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France

Collapse on the right, threat from the far right, hope for an alternative on the left.

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As in 2017, the second round of the 2022 French presidential election will pit Marine Le Pen, leader of the far right Rassemblement National (RN), against the current President and leader of the En Marche party, Emmanuel Macron. The latter obtained almost 27.85% of votes cast, with Le Pen on 23.15% and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the left wing Union Populaire, coming third on 21.95%.

But Macron's victory in the second round appears less automatic than in 2017 (when he won 66% of the vote) and this new identical duel should not mask the profound differences in the electoral situation following the first round.

First, abstention went up by more than 4% to 26.3% of those registered to vote. Since 2007, there has been a steady increase in abstentions, both in the presidential election and in the subsequent parliamentary elections (more than 50% in 2017). Young people (aged 18 to 35) abstained at a rate of more than 40% (29% five years ago) and workers at a rate of 33% (29% five years ago). Abstention represents roughly a quarter of those registered.

Alongside this, these elections mark a new collapse of the two traditional parties of the Fifth Republic, the Parti Socialiste (PS) and the Gaullist Les Républicains (LR) party. Between them, they account for only 6.5% of votes cast. In 2017, at the end of François Hollande's five-year term as President, the PS lost almost 4/5 of its votes. In 2022, the LR candidate, Valérie Pécresse, with 4.78%, lost 3/4 of the votes obtained by the party in 2017.

Collapse of traditional parties

In ten years and two presidential elections, these two key parties have collapsed. The presidential system has just devoured those who spawned it. Macron's electorate had already benefited in 2017 from the contribution of a major part of the traditional PS electorate. In 2022, most of it voted for Mélenchon or Macron and the Gaullist electorate was distributed mainly towards Macron but also towards another candidate of the far right, Éric Zemmour.

Two examples illustrate these shifts:

In Paris, a predominantly PS city for 20 years, Hollande scored almost 35% in 2012. This time, the PS candidate, Anne Hidalgo, herself Mayor of Paris, won 2.17% of the vote while Macron won 35% and Mélenchon 30%.

Another example is Neuilly sur Seine, a chic suburb of the capital, a historic stronghold of the Gaullist party and the traditional right since the Liberation, where Nicolas Sarkozy was mayor for twenty years. In 2017, François Fillon, the Gaullist candidate, won 64.92% of the vote and Macron 23%. In 2022, Macron doubled his vote, approaching an absolute majority, while Zemmour won almost 19% and Valérie Pécresse only 15% of the vote.

These two examples illustrate the unprecedented triple polarization that appeared in this election, draining support from the other candidates with, on both sides of Macron, the extreme right and Mélenchon, a declared candidate of the radical left. Both Macron, Le Pen and Mélenchon will have appeared as "the useful vote" for one category of the electorate, marginalizing the other nine candidates to under 10% or even 5%.

Macron has clearly consolidated himself as the candidate of the bourgeois bloc. The employers' organization,

MEDEF, had, as in 2017, affirmed its support for Macron, who follows neoliberal orientations in all respects and whose new programmatic points appeared to satisfy the capitalist groups, whether on the reductions of levies, aid to companies, or the continuation of the neoliberal offensives aimed at health and national education. He has consolidated his support from the reactionary electorate since 2017, by showing himself capable of opposing the mobilizations of the *gilets jaunes* and those of young people in working-class neighbourhoods against police violence, as well as the peoples of the Antilles, Kanaky and Corsica, asserting themselves as defenders of the forces of repression. Also, in the face of the endless crisis of the PS and the LR, his candidacy for this position appeared the most reliable. The result was a clear strengthening of his electorate by a contribution of votes from the LR, while keeping most of the votes coming from social democracy among the upper ranks of the employed and well-off pensioners, appearing as a guarantee of stability and even as a bulwark against the extreme right.

Therefore, even among electorates traditionally voting for the right or social democracy in other consultations (municipal or regional), Macron has appeared, within the framework of the French hyper-presidential system, as a guarantor of security, beyond the propertied classes, for the social strata essentially spared from the precariousness and difficulties of everyday life. This need for stability has obviously been reinforced by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The specificity of the French electoral system, where the management of the governmental system is the exclusive responsibility of an individual and not of proportional representation in an assembly, has led to the collapse of the parties that have built this system over the last sixty years.

Strengthening of far right

The far right has been spectacularly strengthened in this electoral campaign with the consolidation of the RN and the irruption of the Zemmour candidacy. Macron and the mainstream media had largely cultivated identity and security themes in the months leading up to the presidential election. Just like François Mitterrand who had made Jean Marie Le Pen his “best enemy” in the 1980s, Macron cultivated the idea of a new inevitable duel with Marine Le Pen, presenting himself as a bulwark against the far right, and thinking he would once again benefit from the fiasco experienced by the RN candidate during the 2017 second round. Far-right personalities have also sought to get out of this trap by advancing the project of a recomposition of the right of the right, by building an alliance of the most reactionary wing of the LR with currents of the far right, aiming to extend the union achieved during the anti-LGBTI+ demonstrations of “La Manif pour tous” against same-sex marriage and medically assisted reproduction, an alliance in particular with those around François Fillon. building an alternative, cultivating homophobia and Islamophobia as well as a cult of uninhibited French traditionalist values, and openly welcoming the neo-Nazi currents that Le Pen had marginalized for the sake of respectability.

From this combination, with the support of Vincent Bolloré’s media group and Marion Maréchal, Marine Le Pen’s niece, emerged the campaign of a polemicist journalist from the Gaullist right, Éric Zemmour. The latter has for years circulated the most reactionary ideas and has been condemned several times for his racist and Islamophobic remarks. His project was to overtake Marine Le Pen from the right, reaching out to the most fascistic currents of the LR for a political recomposition. He had his moment of glory with media omnipresence in the autumn of 2021, advancing the idea that a third candidacy of Marine Le Pen would lead to a new failure. In the end, it was the returning boomerang of this argument that marginalized Zemmour, with a vote for Le Pen appearing on the contrary, for her traditional electorate, as the only way to bring down Macron. It is this argument of the “useful vote” that limited to 7% the electoral impact of Zemmour and also that of the third far-right candidate, Dupont-Aignan.

This project is therefore ending in failure for the time being. But unfortunately, this first round will have confirmed the Le Pen vote as the biggest among white-collar and manual workers and its strong presence in popular circles, especially in the North, East and Mediterranean rim. Moreover, to try to strengthen her electoral weight in the popular electorate, she has emphasized her image as “the only candidate who can beat Macron” by developing a discourse

that downplays the security or immigration issues in favour of the question of increasing purchasing power through a reduction in taxation and social contributions on low wages. While cultivating this popular image, she has done everything to appear credible to MEDEF and fully compatible with the frameworks of the European Union.

Consolidation but personalization of Mélenchon vote

The novelty of this first round was also the dual movement of the almost total erasure of the PS from the presidential panorama and the electoral consolidation of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Here too, this third “useful vote” siphoned off from the other candidates on the left, not only that of Anne Hidalgo, the candidate of the PS reduced to 1.75%, but also those of the EELV (Greens), the Communist Party (PCF), the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO). In the cities and working-class neighbourhoods or in the Antilles, many will have seized on the Mélenchon vote to block the extreme right from the 1st round and avoid having to vote Macron again to eliminate the threat of Le Pen. But the Mélenchon vote was also that of the youth in the neighbourhoods confronted with racism, discrimination and police violence. Thus, in the Paris region, it took first place in the former “red belt”, lost by the PCF since the 2000s, exceeding 50% in Montreuil, La Courneuve, Aubervilliers, and totalling nearly 50% in the popular department of Seine Saint-Denis.

Similarly, the evolution of his discourse on nuclear power and the fight for the climate allowed his vote to also appear as a vote for action against climate change and the biggest vote among young people aged 18 to 35. All this dominated, erasing for many, his sympathy for Putin, especially during the massacres in Syria, and his ambiguous position on Russian aggression in Ukraine. Thus, in the weeks leading up to the election, a growing polarization took place on the left to strengthen the Mélenchon vote and make it possible for him to reach the second round.

However, Mélenchon also abusively personalized this election, a personalization corresponding to the “gaseous” character of his movement, La France Insoumise, an action network without any democratic structuring. Mélenchon himself, for this campaign, built an ambivalent coexistence between this personalization and the establishment around him of a broad collective, the “Parliament of the Popular Union”, aimed at playing the role of bridge between the candidate and the social movements. In this, he reiterated the attitude of the PCF at the end of the 1990s, seeking to assert itself as the spokesperson of the social movement in the institutions by integrating on its lists spokespersons for the trade unions and global justice movement. Similarly, La France Insoumise tried from the beginning of the campaign to impose a vote for Mélenchon as the only useful vote on the left, explicitly targeting the other left-wing candidates, while he himself announced his candidacy in November 2020 without ever seeking to conduct any debate with the other left and far left forces. Therefore, Mélenchon's failure a stone's throw from the second round is also that of a hegemonic policy and is not primarily the responsibility of the other left movements present in this election.

Rebuilding social and political left

Nevertheless, its failure and the division of the left forces which, however, gathered a total vote comparable to that of the extreme right (31.94% against 32.28% for the far right), now pose a political problem. Social forces and activist currents are seeking to overcome the failures and betrayals of the social democratic left and its submission to capitalist neoliberalism. The necessary debate on this failure and on the axes of a necessary political and social mobilization in the face of the ravages of capitalism has not occurred. Refusing to accept this situation was one of the essential messages of Philippe Poutou and the NPA's campaign given the anti-capitalist emergency. Also, Mélenchon's success proves the reality and vigour of these forces, but also its limits, arising the lack of will for

convergence and common actions. Unfortunately, for the moment, beyond the second round of the presidential election, it seems obvious to La France Insoumise that the only political future on the left must be under the banner of the Union Populaire. They have already designated most of their candidates for the parliamentary elections in June in order to maintain and increase their parliamentary group in the National Assembly.

In any case, the next step is the second round of the presidential election. Even if the initial polls indicate victory for Macron, the gap is much narrower than in 2017. In the popular electorate, some will abstain, but many will vote Macron to block Le Pen, as was the case in 2017. This choice will be made reluctantly even if, after five years of violent attacks against the popular classes and faithful defence of capitalist interests, Macron is seeking to adorn himself with a social language and an anti-fascist veneer to win votes on the left, even partially amending his project of new attacks on pensions.

This contribution of votes from the left is, with the abstentionists of the first round, his only reserve of votes left to win the second round, as he has already won most of the votes coming from the traditional right. But many among the popular classes will not be able to forget the orchestrated attacks against the *gilets jaunes*, the young people in the suburbs, the unpunished police violence, the reform of unemployment insurance and the promise of new attacks on pensions, the incessant gifts to capitalist groups, the colonial contempt for the populations of the Antilles, Kanaky and Corsica.

But a possible victory for Marine Le Pen would not be a trivial matter, despite the façade of respectability that she has adopted in recent weeks, even using Zemmour as evidence of her moderation. She is the heir and depository of all the most reactionary currents of the French extreme right and includes in her ranks the ideologues and defenders of racist, xenophobic theses, heir also of the currents most hostile to the workers' movement and the struggles for the emancipation of peoples. She represents support for the big French employers when the popular classes rise up, take to the streets, to defend their rights and when order is threatened. She takes up the cause of the forces of repression, against demonstrators, as she did during the demonstrations of the (*gilets jaunes* in November 2019).

Not one vote for Le Pen!

So, under no circumstances could a Le Pen vote be a weapon of defence against Macron's current or future attacks. On the contrary, the election of the RN candidate would be synonymous with a qualitative worsening of the situation of the working classes, deepened divisions in the camp of the exploited and oppressed, made up of an exacerbation of discrimination and attacks against the racialized popular classes, as well as being synonymous with new attacks on the collective rights of employees and their organizations, against democratic freedoms. Similarly, a high score in her favour, far from punishing Macron's reactionary policy, would be an additional encouragement for him on the paths of his ultra-neoliberal and repressive policies.

Although there has been notable social combativeness in recent years in metropolitan France and the overseas départements and territories, in localities and workplaces, the political construction of our social camp to act and defend a project of emancipation is a project built on the rubble of social democracy. Mélenchon's electoral success can be a point of support if it is not synonymous with arrogance and hegemonic will and lack of debate. In any case, the assertive strength of the far right and the announcements of new attacks by Macron against pensions and the public health system, government passivity in the face of the climate emergency and the galloping deterioration of purchasing power show the immediate urgency of building a common political action front around the urgent questions of the day and the fight against capitalism. This question will arise in the coming weeks regardless of the outcome of the second round.

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