

Political lessons of the French elections

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The cycle of presidential and legislative elections this Spring in France has culminated in the disintegration of the Socialist Party (PS) and the election of Emmanuel Macron and an absolute majority in the National Assembly favorable to his government.

Macron, who served as economy minister in the government of PS president François Hollande, is backing Berlin's bid to build the European Union (EU) as a strategic and military rival of US imperialism. The domestic basis of European imperialism's ambitions overseas is to be a ruthless war on the working class. Macron's government, drawn from the PS and the bourgeois right, is planning a series of unilateral decrees that will intensify the PS government's reactionary labor law reforms and institute a permanent state of emergency.

This outcome is a devastating exposure of the bankruptcy of all the organizations in the so-called French left that broke from Trotskyism, who bear principal responsibility for Macron's ability to profit from the discrediting of the austerity and war policies of Hollande and the PS. Time and time again during the last quarter-century, workers in France reacted sharply against these attacks—with mass strikes in 1995, 2003, 2010, and 2016. The working class gave these organizations millions of votes in 2002 and this year, but still they proved incapable of advancing any alternative.

They did not orient to building a revolutionary party in the working class as an alternative to the Socialist Party, but worked time and again to turn workers back behind it. In 2002, *Lutte ouvrière* (Workers Struggle, LO) and the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR) received collectively 3 million votes in an election that led to the elimination of PS candidate Lionel Jospin and a run-off between the conservative Jacques Chirac and neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. Then, the LO and LCR fell in line with the PS campaign for a Chirac vote.

While the LCR endorsed Chirac after back-channel talks with the PS, LO called for abstention while making clear that it “understood” a Chirac vote, which was where its sympathies lay.

In the face of all these opportunities, they refused to use any of their gains to build an independent political force in the working class. Instead, their alignment to the PS and Chirac gave Le Pen's National Front (FN) an opening to pose as the only opposition to austerity in France. They then used the growth of the FN to justify a capitulation to Macron in 2017, along the same lines as in 2002.

In the final weeks of the presidential elections, Mélenchon doubled his support in the polls, eventually getting 7 million voters, after criticizing US air strikes on Syria and the EU's policy of allowing refugees to drown in the Mediterranean. In the run-off between Macron and FN candidate Marine Le Pen, Mélenchon refused to take a position, ignoring a consultative vote of *La France insoumise* (Unsubmissive France) supporters that showed a two-thirds majority in support of blank or spoiled ballots to protest Macron's right-wing policies. He also stressed that he “understood” those who voted for Macron against Le Pen.

Each of these tendencies—from LO to the LCR (today the New Anti-capitalist Party, NPA) and Mélenchon, who began his career in the former *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI) of Pierre Lambert—trace their political origins to a break with Trotskyism. This found expression in unrestrained petty-bourgeois opportunism and capitulation to the bourgeois state.

The OCI broke with the ICFI and with Trotskyism in 1971, to join the preparations later that year to found the PS. Rejecting the struggle for the political independence of the working class, it sought to orient the workers to building a Union of the Left around the Socialist Party, a reactionary party of finance capital.

The OCI sent its members into the PS—one of whom, Lionel Jospin, became prime minister.

As for the LCR/NPA tendency, which rejected the basic principles of Trotskyism during its 1953 split with the ICFI, it formally renounced its purely symbolic and verbal attachment to Trotsky in 2009. It founded the New Anti-capitalist Party on a non-Trotskyist basis, proposing to build the NPA as a “broad left” coalition party open to PS members.

Mélenchon expressed perhaps most crudely the anti-Marxist conceptions that prevail in these circles. Proclaiming that the discrediting of the PS meant the end of socialism and the left, he proclaimed in his book *The Era of the People* that the working class would no longer play an independent political role, and that socialist revolution would be replaced by “citizens’ revolution.” The first stage of this “citizens’ revolution,” in the event, was to assist Macron’s plans for social counter-revolution.

This policy, which objectively served the attempts of the ruling class to block working-class opposition, was theoretically grounded in various forms of pseudo-Marxism promoted by the layer of the French academic petty bourgeoisie that plays a leading role these political parties. France provided a testing ground for these tendencies and their anti-Marxist theories.

Every theoretical tendency of the pseudo-left—from the state-capitalist writers Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, to the post-structuralist Michel Foucault, or the ex-Maoist postmodernists Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière—contributed its drop of poison to the campaign against Marxism. These included Jean-François Lyotard’s 1979 nostrums on the end of history and the “death of meta-narratives,” to Derrida’s 1993 declaration in *Specters of Marx* that Marxism had to give way to “pseudo-Marxism.”

The worth of these theories was best evaluated, if unwittingly, by Badiou, who wrote a 2013 essay titled “Our contemporary impotence” on the EU’s campaign of austerity against the Greek people.

“I have neither the capacity nor the intention of solving any of the problems that currently beset the Greek people,” Badiou declared. “My subjectivity here is therefore broadly external to the sequence in question. I will accept the limits of this position, and begin with a feeling, an affect, which is perhaps personal, perhaps unjustified, but which I nevertheless

feel, given the information at my disposal: a feeling of general political impotence.”

On the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution, as the PS collapses and renewed struggles by the working class against Macron are on the horizon, the lessons of this experience must be drawn. These forces, whose impotence is rooted in hostile class interests and their rejection of Marxism, will only organize defeats. The only way forward is the revolutionary road, returning to the traditions of classical Marxism and of Trotskyism, and to the great titans of revolutionary Marxism: Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky.

Winning the working class, in France and internationally, to this program is the task of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its French section, the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES).

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