

Another View on the 2024 French Legislative Elections

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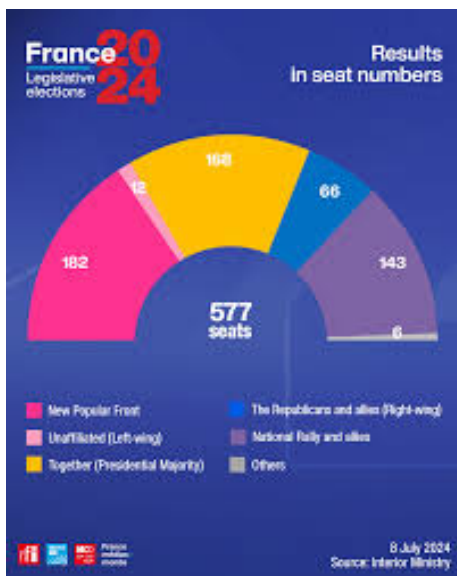


Chart from France 24

The absence of working-class parties in the US makes the 2024 elections here different from the 2024 legislative elections in France. But the French vote confirms what we see here: Elections do little to slow the rightward drift of capitalist politics. Mass action is needed.

Left enthusiasts for the results of the French elections rightly celebrate the electoral defeat of the Rassemblement National (RN) and the placement of the Nouveau Front populaire (NFP) ahead of Ensemble, the governing coalition of President Emmanuel Macron. But Marxists need to confront the problem that the elections open no way forward for the working class.

Popular vote

Left enthusiasts focus on the number of seats the four main electoral blocs won. The popular vote is more revealing. Here's a summary of the results, in order of the popular vote:

Rassemblement National (RN)

10,647,914 votes (33.21%) 1st round

10,109,044 votes (37.06%) 2nd round

142 seats

Nouveau Front populaire (NFP)

9,042,485 votes (28.21%) 1st round

7,039,429 votes (25.80%) 2nd round

180 seats

Ensemble

6,820,446 votes (21.28%) 1st round

6,691,619 votes (24.53%) 2nd round

159 seats

Les Républicains (LR, the traditional center-right)

2,106,166 votes (6.57%) 1st round

1,474,650 votes (5.41%) 2nd round

39 seats

Compared with the results of the participating parties in the two rounds of the 2022 legislative elections, the RN gained 12.92 million votes, the NFP gained 3.69 million votes, Ensemble lost 0.35 million votes, and LR lost 0.5 million votes.

The main story is the RN's advance, not an NFP victory.

Parliamentary impasse

The results show the electoral strength of the NP and the NFP, but neither has enough deputies and allies to form a government. Only Ensemble has a path to forming a government.

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal tendered his resignation after Ensemble lost its working majority in the National Assembly. President Macron asked Attal to stay on until a new government could be formed. If none can be formed, Macron will presumably appoint a caretaker government.

The NFP is an electoral bloc of La France Insoumise (LFI), the Parti socialiste (PS), the Parti communiste français (PCF), and Les Écologistes (Greens). LFI, led by former PS minister Jean-Luc

Mélenchon, is on the left of the bloc. The PS and the Greens are on the right. The bloc proposes modest reforms that would benefit the working class but not challenge French capitalism.

Macron hopes to detach the PS and the Greens from the NFP with the offer of ministries. This could work. The previous incarnation of the NFP bloc, the Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale (NUPES), came together for the 2022 elections and fell apart in October 2023, when the PS declared a “moratorium” on participation over the refusal of NUPES to condemn Hamas.

Ensemble, allied with the PS, the Greens, and LR, would have a majority in the National Assembly. Macron could use the presence of LR to reject demands from the PS and the Greens, and their presence to reject demands from LR.

With or without a new parliamentary majority, the 2024 elections are likely to mean a continuation of Macron’s anti-working-class policies, unless those policies are countered with mass action.

Nouveau Front populaire

The NFP is the fourth time around for the bloc. In 1981, François Mitterrand of the PS was elected president with second-round support from the PCF and the Greens.

Mitterrand ran on a platform of resisting the neoliberal turn of Britain under Margaret Thatcher and the US under Ronald Reagan. Instead, his fifteen-year presidency saw France swept by the neoliberal tide.

The bloc’s second incarnation was the Gauche Plurielle, which governed France from 1997 to 2002. Again, the bloc promised resistance to neoliberalism and failed to deliver.

The bloc’s parties were in electoral exile until the 2022 legislative elections, when NUPES came in second, behind Ensemble. NUPES fell apart in 2023 and re-formed as the NFP in 2024.

The NFP does not challenge French capitalism and imperialism. A surprise victory and a reprieve from the RN, an article by NFP supporter Léon Crémieux republished in *International Viewpoint*, summarizes the NFP platform as follows:

The NFP said that if it were able to form a government, its first decisions would be to raise the minimum wage (SMIC) from 1400 to 1600 euros net, increase civil servants’ wages by 10%, index wages to prices, repeal the pension reform and increased retirement age of 64 imposed by Macron a year ago, introduce a freeze on essential prices, and increase housing benefit by 10%. This would obviously be a positive step.

A positive step, yes. If the NFP were able to form a government, which it isn’t, and if it implemented its program, which its predecessors’ record suggests is doubtful.

The victory in the elections is that 63-67% of voters rejected the RN, and 26-28% voted for candidates they perceived as anti-neoliberal, not any practical results likely to come from the NFP vote. Marxists should say this.

Revolutionary candidates

Left enthusiasts for the French results tend to be hostile toward the revolutionary socialists who ran against the NFP in the first round of the elections, even if they critically supported NFP candidates in the second round, as some did.

For background, the NPA was formed in 2009 with 9,200 members. Almost immediately, it began to fragment over policy toward Mélenchon's various political incarnations. The four main fragments of the NPA are, in order of split date, Ensemble! (2012, the exclamation point distinguishing it from Macron's Ensemble), Révolution permanente (RP, 2021), the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste - L'Anticapitaliste (NPA-A, 2022), and the NPA-Révolutionnaire (NPA-R, 2022). Ensemble!, the NPA-A, and the NPA-R include members of the Fourth International (FI). RP is the French section of the Fracción Trotskista - Cuarta Internacional (FT-CI), whose US affiliate is Left Voice.

Ensemble! is part of Mélenchon's LFI. I don't know whether it was allowed any candidates in the 2024 elections. The NPA-A joined the NFP and was allowed one candidate, Philippe Poutou, in a district he couldn't win. RP ran one candidate. The NPA-R ran 30. Lutte Ouvrière (LO) ran 550.

Marxists have had a policy of running candidates in capitalist elections from the beginning of our movement. As Marx and Engels explained in the 1850 Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League:

Here the proletariat must take care: 1) that by sharp practices local authorities and government commissioners do not, under any pretext whatsoever, exclude any section of workers; 2) that workers' candidates are nominated everywhere in opposition to bourgeois-democratic candidates. As far as possible they should be League members and their election should be pursued by all possible means. Even where there is no prospect of achieving their election the workers must put up their own candidates to preserve their independence, to gauge their own strength and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention. They must not be led astray by the empty phrases of the democrats, who will maintain that the workers' candidates will split the democratic party and offer the forces of reaction the chance of victory. All such talk means, in the final analysis, that the proletariat is to be swindled. The progress which the proletarian party will make by operating independently in this way is infinitely more important than the disadvantages resulting from the presence of a few reactionaries in the representative body.

As the "1850 Address" further explains, revolutionaries should run on what the Third and Fourth Internationals called transitional demands. In the French elections, these would start from immediate demands like raising wages and lowering the retirement age, and extend to demands challenging French capitalism and imperialism, including nationalizations, open borders, abolishing NATO, French demilitarization, and freedom for Kanaky (New Caledonia). The anticapitalist and anti-imperialist demands would be largely educational for now, but they would show the way forward to workers' power and a workers' government.

In my view, the NPA-R, RP, and LO were correct to run candidates in the first round of the 2024 French legislative elections as a way to present their views, even though they had no chance to win.

Revolutionary socialists should have supported the NPA-R, RP, and LO candidates, as well as Poutou, saying they would support the candidates of the NFP in the second round. The latter both to help block the RN from gaining a majority in the National Assembly and to reach the workers and youth supporting the NFP.

With the elections over, revolutionaries should turn to the trade unions and the movements to build the mass resistance needed to reverse the continuing rightward drift of capitalist politics.