



# Is the New Popular Union a step forward for the French working class?

Marc Lassalle Wed, 08/06/2022 - 11:37

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French people if you want it, with your ballots you can satisfy many essential demands?. On June 12th and 19th, if you so decide, by electing the MP of NUPES, that day will blossom the spring of the people, echoing the spring of nature.?

The message delivered by the New Popular, Ecological and Social Union (NUPES) is simple and clear. Vote for this newly founded coalition of left parties in the coming general elections and the government led by the self-nominated Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, will solve all your problems, from wage increases to ecological planning and the Sixth Republic.

Launched by Mélenchon after his sizeable score (22%) in the presidential election in April, the NUPES is an electoral front formed by La France Insoumise (LFI, Mélenchon's party), the Greens, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and other minor organisations. The electoral list gives the LFI 357 candidates, the PS 70 and the PCF 50.

Since the launch of NUPES, the President's lead in the opinion polls has been cut to 26-27% of voting intentions in the first round, compared to 25% for the NUPES and 21% for Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) (Ipsos). A more recent poll (Ifop-Fiducial, 31 May) suggests that Macron could fall short of an absolute majority and thus his prime minister Elisabeth Borne, would have to seek support from other parties

Mélenchon boasts that the simple fact of uniting all these forces is a historic accomplishment and compares this with the Popular Front government in 1936. It is true that the two major left parties, the PS and PCF, have not stood on a common list (The Plural Left) for the elections since 1997. However, rather than showing the strength of Mélenchon's leadership, the success of the enterprise rather stresses the pitiful state of the French left.

With the humiliating score of 1.7 % for Socialist Party candidate Anne Hidalgo and just 2.2 % for Communist Party candidate Fabien Roussel, the two traditional parties of the French left are at historically low levels and the question of their very survival is posed. While the decline of the PCF has been continuing for decades, the PS was still in power in 2017, with a majority in Parliament and governing major regions and cities including Paris and Lyon. Emmanuel Macron's candidacy in 2017 represented a major rightward split from PS, with many leading party figures following him in order to get elected and to obtain positions in the government. NUPES therefore appears today to the younger cadres of PS as a lifeboat, even if they are obliged to play the role of junior partners under the leadership of LFI.

Despite their weaknesses, PS and PCF still retain close links with the French working class. This is most clearly so in the case of the PCF with its strong base of activists, a dense network of associations active in the working class areas and especially with its links with CGT, the leading union. The links of PS with the working class have always been weaker. Indeed, the PS's ancestor, the SFIO, went through a near-death experience in the 1960s until it was resurrected by François Mitterrand as an electoral vehicle for attaining power. This led to the Common Programme of 1972 with its promise of a transitional break with capitalism and Mitterrand's victory in 1981 on a programme of extensive nationalisations which, however, he abandoned after two years.

In France, relations with 'socialist' parties were codified long ago in the unions' Charte d'Amiens, which dictated

strict separation between them and political parties. Parties take care of elections and local and national government whereas the unions' sphere is in the industrial struggle, including organising in the workplaces, plus negotiations with employers and governments. Of course, this distinction between economics and politics is a mere fiction whose only purpose is to let both the bureaucracy of the unions and the leaders of the left parties off the hook when issues of the class struggle demand united action.

This explains in part why the links between PS and the unions have always been hidden. Nevertheless, CFDT, one of the largest unions, was always close to PS, in terms of both its leaders and bureaucracy and of its ideology - and it still is today. Moreover, a large part of the French working class still orients towards PS and considers it as a shield against the worst aspects of neoliberalism. The victory in the presidential elections of François Hollande in 2012 was mainly due to this: the working class had had enough of brutal attacks under the Chirac and Sarkozy presidencies and used the vote for Hollande to put a stop to this.

The current confusion in the ranks of the left comes from the repeated betrayals of the reformist leaders and the fact that in government they adopted neoliberal politics similar to those of the right, not something that sets them apart from the British Labour party or the German Social Democrats. The fact that Macron was an important minister of Hollande, and that he continues as a president on a similar line of attacks against the working class, has plunged the PS into a deep identity crisis. Who needs the PS if Macron and followers take care of the government side and Mélenchon hegemonises the opposition?

The current 'left' turn of the PS towards NUPES, beyond the short-term goal of saving the parliamentary group and the party apparatus, paid for by the state, might show that a younger generation of party cadres is turning towards the working class to renew their reformist credentials and possibly make some closer links with it. In the coming years, the orientation of the PS and the union federations in the class struggle will determine whether this attempt is successful. It is also possible that PS will lose all its influence, fuse with other forces or disappear completely.

In summary, both PCF and PS are still working class parties, even though they have repeatedly betrayed their promises and even though, once in power, their politics have proven to be compatible and often instrumental to the preservation of the bourgeois state: they are, as Lenin called them, bourgeois workers' parties that rest on the votes of the proletariat but serve the capitalist class.

Despite its radical claims, the nature of La France Insoumise is different. Mélenchon clearly wants to break with the tradition of the workers' movement. Inspired by 'left' populism, most notably by the theories of 'radical democracy' of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, he aims to unite the whole French people. This was particularly evident, even at the symbolic level, in his 2017 electoral campaign, when he replaced the red flag and the singing of the Internationale with the tricolour and the Marseillaise.

While this populist nationalist ideology was not stressed so brazenly during Mélenchon's 2022 presidential campaign, it is clearly still the basis of LFI and NUPES. There is still no mention of the working class or the workers' movement, rather it is 'the spring of people'. The message is simple: vote Mélenchon and once in government he will implement 650 reforms. Period. No space is left, even at the rhetorical level, for any autonomous action of the working class, for struggles, for movements, let alone a break with capitalism.

For Mélenchon, the entire political scene is limited to the Assemblée Nationale. The past five years are a testimony to this. LFI was quite active in Parliament, even though at a symbolic level since Macron had a large majority. However, LFI was not very visible, or entirely absent, on the streets or in the movements. LFI, whose activist basis is probably smaller than the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and certainly negligible compared to the PCF, is built as a top-down structure, geared for elections and little else.

Despite the many left reforms contained in NUPES' programme, including raising the minimum wage, setting the pensionable age at 60 and massive investments in the public sector, no mention is ever made of what the alliance will do if they do not win a parliamentary majority. No mention is ever made of the need for resistance and struggles in the

workplaces, for a social movement. Quite correctly, PCF, but NOT Mélenchon, adds these lines to its statement of support for NUPES;

?We know of course that it does not suffice to win an election to obtain the social victories that we want. To achieve these changes implies a powerful social and popular movement, that must be built right now and everywhere in France. Our involvement in these struggles is therefore decisive.?

Mélenchon's project is both wrong (since no radical changes can be brought about solely by a reformist government, let alone one in cohabitation with Macron) and dangerous: it aims to dissolve the working class in a loose cross-class alliance with the petty bourgeoisie and to disarm the working class of its essential strengths, in term of consciousness and of organisation. It is a giant step back even from the eras when the SFIO and PCF were founded. It is a retreat from class identification and class independence, even in the deceitful form these are maintained by reformist workers' parties.

The NPA, an assemblage of tendencies that regard themselves as revolutionaries, largely from the Trotskyist tradition, was involved in intense negotiations with NUPES and was quite close to entering the coalition. The main reasons for their ultimate failure lay not in the NPA's political characterisation of NUPES, but mainly as a result of a clash between the opportunistic appetites of both LFI and NPA. The LFI succeeded in getting the PS on board, which they (correctly) judged would bring them greater support than NPA, given the former's continued strength both in parliament and local government. So, they offered only a handful of less winnable constituencies to NPA candidates. The NPA promptly announced that it could not endorse NUPES because of the presence in it of a party which had not made a ?rupture? with neoliberalism.

Despite the failure of this agreement, NPA is in fact deeply involved in supporting and building the NUPES campaign across the country, except in the few areas where they present their own NPA candidates. The opportunism of the NPA, and its lack of a serious criticism of what NUPES really represents, signifies its shameful political degeneration and could lead to its disintegration.

Worried by the prospects of further attacks by the Macron government (especially on pensions), many workers will vote for NUPES, using it as a weapon, however weak and dubious, to stop or at least weaken Macron. Macron, who will certainly benefit from a large abstention as this will affect mostly RN and NUPES voters, is playing the campaign on a very slow tempo and keeping a deliberate ambiguity on the line of his government. RN is simply trying to capitalise on the high score of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election, hoping to translate this into a sizeable group of deputies in the Assembly. Therefore, the most active force in the campaign is NUPES, with its systematic work of canvassing in working class areas. No wonder then that the polls foresee around 30% for NUPES and a significant number of MPs, although it is unlikely that they will have a majority in Parliament.

In this very confused political situation, it is important to recognise a progressive element in the class instinct of many workers and immigrants who will vote for NUPES. Yes, the working class does need to regroup, to stand in the election and in the class struggle with its own organisations. Its will to oppose Macron and Le Pen is legitimate. However, of course, the conclusion drawn is wrong because support for reformist leaders like those of PS and PCF can only lead to betrayal and discouragement. It is doubly wrong when it supports NUPES as a block under the misleadership of Mélenchon.

We therefore strongly criticise the wrong method in NUPES' programme. No, it is far from enough to vote for NUPES for reforms to be implemented. On the contrary, the working class must prepare for a fightback whether Macron or NUPES gets the upper hand. It must prepare for a serious confrontation with the French bourgeoisie if it wants to make the bourgeoisie pay for the economic and ecological crisis that the capitalist system has created. Even more so now that a new global imperialist war is looming.

We strongly criticise the shortcoming of the NUPES' programme especially in the fight against racism and against stigmatisation of Muslims. Will NUPES MPs repeal the ban on the hijab in the schools? Will NUPES open the borders

to migrants? Not a word on it among the 650 statements of that programme! Instead, one can read dubious promises like 'favouring the creation of legal and secured migration routes' or even a promise to 'refund the police to guarantee the right to security' and 'prioritise buying French military equipment for the army'.

In the coming elections, in the first round, we advocate a vote for the NPA candidates where they stand, and critical support for PCF candidates elsewhere, as they represent the most active, class-conscious sectors of the French working class. In the second round, considering that the working class will mobilise to defeat Macron, we give critical support to the PCF and PS candidates in the NUPES block.

However, we strongly advocate that the workers follow the lead of the 1936 strikers. Instead of waiting for a government to implement the socialist leader Leon Blum's reforms, the workers went on strike and occupied the factories. That was what won significant social reforms from his government. Electoral victories and favourable laws followed, showing that even the threat of a revolution, is the most powerful locomotive for reforms.

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