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France

On Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Europe, and especially migrants

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“European elections: France Insoumise shifts a bit”: this is the title of an article published in *L’Humanité* following the “Amfis” of France Insoumise [1], organized in Marseille from 23 to 26 August. [2] “Shifts” which confirm that the Mélenchon version of “insubmission” is increasingly directed towards the quest for “respectability” and the claim to being “responsible”. A tendency that is unfortunately confirmed, among other things, on the question of migrants.

Invited to the “Amfis” for a debate on the question of pensions (“the mother of all battles”), alongside Adrien Quatennens (FI MP), Christine Marty (member of the Scientific Council of Attac) and Bernard Borgialli (railway worker, candidate for FI in the European elections), the NPA obviously replied positively. [3] Our comrade Christine Poupin stressed among other things the need to jointly organize a large-scale collective response to the ultra-liberal projects of the Macron start-up, concerning pensions, unemployment insurance, social security, etc. This is the approach we defended during the counter-reform of the SNCF by initiating a unified framework of support for the struggle of the railway workers and for the defence of public services.

A little more institutional water in the insubmissive wine

This approach does not mean, quite the contrary, the negation of disagreements between organisations. That is why we have never deprived ourselves of criticising the positions of FI and publicly confronting our ideas with theirs, especially on subjects that are debated within the left, anti-capitalist or not.

And in this case, it must be noted that what some people have hailed as a “move” of FI on European questions is more like an additional stage in the quest for respectability of the “insubmissive” movement. A quest that this summer included, among other things, the invitation of right-wing MPs to the “Amfis”, following a singular position taken by Jean-Luc Mélenchon at the height of the Benalla case, as reported by *Le Monde* of 20-21 July: “When it comes to protecting the state and enforcing the republican norm, there is a convergence with the right, I recognize it,” [[Le Monde 28 July 2018, “L'affaire Benalla, une revanche pour l'ancien monde”](#).]]

It is not a new discovery that Jean-Luc Mélenchon wants to be in government and has a deep respect for the state, but obviously he is pouring more and more institutional water into his insubmissive wine, “recognizing” a “convergence” with the right and the defenders of the established order. It is also a question of announcing a change of course on the question of breaking with the European institutions, by reversing the “Plan B” (interpreted by some “insubmissives” as purely abandoning it [the perspective of threatening to leave the EU]) and reaching out to the “left” of the Socialist Party embodied by Emmanuel Maurel [a leading member of the SP] – these two “moves” being obviously linked – as stated by Manuel Bompard [a close collaborator of Mélenchon]: “A whole group within the PS has orientations on the question of Europe that are close to ours. For sure they would be more in their place here than on a list headed by Pierre Moscovici” [4]

We are now far from the presidential programme (“The EU, we change it or we leave it”), the thundering declarations of September 2017 (“Go back to horse-trading, never!”) and hostility to the “dissidents” of the PS (one of whose leaders was none other than a certain... Emmanuel Maurel), about whom Jean-Luc Mélenchon declared after the presidential election “(that) they represented everything that French people hate” [5]. This is how the leader of the FI parliamentary group explained it: “We are rough in polemics, in words, but it is better that things do not go any further.” [6] And he even went a little further on 9 September by declaring, still addressing himself to the “left” of the

PS: "My friends, I have missed you" [7]. Why not? After all, as the man said, it is not the weathervanes that turn, it is the wind...

Welcome migrants? «Yes, but...»

Ready to give up an essential part of their programme ("Plan B") and their rejection of "horse-trading" to consider joining one of yesterday's designated enemies and present themselves as an alternative majority governing force, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and FI have hardly budged on the question of migrants. Because while criticising, quite rightly, the Macron government's anti-migrant policy, and in particular denouncing the asylum-immigration law, Jean-Luc Mélenchon has reiterated on several occasions this summer his hostility to freedom of movement and of residence. Here is one example, on BFM-TV on 2 September: I am not saying to people that I agree that everyone should do what they want, go where they want, settle wherever they want." [8]

And he justified this position in the name of "responsibility": "None of us is a gentle dreamer who would say "well yes, everyone has just to do it, to move". And he invokes "reason" ("We are reasonable people"), thus maintaining the myth that France and the EU do not have the means to accommodate all those who, in a constrained or chosen way, might wish to settle here... At a time when there has never been so much wealth produced, and potentially available. Accepting migrants is absolutely not a question of "technical" capacities, but of political choices: to reduce working time, to share out wealth, to requisition empty housing units... So many common-sense measures that, far from being opposed to problematics linked to migration, or even being part of another terrain than migration, are combined with the demand for freedom of movement and residence within the same global perspective: a real sharing of wealth, policies for the benefit of the majority and not for a small predatory minority.

Worse still, in order to justify his refusal of a real opening of borders, Jean-Luc Mélenchon uses the argument of the use of immigration, by the bourgeoisie, "to put pressure on wages and social gains" [9]. That some employers and politicians instrumentalize immigration to reinforce the logic of exploitation is undeniable. But to infer that immigration is "organized by the free trade treaties" [10] in order to reduce wages and grind down social gains, there is a step... that it is difficult to take. Because it is not just a question of confusion between a windfall effect and an organized policy, which we will come back to, but of the legitimization of the idea of a *de facto* competition between French and foreign workers and, therefore, the questioning, whether voluntary or not, of the possibility of jointly fighting against the employers. However, the fight against the pressure of capitalists determined to increase, at all costs, their profit rates, certainly does not involve challenging, even indirectly, migratory phenomena ("to say that (the waves of immigration) can exert a downward pressure on wages and be profitable for the employer is not a completely absurd reasoning") [11] but only challenging... the capitalist system itself, and the frantic race for profit. Besides, all things being equal, we seem to be hearing the arguments of some trade unionists at the beginning of the 20th century, according to which the entry of women, less qualified than men, into the labour market, would be used by the employers to lower wages...

No, the boss is not pro-migrant!

There is actually no mechanical link between immigration and lower wages, as we were recently reminded by the economist Anthony Edo, a specialist on questions of migration, in an interview in *La Tribune* in February 2017: "Immigrants are not only workers, they consume, go into business, innovate and thus participate in the creation of wealth, and as a consequence exert positive effects on growth, wages and employment. [12] Furthermore, it should be added, as Roger Martelli has pointed out, that in an economic system as global as it is today, it is the low wage costs in the countries of the "South" that serve as the principal means of pressure for capitalists, not the presence of

immigrant workers in the main global economic powers [13]...

In France, the opportunism of certain sectors of the employers towards migrants does not mean in any sense a collective adherence of the bourgeoisie to the principle of freedom of movement and residence. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand why Macron and his government, whose fidelity to the interests of the wealthy and the MEDEF does not need to be demonstrated, are also hostile to migrants, and struggle tirelessly to discourage them from travelling to Europe in general and France in particular... Once again, it is a question of political choice, and it is regrettable that Jean-Luc Mélenchon and FI have recourse to an argument which, *de facto*, postulates that the opening of borders would have negative consequences for the workers “already present” on French soil.

Moreover, the argument of the profits made by the capitalists on the backs of the migrants who manage to reach European countries can be turned around, given that some large industrial groups, and not least important ones, make profits... by preventing migrants from reaching European countries. Claire Rodier, author of a work of reference on the subject (*Xenophobia business: À quoi servent les contrôles migratoires ?*), raised already in 2014 the question of the “migration business” [14].

“We are thinking about the profits made from the development of security technology in the area of border surveillance, but also of everything in the countries of immigration that comes from legislation on the reception, lodging, detention and expulsion of foreigners. In both cases, the beneficiaries of this windfall are principally private enterprises: armaments and aeronautics industries, insurance companies, security companies, private providers for the management of visas, as well as a plethora of operators involved in the implementation of migration and asylum policies”.

With colossal sums at stake: the market for border security in Europe amounted to 15 billion euros in 2015 and, according to some estimates, is expected to increase to more than 29 billion euros per year in 2022, for the benefit of multinationals like G4S, Thales, Finmeccanica and Siemens... All of this hardly confirms the thesis of “pro-migrant” employers, although this issue is in reality secondary in the discussion that we are dealing with, compared to the need to constantly repeat that France and Europe have indeed the means of welcoming migrants, and that the discussion is political, not technical or economic.

For a consistent internationalism

It should be noted in passing that the second axis of the discourse of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and FI about migrants – which consists of explaining that although it is necessary to accommodate “people [who] have touched the sacred soil of the homeland” (sic) it is also necessary to “ensure that they can live with dignity at home” so that they will have no reason to leave their country, [15] – resembles more an “internationalist” counter-shot than a consistent political agenda. It is in fact difficult to find consistency between the proclaimed willingness to “let the countries of the South develop” (through the denunciation of free trade treaties) and the absence of demands, *inter alia*, for the abolition of debt (but only for its “restructuring”), for the expropriation of French multinationals who plunder the wealth of African countries, the dismantling of the bases and military installations that assure France a role of “gendarme of Africa”, without even mentioning the enthusiastic discourse about “France, present on all continents” or “France, the second maritime territory of the world”, a situation which is above all an ever-present legacy of French colonialism.

And let us add that the posture according to which it is necessary to “create the conditions for people to live in a correct way at home” is not unambiguous, entertaining the idea that the objective is to reduce migratory flows, or even to “dry them up”, according to the formula of Djordje Kuzmanovic, adviser to Jean-Luc Mélenchon and future candidate of FI in the European elections. [16]. For our part, we would prefer to say clearly that we tend towards the

objective of creating the conditions for migration to be free, and not forced. And we also do not forget that, according to all the forecasts, a large majority of refugees will, in future, be climate refugees, and that it is futile to argue that it would be possible, including by repealing the free trade treaties, to lay the basis for a global slowdown in migratory flows, given how advanced global warming is, and even though we fight against climate change.

Everyone will understand that these internationalist criticisms, which are based on a defence of freedom of movement and residence, are intended to further the discussion on the left, and do not have anything to do with the postures of the LREM leaders who, since the end of the summer, have been attacking the “nationalism” of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This is an opportunistic offensive – both pathetic and cynical – coming from a government and a majority whose anti-migrant obsession, particularly embodied in the asylum-immigration law, demonstrates an increasingly strong alignment with ultra-nationalistic currents, whether French or European.

At a time when some people in Germany claim to be fighting the far right by creating a movement in which one of the markers is to denounce the “naivety” of the left on issues related to immigration, that is by taking up the vocabulary of the right and the far right, there is no question of equivocating. Welcome migrants, all migrants, without establishing a hierarchy between “political refugees” and “economic migrants”. Regularize undocumented workers, all undocumented workers, without separating out “those who work” and “those who do not work”. Refuse to give an inch of ground to reactionary theorists of “a breathing space” or “unfair competition”. Defend unconditional freedom of movement and residence, insisting that this is nothing but a matter of political choice and of a struggle for a real distribution of wealth.

These are perspectives that we have not given up and that we will continue, with many others, to defend, within a Europe in which ill winds are growing stronger. While proposing, here and now, the constitution of fronts comprising all those, and we know that there are many of them in FI, who refuse to remain passive in the face of the enterprise of methodical destruction of all our gains, in the face of the continuation of the law-and-order and repressive offensive, in the face of racist policies and the criminalisation of solidarity... And who do not intend to wait until 2019 to put Macron in his place.

PS:

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[1] “Amfis” a play on words of “amphitheatre” (university lecture hall) – most French parties have “summer universities” but this made it possible to have the initial “FI”.

[2] L'Humanité, 27 August 2018 [“Elections européennes: la France insoumise se livre à quelques bougés”](#).

[3] There is a video of the debate online, on [Youtube](#).

[4] Quoted in *Le Parisien*, 3 September 2018 [“Mélenchon veut siphonner le PS”](#).

[5] *La Provence* 14 September 2017 [“Mélenchon: ‘Mon objectif, c'est la conquête du pouvoir national’”](#).

[6] *Médiapart*, 26 August 2018 [“La France insoumise change de cap et ouvre la porte à un rassemblement à gauche”](#).

[7] *Le Monde* 9 September 2018 [“Jean-Luc Mélenchon face à l'aile gauche du PS: ‘Mes amis, vous m'avez manqué’”](#).

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[8] Speech by Jean-Luc Mélenchon during the "Amfis", 25 August 2018.

[9] Twitter account of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 25 August 2018.

[10] Idem.

[11] Charlotte Girard, *Le Monde* 3 September 2018 "[Immigration : La France insoumise, embarrassée, envoie des signaux ambigus](#)".

[12] *La Tribune* 21 February 2017 "[L'immigration tire-t-elle les salaires et l'emploi vers le bas ?](#)".

[13] [Regards.fr](#) 9 September 2018 "[Gauche européenne et immigration: la réponse de Roger Martelli à Djordje Kuzmanovic](#)".

[14] Claire Rodier, "Le business de la migration", 2014, Revue *Plein droit*, 2014-2, no. 101, online at [Cairn.fr](#).

[15] Speech by Jean-Luc Mélenchon during the "Amfis", 25 August 2018.

[16] In an interview with *L'Obs* "[France insoumise et immigration : Le discours de Sahra Wagenknecht est de salubrité publique](#)", during which he stated, among other things, that Sahra Wagenknecht, cofounder of the Aufstehen movement in Germany, had "a discourse of public salubrity".