



France's presidential election: No to racism, No to imperialism, Prepare the fight!

Marc Lassalle Sat, 26/03/2022 - 16:03

Marc Lassalle

The winner of the presidential election in France is effectively a foregone conclusion. Even though, after the first round of voting on 10 April, Macron will have to go to the run-off on 24 April, anything other than a victory for the incumbent would be a political miracle.

It did not always look that way. The five years of Emmanuel Macron's presidency falls into two distinct phases: two years of neoliberal attacks (cuts to pensions, unemployment benefits, universities, secondary education, etc.), followed by two years marked by the COVID pandemic. In the last two years, the policy of "whatever it takes" has propped up the economy from large companies to small businesses. As a result, government debt has risen to 115% of PIB (it was 97% in 2019), but the system has been kept afloat.

Compared to previous presidencies, no major social movement took to the streets, with the exception of the "yellow vests" in 2018 and, to a lesser extent, the protest against the health passport and the anti-vaccination movement. In both, the petty bourgeoisie took the lead over the working class, and, especially in the case of the no-vax movement, with a decidedly reactionary slant.

The crucial question for the working class, the trade unions and the left will therefore be: how can we effectively counter the attacks in Macron's second term, aimed at imposing the costs of debt, crisis and (economic) war on the working class? How can we build a social and political movement? How can we prevent popular discontent being channelled further into a petty-bourgeois reactionary pseudo-opposition by right-wing populist, racist and even fascist forces? How can the further decline of the workers' movement be stopped and reversed, given the increasing dominance of petty-bourgeois forces in social and political protests? And how can the struggle against French imperialism and its allies be taken up in the face of the Ukraine war and the intensified bloc confrontation?

Before we turn to these questions, we must ask ourselves why Macron was able to hold his ground. Why the French bourgeoisie and almost the entire political establishment are relying on him and his presidential party as the most reliable administrator of their class interests in the current situation? Certainly, the war in Ukraine plays directly into his hands. In view of the threat of war and the patriotic mobilisation, the invocation of "Western" and national unity, the call for a "strong" president is almost automatic.

Crisis of the traditional party system

The fact that the other candidates appear unreliable, with their parties in serious crises or only representing a fraction of the ruling class, the petty bourgeoisie and the middle classes, is only made more visible by the war. The causes of this, however, go back years.

Macron's election victory five years ago and the formation of his electoral party "La République en Marche!" marked the end of a party system that had been shaped for decades by the bourgeois right and social democracy. Of course, this had already been severely weakened by the rise of the Front National and by tensions in the parties (e.g. the permanent crisis of the Socialist Party). But Macron effectively brought it down.

No wonder, then, that the candidates of the Socialist Party, Anne Hidalgo, and Les Républicains (The Republicans), the party of the traditional bourgeois camp, Valérie Pécresse, are playing only a supporting role in the election campaign.

The reason is simple: Macron continues to attract many former voters of both the Socialist Party and Les Républicains and appears as the most "credible" candidate to maintain the system. And undoubtedly, from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, he is. During the pandemic and now in the Russian-Ukrainian war, he appears as the best helmsman to protect the interests of French imperialism. His government, composed of ex-PS and ex-LR leaders, is representative of this widespread opinion and in fact integrates large sections of the former Conservative and Socialist Party following.

For many socialist sympathisers, it is the lesser evil compared to the radical right. So much so that Anne Hidalgo, the PS presidential candidate, with 3%, is even trailing the Communist Party candidate (4%) in the polls. The left-wing populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon seems to be the closest alternative to Macron, he is seeking votes with a mixture of social promises and social chauvinism. The more moderate part of the right also supports Macron, while a part is attracted to the extreme right. This explains why Valérie Pécresse is behind both Macron and the extreme right.

Right-wing danger

No wonder then that the Rassemblement National candidate, Marine Le Pen, looks the most promising challenge to Macron in the polls. The heiress of the Front National, the utterly reactionary creation of Jean-Marie Le Pen, is trying to give herself a "softer" image than in previous campaigns. While her father, a former army officer during the Algerian war, made antisemitic provocations from time to time, Marine Le Pen has focused strictly on anti-immigrant racism and Islamophobia. She tries to appeal to more "moderate" bourgeois or even backward working class voters by softening the tones (e.g. on abortion and same-sex marriage) but keeping the same racist content. Even on economic issues, the promise to leave the Eurozone has disappeared.

Eric Zemmour, a long-time journalist for Le Figaro and a popular guest on talk shows, is the surprise candidate in this election, even though his poll ratings have been falling lately. Strongly supported by Vincent Bolloré, a media magnate who owns several television channels, Zemmour has launched a very aggressive campaign based on obsessively touting a nationalist and xenophobic ideology.

His main campaign theme is the threat of the "great replacement", according to which the real French are being replaced by migrants, mainly of Islamic religion, who bring foreign values into the country. Unemployment, crime, terrorism, France's economic and political decline are blamed on them. While this racist "theory" was until recently the hallmark of a tiny fascist minority, it has quickly become a widespread political concept, influencing even the traditional right-wing party Les Républicains.

Although the ideological gap between Le Pen and Zemmour is small, they pursue different strategies. Marine Le Pen tries to appeal to backward layers of the working class. Thus, at the beginning of the election campaign, she promised to restore pension rights at the age of 60. She promises a wage increase, a reduction in VAT on energy and a comprehensive plan for the hospitals. However, the core of her programme has not changed: "stop uncontrolled immigration", "eradicate Islamic ideology", "security everywhere and for all" are the first and most important measures in her programme.

Zemmour, on the other hand, appeals to other reactionary strata. He is strongly supported by fundamentalist Catholicism (including Opus Dei and the movement against same-sex marriage), openly fascist and identity politics groups. He has links to the more right-wing sector of Les Républicains and is supported by several leading figures in the RN. He hopes to combine these forces into a new party if Marine Le Pen is not elected.

Both Le Pen and Zemmour are suffering at the moment because of the war in Ukraine. Both admire Putin as a strong leader, autocrat and for his defence of "Western civilisation". Marine Le Pen benefited from Russian money in a previous election. In recent days she has had to scrap 1.2 million leaflets with a picture of her shaking hands with Putin.

Zemmour assured voters a few days before the invasion of Ukraine that Russia would never invade. Even if this plays into Macron's hands and facilitates his re-election, his presidency and the coming attacks will continue to provide fertile ground for right-wing demagoguery, agitation and their strengthening as an alleged opposition to the system.

The "left" and the working class

The fact that Macron's victory is certain and that he will probably be able to enjoy a solid parliamentary majority in the parliamentary elections in June - whether from his own party or the bourgeois "centre" of conservatives, social democrats and greens - and that the right can appear as the only "opposition", is not due to the inner strength of Macron and his movement, but above all to the historical political weakness of the working class.

Of course, important struggles have taken place in recent years, notably among hospital workers and teachers over the chaotic, contradictory and flawed health care policies, a strong but short-lived series of anti-racist demonstrations at the time of the BLM, and more recently a series of labour struggles over wages. The latter are still ongoing in an impressive number of companies: RATP (Paris buses and trams), L'Oréal (cosmetics), Alstom (trains), Dassault (fighter planes), BioMérieux (pharmaceuticals).

The rising cost of living and the fact that wages have been locked at a low level for decades while at the same time the profits of the big French companies are reaching record highs easily explains the wave of struggles. Some strikes are successful and in other sectors the bosses are ready to raise wages, but the main unions have so far been unable or unwilling to launch a national campaign on the issue. While wage increases and the environment top the list of issues of general interest, the political scene has been dominated for months by the far-right parties and their racist propaganda against immigration.

This is mainly because the workers' movement itself does not appear as a political factor, as a leading force at the national level. The PS is in a well-deserved death crisis. The CP has been bobbing along for years, effectively subordinating itself to Jean-Luc Mélenchon. His increasingly open turn away from a reformist bourgeois workers' policy towards left populism led to a break with the CP, but its policies did not improve as a result.

Mélenchon is now the leading candidate of "the left" with a new movement called Union Populaire. Despite the name, the "Union" unites only him and his friends. The previous electoral alliance, Front de Gauche with PCF and other forces, went down ingloriously.

Its programme is a social-chauvinist, pro-imperialist programme. It juxtaposes progressive reforms with a strong restoration of French imperialism, which is allegedly hindered by the EU and NATO. On the one hand: raising the minimum wage, lowering the retirement age, taxing the rich, ecological planning. On the other, one can read in his programme: "Let us be a great nation", "Industrial and health sovereignty", "For an independent France", "France is a maritime power that ignores itself" - an allusion to France's overseas territories, in reality colonial possessions. And further: "Its economy, its military sovereignty, its geography and above all its scientific and cultural charisma make France a world power". "We must fight the space arms race while ensuring France's sovereignty."

Gone are all references to the working class, the trade unions, the social movements and a transformation of the system. Mélenchon promises to be a new left Bonaparte, ruling over an indeterminate mass of "people".

Even though he is by far the best placed "left" candidate in the polls, he is not a candidate based on the organised workers' movement. His mutation to populism, to a supposedly cross-class "people's" politics, and his increasingly overt nationalism and social-chauvinism illustrate the political and ideological crisis of the working class and the left.

Radical Left

After 5 years of Macron, the balance of power between the classes has shifted to the disadvantage of the working class, the racially oppressed, the social movements and the left. This also affects the "radical" left.

Three different currents tried to run a candidate in the elections. Two succeeded: Natalie Arthaud of Lutte Ouvrière and

Philippe Poutou of the NPA (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste). Anass Kazib of Révolution Permanente clearly failed the undemocratic hurdle for participation in the elections, which requires at least 500 signatures of support from mayors.

It is easy to see that the next president will attack the working class. France is losing ground economically and above all industrially to Germany, but also to Italy. Its public debt is high, its trade balance is heavily in the red. The only way for France to keep its status as a medium-sized imperialist power is to shift the debt burden onto the shoulders of the wage-earners, with attacks on pensions, schools, hospitals, wages etc. The coming economic turmoil and the rise in energy costs will require even sharper attacks.

Basically, Arthaud and Poutou (and Kabiz) recognise this. As Nathalie Arthaud puts it, "I'm not running to make electoral promises, but to present a plan of struggle and popularise the crucial demands for tomorrow's struggle."

Unfortunately, much like previous LO campaigns, there is nothing in Lutte Ouvrière's programme that resembles a struggle plan. Rather, it is a wooden list of basic Marxist doctrines, which are absolutely correct in themselves, but are not sufficient to mobilise the masses and show a way forward for their struggles. Instead, LO defers this to the future: "Yes, the future depends on the next revolution of the workers, their ability to overthrow capitalism, expropriate it and take power." In the meantime, there is nothing to do but vote LO and join their ranks.

But even Poutou's programme only goes so far. It has a range of quite correct social and political demands around which the class is to be mobilised - but their connection to the actual situation, to the present situation is missing. The programme reads as if it could have been presented five or ten years ago.

While Kazib's programme formulated many points in clearer language, it suffered, like that of Poutou and Arthaud, from a crucial weakness: it bypassed the question of how the working class, the trade unions, can move forward in the current situation, which is essentially defensive. The question of the united front against the attacks, the need to raise demands on the current trade union leaderships are almost completely missing.

This is related to a second problem of the "radical left". The deterioration of the balance of power between the classes, expressed in the fact that all candidates who are based even in a broader sense on the working class (i.e. also those of the CP and PS) as well as the radical left, together are below 10%, is not addressed, in fact it is glossed over. This can be seen in the lack of an analysis of the class character of the yellow vests. Instead, this movement is presented as a real glimmer of hope. Yet the populism as well as the electoral strength of the right among its supporters reflect the petty-bourgeois nature of this movement. This is even more evident in the directly reactionary anti-vaccination movement.

For years, the trade unions shaped many social movements in France, but this is no more the case today. The working class as a social force has left the field to the petty bourgeoisie and thus to numerous reactionary, cross-class political concepts.

Therefore, a clear break with this accommodation to populism is necessary - not only with regard to Mélenchon, but also with regard to movement populism. Only then will the struggle against the right-wing danger and its influence stand on firmer ground.

Finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also triggered a huge wave of imperialist propaganda in France, also because France and Macron play a special role within the EU (it is the only nuclear power in the EU) and in diplomatic relations with Putin.

Lutte Ouvrière rightly condemns NATO's role in the region as well as that of France. It rejects any alliance with Macron. The NPA is much less clear. Although it rejects NATO and imperialism, it does not see the struggle over Ukraine primarily as a struggle for the redivision of the world between the great powers.

The NPA here follows the statement of the Fourth International (formerly the United Secretariat) and does not say a word about the role of the extreme right in Ukraine, about the role played by Zelensky and his government in the service of NATO, about the big oligarchs behind him, or about the reactionary policy against the Donbass and the Russophones. The NPA even goes so far as to support the sanctions. "The sanctions imposed on Putin will probably

have little effect. But we have no reason to oppose them as long as they do not become a weapon against the Russian people."

This position is wrong and dangerous in several respects. First, the sanctions that do not also become a weapon against Russian people have yet to be invented. Secondly, the sanctions imposed naturally hit the Russian economy and thirdly, they dramatically sharpen the bloc confrontation. This weakness of the NPA to openly take a stand against its own imperialism must be openly criticised by its left wing and by all those who have hopes in Poutou's campaign, which is quite lively and, for the size of the NPA, mobilising effectively.

In the pre-election campaign and in the election campaign itself, the NPA and its candidate were able to hold quite large rallies not only in large cities, but throughout the country, and regularly mobilise hundreds of people in medium-sized cities. Of course, this will make little difference to the overall result, but unlike Arthaud, Poutou represents parts of the social movements and struggles of recent years. Therefore, we support his candidacy without hiding the criticism of his programme, which vacillates between revolutionary and reformist positions.

The crucial question, however, is what Poutou (and also Arthaud) are mobilising their voters for beyond the elections. The rallies and agitation must be used to build a movement against the future Macron government, against French imperialism, against the ongoing and coming social attacks, against state racism and the right-wing movements. For this, the NPA and the entire radical left need a concrete, focussed programme of action. At the same time, they should take the initiative now to call assemblies at the local level, in the workplaces, in schools and universities to organise action committees against the threatening attacks, against the war, against racist attacks and demand this from the trade unions and all organisations of the workers' movement.

Secondly, the elections also make clear that there is actually no political justification for the separate candidacies of Poutou and Arthaud (or for the candidacy of Kabiz) on different centrist programmes. They may be more radical or more aligned on individual issues. But basically, they all lack an understanding of the current balance of forces between the class and a correct application of a united front policy towards the trade unions and mass movements.

Therefore, the NPA should also use its electoral campaign to bring together all the forces that proclaim the need for a revolutionary political alternative to the left populism and reformism of the PS and CP, to openly discuss the basis of a larger revolutionary party and a plan to build a movement against the government.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/frances-presidential-election-no-racism-no-imperialism-prepare-fight>