservatives and the right went

out to vote, as did the right wing of the PS, the people of the left stayed at home. The reasons were analysed in an opinion poll carried out between the two rounds. It is clear that the majority of left voters abstained. In a survey carried out between the two rounds, people were asked why they abstained. 27% thought the results were a foregone conclusion and that En Marche would win. 24% did not identify with the projects or personalities competing in the second round. The highest rate of abstention was among the young: 61% of 18-24 age group and 63% of 25-34 year olds said they would not be voting. 58% of workers and employees said they would abstain. This is in spite of the fact that 6 out of 10 people surveyed said they did not think a majority for Macron would be a good thing. As one disgruntled voter put it, 'even if Mélenchon does get elected, it will be the multinationals and the banks that govern'.

Faced with the most undemocratic situation since De Gaulle's coup d'état in 1958 left unity is an absolute necessity. The situation, with an elite majority inside parliament and a discontented population outside, is highly explosive, and the ruling class knows it. They are gearing up with even more repression and more restrictions on public debate. Macron has declared that he will govern by decree. The main tenets of the state of emergency are to be made law. Underneath the electoral victory for the ruling class, the seeds of future contestation are already pushing through. Melenchon has called for opposition to Macron's planned destruction of what remains of the Labour Code. Already, militants and trade unionists have taken to the streets in a 'Social Front' against the onslaught promised by the new president. The political organizations of the radical left will have an important rôle to play in the resistance to come. For that, unity will be crucial.