

The French Election

June 10, 2017



The good news this May was that French voters rejected far-right Marine Le Pen by a two-to-one margin in the second round of the Presidential election.

The bad news was that France ended up electing Emanuel Macron, an efficient technocrat who consciously incarnates French capital's need to eliminate the "French exception" and level the wages, rights and benefits of the French common people down to the average of the European Union (which includes Romania and Bulgaria).

Faced with Macron's calmly-worded, reasonable, deliberately transparent class war agenda, it should be obvious that France needs a united Left of parties, unions, social movements and local associations to oppose it - the June during the legislative elections and later in the streets. Such a powerful coalition from below came together spontaneously against Macron/Hollande's pro-business Labor Law during the "hot" Spring of 2016, which included strikes, blockades, occupations and all-night discussions. Where is it now?

The Divided Left

Alas, more bad news: the French Left today is totally divided, splintered as never before. As I reported last month after May Day, the labor unions couldn't even agree to march together. This Sunday, June 11, French voters will face the first round of elections to the 577-seat National Assembly. These elections will decide whether President Macron will have a legislative majority with which to govern unopposed, and the opposition parties seem hopelessly divided.

Last week I watched a young, idealistic Communist Party candidate practically in tears at a *Médiapart* round-table as he told how at least four Leftist Parties were competing against each other in the first round in his popular Paris district. This Communist candidate was heartbroken because during the Presidential election, his Party had supported Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *Unbowed* coalition with all its strength, and now Mélanchon had sent an *Unbowed* candidate into his district to compete with him in the legislative election. A fratricidal stab in the back! Why?

Historically, in multi-party systems, Left parties negotiate alliances and coalitions so as to agree on a single candidate, presumably a strong one, in each local district so as to maximise the chance of winning nationally. Each party in the alliance gets assigned a certain number of prospective seats in the National Assembly in proportion to its size - subject to much haggling and horse-trading. Some negotiations between Mélanchon and the Communists were held last month, but apparently they broke down early. This, in spite of the fact that Mélenchon had previously headed the "Left Front," a coalition including the Communists and his own "Left Party" (a 2008 left split from the Socialists).

Alas, as so often happens in party politics, control trumped goal. The Communists, who still have Representatives in the Chamber and control local offices in many districts, wanted to protect their turf. Mélenchon wants to dominate the Left through his *Unbowed* movement.

Mélenchon's strategy, based on strength of the 20% of the electorate that voted for him in the Presidentials, is apparently to run candidates in every possible district with the goal of winning an (unlikely) parliamentary majority. Under the Constitution of the Gaullist Vth French Republic, this would oblige President Macron to appoint Mélenchon Prime Minister (an arrangement known as "cohabitation") and share power. In Sunday's first round *Unbowed* candidates who get 20% of the votes would theoretically place into the second round in a field where the Right is also splintered. Along with Macron's handpicked "new faces" running for *En Marche*, there are also several traditional conservative parties and of course the far-right proto-fascist National Front that won a third of the votes in May's Presidential election.

Thus, according to Mélenchon's strategy, the *Unbowed* candidates could conceivably beat the Macronistas and the Le Penites and end up with a majority in the second round, automatically making him Prime Minister. On the other hand, the more the Left field is crowded, the greater the chance of a repeat of the Presidentials: Macron's *En Marche* facing off against the National Front in the second round, giving Macron an easy majority and marginalizing the Left for the next five years. This would be the tragic consequence of Left disunity based on turf wars and the party politics of control-trumps-goal.

On the other hand, even in the minority, Mélenchon's *Unbowed* group would emerge as the hegemonic organization of the Left for the next five years, well placed for the next elections in 2022. There is not much competition left. The electorate of the Communist Party, despite its hold on office and ties to the CGT labor union, has shrunk to not much bigger than the "Trotskyist" *New Anti-Capitalist Party* (part of which has joined the PCF in a coalition called *Ensemble*).

The Socialist Party has also shrunk, having disgraced itself in power. President Hollande, with only 4% approval, didn't even dare run in the primaries, an historical first for an outgoing president. The Socialists' right wing has followed Macron in deserting the sinking ship. The SP's Presidential candidate, a young leftist named Hamon who won the primary, seems a refreshingly sincere and honest social democrat. He is attractive to voters who consider Mélenchon a dangerous demagogue and are suspicious of his apparent support of Putin's annexation of the Crimea and his flirtation with the idea of a FREXIT. Some also remember he supported the invasions of Syria and Libya. So much for the Left!

So Who is Macron?

A brilliant young graduate of France's elite state graduate schools (founded by Napoleon to run his Empire) with a successful career in banking (*chez* Rothschild, where else?) and public administration, Emmanuel Macron is well read on nearly every subject and totally confident of his competence and right to rule. He coolly showed himself a statesman last week castigating Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords. Speaking in elegant, charmingly accented English (a first for a French President) he famously concluded: "Let's make the planet great again." Macron's government is made of neo-liberal technocrats, half of them women. Unlike the usual political hacks, his ministers are younger, more dynamic, more diverse - fresh political faces recruited directly out of the economic establishment like Macron himself. This is a new broom eager to sweep clean, so watch out.

As a candidate Macron had made his program absolutely clear. He is pledged to strip French workers of what remains of their on-the-job rights and protections by further expanding the pro-

business Labor Law - a "reform" he helped impose while Economics Minister in the neoliberal government of his predecessor, the unpopular Socialist Hollande. However, even if Macron does not win a majority on June 18 in the second round of the Legislatives, he is pledged to impose his neo-liberal class-war program by Decree. That's how Hollande's Socialist government "passed" its pro-employer labor reform last summer after a very hot spring of strikes, blockades, mammoth demonstrations and opposition from many Socialists in the Chamber. (Please see my "The French Stand up.")

Macron is also pledged to another anti-worker "reform": the downgrading of France's wonderful post-WWII Social Security system which includes healthcare, unemployment insurance, retirement, minimum survival income, housing subsidies and welfare for the poor. The *Sécu*, as it is known, was created after WWII by workers' organizations coming out of the Resistance, when the de Gaulle government depended on Communist support to stay in power and the French industrialists were in disgrace for their vile collaboration with the Nazis during the Occupation. The idea of the "social wage" - in addition to the salary - was enshrined in France's post-war Constitution.

The *Sécu* remained a self-governing non-state national institution even after de Gaulle placed business representatives on the board to undermine it. Today, the government votes on its budget. As for unemployment insurance, which is governed, by a bi-part commission of unions and employers, Macron would put the state in charge, with budgetary powers. The impact of these "reforms" will be to break up the semi-autonomous *Sécu* and turn its functions over to the state. These "reforms" will allegedly rationalize the system and reduce costs, but in fact they are designed to progressively shrink the social safety net that has made 'the French exception' so popular. A grim prospect for average French people and lovers of France's quality of life.

Last week, researching this article, I asked my neighbor, a poised, well-educated young mother from a good local family, to explain the intricacies of French electoral system to me. When the truth finally dawned on me that with the Left divided there is very little hope left for Social Security and fair labor laws, I blurted out: "Then what will the French people do?" She calmly replied: "Why go down into the streets and throw the bastards out! We're good at that."

Since Summer Vacation is the true God worshipped by the French, this battle will not take place until next September. If anything interesting happens meanwhile, I'll keep you posted.