

France: We Need a Popular Front Based on the Social Movements

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In the recent elections to the European Parliament, the far-right National Rally (RN) did so well in France that French President Emmanuel Macron decided for some incomprehensible reason to call snap elections to the French parliament, elections that could change the dominant party in the government. In the first-round elections held on June 30, the RN almost doubled its previous total, receiving 33% of the votes. But in only 76 constituencies out of 577 did a party win an absolute majority, so the remaining 501 will be determined in another round on Sunday, which will pit the top two candidates in that constituency, as well as any candidate with more than 12.5% of the total number of registered voters. About 300 constituencies are facing potential three-way races. Jean-Luc Melanchon, the leader of the left New Popular Front alliance, which placed second in the first round with 28% of the vote, has pledged that the left would stand down in any district where it placed third. On the other hand, some of Macron's centrists, who got only 21% in the first round, have been telling their supporters to reject both the right and Melanchon's France Unbowed, the largest of the left parties. The following article puts the second-round election in the broader context not only of parties but of the social movements. – Eds.

The results of the 1st round of the French legislative elections have disappointed those of us who were hoping for a miracle. However, the polls conducted the day after the European elections gave 35% to the National Rally (RN) and 25% to the New Popular Front (NFP). After three weeks of campaigning, the gap has narrowed to 33.1% for the RN and its allies and 28.0% for the NFP. The gap has thus been reduced from 10 to 5 points. The count is certainly not there yet, but a dynamic is underway.

With a view to the 2nd round next Sunday, we must not give up on a possible victory for the NFP, in particular by trying to mobilize the 33% of abstentions – and among them the 43% of young people aged 18 to 24, whose age group voted 48% for the NFP. However, it must be admitted that a relative majority for the NFP is very unlikely today, given the data from the first round.

Preventing an absolute majority for the RN

On the other hand, it is still possible to prevent the RN from winning an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly, although this will not be an easy task. Indeed, the demonization of the NFP by the Macronist right (20.0% of the vote) and the Republicans (6.6%), as well as by most of the media, makes it more difficult for their candidates to withdraw and transfer their votes to the NFP when they come third.

This objective is not comparable to that of electing Macron to defeat Marine Le Pen in the second round of the 2022 presidential elections, firstly because a victory for the RN was unlikely then, but also because a second Macron presidency could only prepare the RN wave that we are witnessing. Today, the challenge is to prevent the far right, on the verge of power, from taking control of the state apparatus and using it to its advantage.

The results of this 1st round are a wake-up call for the left. The RN won 9.3 million votes (10.6 million with its allies). 57% of the blue-collar workers and 44% of the white-collar workers voted for the extreme right. This thunderclap, which had been widely announced, must lead the popular and democratic forces of the left to unite in order to fight the evil at its roots. It's five minutes to midnight!

What responsibilities?

There is no need to recall the responsibilities of the "left" governments, which have not stopped pursuing right-wing policies since the 1980s. But the radical left must also question its inability to build a broad political force, outside the electoral period, beyond the big cities, rooted in the working class and democratically organized on the ground.

It is not enough to proclaim the New Popular Front to win back the hearts of those who have felt abandoned by the left for several decades. But its programme must outline a horizon of expectations capable of capturing the minds of the broad masses. To do this, it must defend economic and social justice through concrete measures, including the restoration and expansion of public services and social security. These have been sacrificed by the neo-liberal policies of austerity and privatization, which are causing an explosion of social inequality and social exclusion.

How can we fail to understand that a growing number of modest people today consider it more realistic, in the absence of any prospect of a break with the order of things, to exclude immigrants from an ever-diminishing redistribution of social benefits than to tax the profits and wealth of the capitalists more heavily?

Left counter-populism

Etienne Balibar has recently proposed some ways of transforming the New Popular Front from a desirable virtuality into a concrete instrument of repoliticization and to the rebuild a "people of the left". To do this, he conceives of it as a "counter-populism" based on the self-activity of large sectors of society, whereas far-right populism relies on the passivity of the people and the following of leaders.

What can be done? He suggests starting with the main social movements that have shaken French society from below in recent years. If they have been more or less stifled, they have not been destroyed. Of course, they cannot be reduced to homogeneous social groups or ideologies, but their strength lies in the fact that they were "popular", by embodying in struggle the demands of the situation and the moment.

Offensive struggles that show the way

What are these movements?

- 1) "Nuit debout", in 2016, combining the defense of workers' rights against the Hollande-Valls law and the demand for participatory democracy.
- 2) The "yellow jackets", in 2018-19, combining the defense of purchasing power, the symbolic occupation of territory and democratic aspirations (demand for a referendum by popular initiative).
- 3) The mobilizations of care and social workers in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, against the lack of resources for basic public services, supported by large sections of the population.
- 4) The revolts in the suburbs against institutional racism and police violence, which affected the whole country in June 2023 and are being extended by forms of self-organization in the neighborhoods.
- 5) The mass movement against the pension reform, in January-March 2023, which mobilized the whole country and contributed to the reconstruction of an inter-trade union that gave voice to the class struggle.
- 6) The "Earth Uprisings" and other mobilizations against the exploitation of land and the depletion of groundwater for intensive agriculture, which are the main ferment of internationalism in today's world.
- 7) Feminist movements that are not reducible to MeToo, even if this issue has revealed the importance of the fight against incest, rape and virilistic brutality for all women today.

For my part, I would add the movement in solidarity with the Palestinian people, led by numerous self-organized grassroots collectives, which combines the fight against racism in France with international anti-colonial solidarity.

The movement from below to overturn the status quo

These movements, although certainly heterogeneous, have in common the ability to go from the defensive to the offensive and to transform anger or despair "into the affirmation of a right, solidarity and the desire to transform the 'world' towards equality and justice". Each of them, in its own way, draws "a concrete utopia without which there is no emancipatory politics" (Balibar).

The constitution of a united social front presupposes the lived perception that the demands of each of these movements have a universal scope because they respond to common causes. But this perception can only be achieved through the shared experience of many activists on several of these fronts, through their mutual exchange, as well as through their meeting shoulder to shoulder in the context of the broadest mobilisations, such as the one in defence of pensions.

In this context, more than ever, the anti-capitalist left must reject abstract slogans and sectarian constructions, seeking to defend a set of demands that start from the essential concerns of the social sectors in struggle, to propose unifying responses that break with the logic of capital and the bourgeois state. To form a popular front with the social movement is to support, to paraphrase Marx, the movement of those at the bottom that abolishes the current state of affairs.