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France:

# Front de gauche: and now?

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**One of the striking events of the 2012 French presidential election was the campaign of the Front de Gauche and Jean-Luc Mélenchon: tens of thousands of participants at its meetings, a significant place in the political debate and 11.01% of the vote in the first round, a notable score.**

Certainly the Front de gauche leaders had hoped for a result of more than 15% and above all third place ahead of Front national leader Marine Le Pen. But going from the 5% which had been predicted for them in the polls at the beginning of the campaign to 11%, they have succeeded in dominating the space of the “radical left” and marginalising the revolutionary left.

## A real dynamic

During this campaign a left reformist political force of mass influence has been reconstructed. This is the result of several factors:

- A situation, marked by social defeats, which favours the aspiration and the illusion that “what is blocked by struggle can be unblocked by the election”.
- The remobilisation of the forces of the Communist parties (also seen in Portugal, Spain and Greece), resting on the fact that they have not been in government for some years and that they have preserved positions in the apparatuses of the institutions or trade union organisations.
- A good campaign by Mélenchon. Defending radical objectives, such as a minimum wage of 1,700 euros or the defence of public services, his speeches invoked the revolutionary imagination of the texts of Victor Hugo and the most glorious moments of the workers’ movement. This alchemy unleashed a political dynamic beyond the parties of the Front de gauche. A campaign which was all the more noteworthy in that it came as a counterpoint to that of François Hollande which was especially dull (to put it mildly).

## Ambiguities and contradictions

Mélenchon's impressive campaign was however heavy with ambiguities and contradictions which justified the NPA's independent campaign. The NPA and the Front de gauche shared common positions on such themes as social issues (wages, employment, defence of public services) or democratic demands (proportional representation or defence of the rights of immigrants). The two organisations are united in their opposition to the Front national. On the other hand, other issues divide them sharply: on nuclear energy, there is a major disagreement between the NPA and the PCF leadership, attached by numerous links to the French nuclear industry.

We share then overall common objectives, and the dynamic around the Front de gauche campaign opens new political possibilities, for their realisation. However, in terms of engaging in a serious struggle and obtaining the implementation of our demands, the PCF and Jean -Luc Mélenchon reject confrontation with the power of the capitalists. They denounce finance, not capitalist ownership. They demand a public banking sector but reject the expropriation of the banks and their nationalisation under social control, preferring to see the private and public banking sectors compete. They denounce the scandal of the debt but reject its cancellation. Mélenchon proposes a repayment of the debt over several years, balancing off the sacrifices between the capitalists and the masses. Here again, it is necessary to be consistent. If we participate in a campaign for a citizen's audit, it is to prepare the ground

for the cancellation of the debt, and not its progressive repayment. The leader of the Front de gauche evokes “ecological planning” without indicating the strategic resources necessary to this planning, in particular, the socialisation of the key sectors of the economy, transport, and energy.

On the political and historic level, the reformist orientation of the leadership of the Front de gauche goes hand in hand with the “republican” positions of Mélenchon. Not those of the Communards, who opposed the social republic to the bourgeois classes, but those of republicans who in their defence of the republic merge the terms “nation”, “republic” and “state”. This conception subordinates the “citizen’s revolution” or “revolution by the ballot box” to respect for the institutions of the state of the dominant classes. Mélenchon freely evokes US imperialism, but not French imperialism. During the presidential campaign he reaffirmed “that in the current situation, the nuclear deterrent remains the key element of our strategy of protection”.

Far from being questions of detail, these conceptions are key elements in Mélenchon’s politics – he will do all he can to channel, subordinate, and render compatible the mass movements and the institutions of the republic. These questions also become decisive in discussing strategy and party or political movement.

## What policy towards the Front de gauche?

In relating politically to the Front de gauche, we need to take into account these elements: the dynamic, but also the project; the mobilisation, but also the overall political programme; the renewal of activism but also the policies of the leadership.

Tens of thousands of activists and hundreds of thousands of voters have given a radical, social, democratic content to their vote or participation in the initiatives of the Front de gauche. For them, it is about rejecting the austerity of the right but also the austerity of the left by mobilising together around vital demands like the 1,700 euros, a ban on layoffs, the defence of public services, a regular status for precarious workers in the public sector, the defence of undocumented persons. For our part, we believe it is necessary to go much further than punctual unity of action. Faced with the austerity that a Hollande government prepares for us, we offer the Front de gauche, as well as the others (LO or the alternatives) the construction of a unitary opposition to the government. The NPA is ready for it. And the Front de gauche? This battle is decisive so as not to allow the Front national to take up the banner of the opposition. It is this which must lead us to dialogue, in common action, with the activists and sympathisers of the Front de gauche.

At the same time it should not be forgotten that the Front de gauche is a political construction, led by the PCF and Mélenchon and not a simple united front. This is not a party, is already a political movement. That means all is not decided, questions remain open. It seems at this stage that the leaders of the Front de gauche do not wish to participate in the government. Targeting “the taking of power, all power, within ten years”, Mélenchon rules out participation in a government that he does not lead. The constraints of the crisis are such that the PCF seem to choose a formula of “support without participation”, already used in the past. Tensions could surge between the leadership of the PCF and Mélenchon. Pierre Laurent, national secretary of the PCF, sets as the objective at the parliamentary elections “the election of a left majority in the National Assembly, with the maximum of Front de gauche deputies”. A left majority with the PS? What would the FDG deputies do when the budget of the Hollande government was voted on? What the regional counsellors of the FDG have already done in nearly all regions, aligning with the PS? These questions remain open. To allow common action, an appropriate tactical policy is needed on our part.

None of the hypotheses envisaged by the Front de gauche at this stage challenge its reformist project. Thus, at a

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time when calls are made to join the FDG, including from inside the NPA, we think on the contrary that the organisation of anti-capitalists cannot depend on the tactical evolution of the FDG. To join the Front de gauche is to accept the leadership of the PCF and Mélenchon. To have weight on the political scene, stimulate unitary action and keep all the possibilities of criticism demands an NPA independent of the Front de gauche. The independent organisation of anti-capitalists is not a tactical choice. It is a strategic option which maintains the historic continuity of the revolutionary current. A dual challenge is now posed to the NPA: to resume its construction and set out a unitary policy, in particular in relation to the Front de gauche.