

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8573>



France

Stopping Le Pen with the New Popular Front

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV593 - June 2024 -

Publication date: Thursday 27 June 2024

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Two leaders of major European countries have both gambled on calling a snap election. Rishi Sunak's desperate move has merely confirmed and deepened the already existing wave of disgust and rejection of 14 years of Tory misrule in Britain. Political debate already assumes a Labour government with a big majority. Emmanuel Macron's surprise move after his party was defeated by Marine Le Pen's far-right, post-fascist RN (National Rally) party has detonated a bomb across the political spectrum in France.

Starmer promises an end to chaos and proposes minor changes but above all stability for the capitalists. Macron has opened up a period of deep political instability that has already unsettled the financial markets. Some French bosses are even considering dealing with Le Pen.

The Left's Response

The French president already had no clear majority in the French parliament and relies on day-to-day agreements between his Ensemble (Together) movement and mainstream right-of-centre Republicans (LR). Maybe he thought the threat of Le Pen winning a parliamentary majority would once again save him and his party as the mainstream right and left parties combine to stop Le Pen. Perhaps he thought a Le Pen majority cohabiting with his presidency might actually weaken RN over the three years leading up to the next Presidential elections. Or did he think that despite the decline in his personal ratings, his movement could win back voters?

No doubt he saw the break-up of the New Popular Union (NUPES) comprising Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Unbowed (LFI), the Socialist Party (PS), the Ecologists, and the Communist Party (PCF) as a sign that the Left would not be a problem for him. Despite the NUPES success in destroying Macron's parliamentary majority in 2022, these currents had been at one another's throats particularly over Gaza, Ukraine, and how to relate to France's ethnic minority groups. The PS had been fighting the LFI to regain the leadership of the broad left, tacking even more to the moderate centre to achieve this.

The New Popular Front

Instead of splitting further apart, the different currents of the left have come together in the New Popular Front (NPF). It deliberately evokes the historic 1936 Popular Front that, through struggles and strikes, and not just with an electoral pact, won historic gains like paid holidays for the working class. Le Pen becoming the biggest party in the Euro Elections with 33% really shook the left up. Within a day or so, there was an agreement about a radical left social democratic programme and an agreement to set up a single candidate in each constituency.

Elections are not based on fair proportional representation but take place over two rounds if nobody wins 50% plus one on the first round. The top two candidates go through, and anyone else who has won 12.5% of registered voters. Having competing left candidates in the first round would make it easier for the RN to win.

All the current polls are showing the NPF between about 3 and 8 points behind the RN, with Macron over ten points further back. The Left could still pull off a dramatic win, and with less than a week remaining, there is all to play for.

But if we believe the polls, Macron looks at the moment like he will face either an RN overall majority or a parliament with no majority but with the RN as the biggest party.

Already RN is the biggest party, but these polls show a considerable increase in its numbers. One problem with the national polls is how they translate into the hundreds of key local contests. For example, will all the left currents in the NPF step down in the second round, or will they argue they have a chance in what are called triangular contests? The leaders of the Ecologists and the PS have already said they will stand down their candidates in favour of the biggest non-RN party. Some LFI leaders have suggested they will do the same but have not specified whether this includes contests where their candidates have got 12.5% or more and could therefore compete in a second-round triangular contest.

Further complications have arisen in five seats when Jean-Luc Mélenchon—who is a centralist leader who does not tolerate much dissent—decided to drop well-known LFI dissidents from the slate. A number of the dissidents are going to stand anyway, and in some cases are being supported by the local CP and SP branches, and other NPF parties. This has led to LFI retaliation as they put up candidates against CP or SP candidates in neighbouring seats.

The revolutionary group, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), immediately responded positively to the call for the NPF. It has been assigned a candidate in the area near Carcassonne in the Aude area. Philippe Poutou, ex-car worker and currently a councillor in Bordeaux, is standing. However, since the moderate PS has condemned the NPA's principled position on Palestine solidarity, it is putting up one of their local people against Poutou. A report in the *Mediapart* newsletter said that Poutou had received a favourable response from the local activists of the other NPF parties. The NPA recognises in any case that the electoral campaign is also about building and preparing a network of activists for the struggles and challenges following the election.

Internal Tensions

Another source of tension inside the front—which is obviously fanned by Macron and the mainstream media—is the discussion of who would be the NPF nomination for prime minister. Normally you would expect this to be a leader from the current within the NPF which scored the highest percentage vote. This might well be the LFI, which is currently the left party with the most MPs and so could be Jean-Luc Mélenchon (JLM). The latter says he does not want to impose himself but neither sees why he should exclude himself.

All the other main currents are critical of JLM becoming the premier. They say he is divisive with his criticisms of the police, of Israel, and his rather campist line on Ukraine. According to them, he loses votes in the centre even if he can galvanise the ethnic minority and working class in the big cities. His critics use the polls generated by the mainstream media 'proving' he is not a unifier and that he antagonises people. Ageing big beasts from the SP, like ex-prime minister Lionel Jospin and ex-president François Hollande (who directly opened the door to Macron), have both been wheeled out of retirement to join this anti-JLM chorus.

The main line of Macron echoes the PS. He rails against the two 'extremes' of Le Pen and LFI. His people even go so far as to say they both feed off each other. Macron melodramatically said yesterday that this could lead to civil war. He hopes to recreate a centre that his own divisive policies on increasing the pension age and cutting public spending have destroyed. It will be difficult for Macron to simultaneously call for people from the 'left family' to rally around him while eviscerating the NPF's social and economic programme.

On the mainstream right, Macron's bomb fragmented rather than brought together the different tendencies. The Republicans (LR) leader, Ciotti, unilaterally declared for an alliance with the post-fascist Le Pen. His action led to an

internal rebellion which descended into farce as he locked himself in his HQ offices to prevent the Political Bureau majority coming in to vote him out. The end result is there will be dozens of constituencies where the RN and Ciotti's remaining supporters will be standing on one slate. Consequently, Macron's hope for a stronger score from potential coalition supporters among the LR mainstream right wing has been quashed. We should also not exclude a further splintering of the LR if the RN do well in the election – an Italian solution with a coalition between the so-called mainstream right and the post-fascists could still be an option. Certain sectors of the French establishment are already tempted to throw their lot in with Le Pen – bringing some or all of the LR in would help this process.

Even further right than Le Pen, we have the neo-fascist Zemmour, Reconquete (Reconquest) current, which got 5.5% in the Euro elections. Head of their slate was Marion Maréchal, a niece of Le Pen, who ran back to Auntie, assuming that the far-right would have a united slate in the parliamentary elections (if you added their Euro scores we are at 37%). Zemmour has rebuffed this plan, but it looks likely that whatever he says, his votes will go over to Le Pen.

Jordan Bardella, who successfully led the RN to 31% and victory in the Euro elections, is heading up the RN parliamentary election campaign as the presumptive PM if they win. Only 28 years old, he represents the success of Le Pen's long-term work to remodel her political current. Smartly dressed, a smooth communicator, and up-to-date on social media, Bardella is the modern face of post-fascist authoritarianism. Le Pen has gained support among younger voters. He is the epitome of what the French call *dédiabolisation* – de-demonization. She wants to make it more difficult for Macron to wave the scarecrow of her anti-republican and fascist values each time he wants to get elected.

Listening to Bardella outline the manifesto yesterday, you can see how on a lot of economic policies the RN are not so different to Macron. They no longer shout against the EU. On the pension issue, they reject the Macron reform but support a return to 60 years only if you start work at 20 and have 40 years of contributions; otherwise, it is 62 with 42 years of contributions. He also put forward, like Farage, plans to take lower-paid workers out of taxation altogether. The RN has to manage its base that includes many workers, particularly in ex-industrial zones, the smaller towns, and rural areas. There are plenty of anti-migrant measures built around the ideology of 'la priorité nationale' (French people first). Thirty-five anti-poverty organisations have denounced this and vowed to reject any sort of categorisation like that in their work.

Following this logic, he said people with dual nationality would be barred from a number of sensitive posts in the state sector. There are 3.5 million people with dual nationality in France and commentators assumed that even street cleaners might be affected. Le Pen stepped in to clarify, talking about security and defence posts. But the overall mood music basically turns French citizens into first and second class categories. Repressive legislation to ban radical groups of 'left and right' was also put forward. Already the NPA has been legally accused by the government of covering for terrorism for its principled position of critical but unconditional support for the Palestinian resistance. Ironically, for a group set up by a known antisemite Jean-Marie Le Pen, Bardella fiercely defended the Zionist state, saying that to recognise Palestine would be to recognise terrorism.

On the other hand, the NPF has a programme of action that would defend working living standards and provide a stimulus to further action and mobilisation. Over three years it has a spending budget of 108 billion euros which highlights how limited the Labour budget for change is. Someone has forgotten to tell the French Left that tax and spend is so old hat, so last year, and not a means to change. The position on both Gaza and Ukraine is good – it condemns the Russian invasion and supports the Ukrainian resistance, including sending arms. LGBT+ rights are defended and extended. Macron has criticised its positive policy towards trans people – 'the left are saying you can drop into your local town hall and change your sex'. SOS Homophobie has responded by saying that Macron is stirring up transphobia in order to attack the programmes of his political opponents. His strategy is to opportunistically use attacks on minorities in order to cling on to power. Mélenchon stated that Macron's comments were 'unworthy' of a serious politician.

Stopping Le Pen with the New Popular Front

Unsurprisingly, the MEDEF – the French bosses association – has condemned the NPF economic programme but for some sort of balance also criticised the RN. It raises the usual spectre of capitalist investors leaving France and taxes going up.

On the Saturday following the formation of the NPF, over 250,000 people, according to official estimates, demonstrated across France in its support. The main trade union confederation, the CGT, has called for a vote for the NPF – a rare occurrence in France. Well-known Black footballers like attacker Thuram, currently playing at the Euros for France, have called for a vote against the RN. Mbappé has supported Thuram too, although he talked of rejecting the ‘extremes’ rather than identifying the RN.

Certain radical left groups like Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Fight) and a sectarian split from the NPA, NPA-R, have refused to support the NPF and are standing candidates. They denounce the alliance as reformist and repeat the need to build the revolutionary party today through independent electoral intervention. They only look at one side of the 1936 Popular Front claiming its moderation led the way to fascism. Given the dynamic of the situation and the serious consequences of an RN victory, they appear not to grasp the stakes involved in the current situation. They minimise the demoralisation caused by the defeats suffered by the labour movement and overestimate the potential for spontaneous struggles today outside the framework of the traditional workers’ organisations.

The NPF does not just have an electoral dimension as the street demonstrations show. Leading members of the NPF like the Green, Sandrine Rousseau, have stated that if the RN win then the NPF should continue to build resistance at every level of society. Inside the NPF, it has been perfectly possible for the NPA to raise its anti-capitalist programme as well as building united actions in the communities and workplaces. By setting themselves apart from the current of unity against the RN, they are marginalising themselves from the most advanced and militant sections of the class. Putting up separate candidates to help their particular party-building project is getting things entirely the wrong way round. Above all, it minimises the political consequences of an RN victory on the very workplace and street struggles it so extolls.

25 June 2024

Source: [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.