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France

Radical Left Against the Rise of Neo-Fascism

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In this interview Franck Gaudichaud, doctor of Political Science and a militant in the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA - New Anticapitalist Party), examines the political situation opened by the results of the presidential and legislative election in France, particularly the growth of the extreme right, the reconfiguration of the political landscape on the left around Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the challenges the anticapitalist left faces in exploring and expanding the field of possibilities which the new situation presents.

Martín Mosquera: Can you make a general balance of the electoral sequence which takes us from the presidential to the legislative elections?

Franck Gaudichaud: What we can say is that we are facing an acute crisis of the ultra-presidential system of the Fifth Republic in France and that, at the same time, there is an acute political crisis of Macronism, the current main political face of the ruling class and of authoritarian neoliberalism in France. These crises are reflected at the electoral and institutional level, but in a deferred manner with respect to the multiple tensions (social, racial, gender, territorial, ecological, cultural, etc) and the class conflicts which exist deep within Gallic society.

Firstly, it is necessary to underline the extent of abstention, something very important both in the last presidential election and in the legislative ones, although even more so in these: more or less half of the electorate did not show at the polls. Neither the left, nor Macronism, nor the extreme right managed to mobilise massively. We have very high levels of abstention, of more than 60 or 70% in the youth and in the popular sectors. This is a central point for any left perspective, since it is in the popular neighbourhoods, among migrants and young people, that the left should capitalise and continue to grow (and not only at the electoral level). Finally, in the second presidential round, Macron was elected “for the second time” against the extreme right (of Marine Le Pen), with 58% of the vote. But half of his voters (including many on the left) supported him by default, that is, to prevent a victory of the extreme right (stopping fascism at the polls), although in reality they reject the disastrous political balance of Macronism.

A second trend is that the crisis of the presidential coalition is reflected even more clearly in the legislative election and this leads to the fact that, for the first time in twenty years of republican life with a presidential system since 2002 of a five year term, that an elected president does not have an absolute majority in Parliament. Macron's coalition finds itself with a relative majority of 245 seats and, lacking more than forty seats, a long way from reaching an absolute majority... It went from obtaining 33% of the vote in 2017 to less than 26% today : La République En Marche (LREM/The Republic on the Move) - Macron's party - lost half of its seats compared to the previous legislature! This means the opening of many unknowns in the short term and a period of strong institutional instability: the current government of Elisabeth Borne - a former socialist supporter of neoliberal austerity recently appointed as Prime Minister - will have to negotiate each step with the traditional right, perhaps with some members of the social-liberal center and even - as they are already actively doing - seek support (or abstention) from Marine Le Pen in Parliament, giving more space and a position of power to the extreme right. The problem represents a major fissure for Macron, which further reinforces the ultra-presidential drift that the regime has suffered since 2017, without building a solid political apparatus of its own and with a Parliament considered by the power only as a space for validating its managerial directives.

Third lesson: we are witnessing the confirmation of the tripolarisation of the French political sphere and the end of the bourgeois bipartisanship that has dominated the scene since the creation of the Fifth Republic by General De Gaulle in 1958. That is to say, three blocs appeared and the historical parties that have governed France in recent decades, the great parties of the ruling classes up to now, that is, Les Républicains (the traditional right) and the (social-liberal) Parti socialiste (PS/Socialist Party) have almost disappeared from the presidential scene. These two parties have

been totally dispersed, atomised, by this new scenario of tripartition: one of Macron's tasks has been precisely to pulverise these historical parties to reconfigure a neoliberal "extreme center" around himself. However, the PS and the right have shown a certain capacity for resilience in the legislative elections, thanks to their national anchorage and local figures.

A first pole is brought together around Jean-Luc Mélenchon, one pole of the parliamentary left whose center is France Insoumise (FI), a left much more to the left and more radical than the PS, with which it managed to unite for the legislative elections - in an unexpected tactical gesture that owes much to the new weight of FI and to the figure of Mélenchon- and almost all of the various forces of the parliamentary left within NUPES (Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale/ New Popular Ecological and Social Union). A second pole is that of authoritarian neoliberalism around Macron and his coalition called Ensemble. And a third, a pole of the extreme right, with clear neo-fascist tendencies, around Marine Le Pen and other small xenophobic and ultra-conservative groups. It is noteworthy that during the presidential elections we have witnessed the emergence of an even more radical and openly fascist extreme right around the polemicist and former journalist Eric Zemmour, who despite a speech vindicating Marshal Pétain (a Nazi collaborator) managed to gain almost 2.5 million votes, 7% of the votes. Zemmour's radicalism has even contributed to giving Marine Le Pen a slightly more "republican" image and presenting her, to ever broader sectors of the establishment, as a possible governing force.

The great challenge that this political-electoral sequence leaves for the left is to know to what extent it will be possible to build alternatives to both Macronism and an extreme right in full growth and institutionalisation. That is, to create unitary social and political fronts and, at the same time, build non-sectarian anti-capitalist forces in order to face a very complex scenario, in a context of inflation, economic crisis, climatic collapse and bloody armed conflict in the heart of Europe.

MM: What can you tell us about Mélenchon's presidential election, the construction of NUPES and the legislative result of the left?

FG: During the presidential election, the first trend that was confirmed is that the left is at very low levels, around 30/31% of the total vote. Within that percentage, the central axis has been France Insoumise and Mélenchon, who got 22% of the votes, only one point behind Marine Le Pen and the possibility of competing in the second round against Macron. This constitutes another missed opportunity for a clear electoral battle between authoritarian neoliberalism and a left of institutional transformation that proposes advanced reforms. Unfortunately, Mélenchon was defeated again, but he managed to show – beyond his many limits and contradictions – that a discourse of democratic reforms breaking with neoliberalism and racism, with a very active and popular campaign, reclaiming ecological planning and the return of the role of the public state, could defeat the extreme right, marginalise social liberals and threaten the power of Macron and finance capital. As is widely known, the FI and Mélenchon are full of ambiguities and blind spots. The same Mélenchon who for 30 years was the leader of the PS continues, in his numerous speeches, to vindicate part of the tradition of the "governmental left" of François Mitterrand or even that of Lionel Jospin (who brought so many disappointments and betrayals to left-wingers). This is an orientation that in many respects could be described as "national-republican", in particular when referring to the "glorious" role of France in the world (including in its current "colonies"), to the role of the Armed Forces and of "nuclear deterrence" to "build peace in the world", when it mobilises "patriotic" symbols and relies on an understanding of our history that is quite far removed from the tradition of decolonial and anti-imperialist struggle of other sectors of the left. At the same time, FI's programme on essential ecological planning and combating the financialisation of the economy is, without a doubt, one of the most detailed and progressive on the left; as are the rights of women and LGBTQI or in terms of an aggressive tax policy towards large companies and multinationals. During the campaign, Melenchon's opposition to the use of civil nuclear energy, the clear denunciation of police violence and the structural racism of the State and, in particular, Islamophobia, were very advanced for the general level of consciousness in the country and have been a fundamental breath of fresh air in a media camp saturated with xenophobia and prejudice. Melenchon's model is the "revolution at the polls" or "citizens' revolution" – in a certain way, essentially a reform plan "from above" linked to

the demands of civil society. In fact, he is very inspired by the dynamics of Latin American progressive governments: he first approached the processes in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador. Now —with the second progressive wave in the continent— he decided to go on a new "tour" of the continent, particularly through Mexico, Honduras and Colombia, showing his interest in the new governments in power. This is a clear political message also intended for France.

The rest of the left that competed in the presidential election did not allow for unity and it seems to me that in the face of an increasingly threatening extreme right this has been a serious tactical error. We therefore saw EELV (the ecologists) and the Parti communiste (PC/Communist Party) get less than 5%. The PS, the grand party of government since the 1970s, took less than 2%. This is a tremendous collapse! And the revolutionary left, with the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and LO (Lutte Ouvrière/Workers Struggle) competing, proved able to mobilise little or almost nothing at the electoral level, obtaining 0.7 and 0.5% of the votes respectively. Despite this it must be said that the campaign of Philippe Poutou (NPA) was very dynamic and managed to find real sympathy on the left and from certain politicised sectors on the popular and union fringes, for being a worker and anti-capitalist, who does not mince words in front of conservative journalists and bourgeois political leaders. The huge bet, and the tactical and political success of Melénchon, has been the creation of NUPES. It is there that Melénchon forced all the parties of the institutional left to ally for the legislative elections around his programme L'Avenir en commun (the future in common), with some concessions as part of these negotiations, in particular that of constituencies for a dying PS. This meant the unification of the socialists, communists, greens and FI. Obviously, the incorporation of the PS was tactically important at the electoral level for Melénchon because of its country-wide presence. But this had a very high political cost because it is a social-liberal party. What Melénchon managed to do by bringing the PS to its programme of breaking with neoliberalism is something unexpected (and denounced by the old socialist leaders as an unbearable "radicalisation"). But it has not been possible to incorporate the NPA, the anti-capitalists, into that coalition, precisely because the alliance with the center, with the PS, was prioritised and no space was given to the revolutionary left.

In the end the result of the legislative elections was quite disappointing, since NUPES won only 133 seats (30-31% of the votes, 13% of those registered and 6.5 million votes), when the expectation was for much more (the entire world was talking about 200 seats), which was very far from the objective Melénchon set in the campaign of obtaining a majority and imposing a government on Macron. The uninominal ballot system underrepresents the left in the Chamber, where despite achieving a strong presence in the large metropolises and medium-sized cities, does not do so in the countryside. Under a proportional voting system NUPES would have won at least 15 more seats. But, beyond the effect of the electoral system, we can see that it was not possible to widely mobilise young abstentionists and those from the popular classes around the coalition programme of the left. Thus, it can be seen that, in most of the clashes in the second round of the legislative elections between the extreme right and NUPES, the extreme right won...! That is a lesson of great importance and it confirms a danger. In any case, NUPES opens up a perspective for the left, due to the fact that, whereas it had only 17 seats in the previous mandate now it has over 130 seats with more than 70 coming solely from the most radical sector, FI. This opens many avenues to fight against Macron and the extreme right institutionally, from within Parliament. The first weeks confirm this will of the left-wing deputies, although with a certain tendency to seek an audience on social networks rather than to build projects... The challenge is to open up to social movements and union mobilisations, supporting them to confront Macron's combative neoliberal programme and at the same time to reveal the antisocial and racist options of the extreme right.

The question is whether NUPES is really going to maintain that unity or if it was just an tactical electoral option. We already see the first tensions within this space between the social-liberals of the PS, the PC, the environmentalists and FI. Melénchon's proposal to have a unified parliamentary bloc has been rejected by the rest of the coalition's components. So there is an internal tension that translates into possible divisions in the parliamentary work of the left. But they are also differences at the strategic level.

MM: In this scenario what can we expect from Macron's second term?

FG: Effectively, we are entering a period of crisis and instability, beyond Macron's management, of the regime of the Fifth Republic. Macron, who no longer has a majority, is going to be forced to negotiate permanently, in particular with Les Republicains (on the right) - who for the moment have said they would stay in opposition - or with spaces of social liberalism and with the extreme right. Due to its composition the newly appointed government is even more to the right than the previous one and is much weaker, dependent on parliamentary right and on Marine Le Pen's caucus. Several analysts predict a possible dissolution of Parliament and a call for new elections (a power of the president). In parliamentary regimes, such as Germany or Italy, a minority government can govern, forging coalitions. But the Fifth Republic doesn't work like that. It must be understood that the context we are in is that of an acute crisis of legitimacy of the French "republican monarchy". Most European political regimes are parliamentary systems where coalitions are the norm; in France we have an exacerbated presidentialism where in the event of a minority, presidential power enters into crisis. Thus we see the exhaustion of the regime initiated by General De Gaulle in 1962 (which underwent substantial modification in 2002). In addition to that, we should remember the many affaires: embezzlement in the McKinsey case (a private consultant who received millions of euros), accusations of sexual violence against two ministers, the Uber case and influence peddling when Macron was minister of the economy which impacted the world press, etc.

In this context, the promises of the current tenant of the Élysée Palace are more of the same: a continuation of neoliberal violence whose axis is the pension reform, in order to raise the retirement age from 62 to 65 years. That is a very big social regression. With this comes a policy directly aimed at the richest, with tax benefits for large companies and the wealthiest sectors of the country. Macron thus confirms his profile as "President of the ultra-rich", an expression coined by two renowned critical sociologists. Despite his weakness, Macron tries to guarantee the country's capitalists that he will follow the chosen path, in a context of an explosion of public debt with billions of euros injected into the economy by the State during the pandemic crisis (to directly finance companies to enable continuity of employment).

It is most likely is that the institutional crisis will also correspond to a political-social crisis from September, with the reactivation of social and trade union movements around the defense of the public distribution retirement system, but also in the face of the enormous crisis that currently exists in health, where there is no longer the capacity of the public hospital system to respond to the outbreak of the pandemic. Similarly in the education system which teachers "who do not want to live in totally precarious working conditions" are deserting. So we clearly see a weakened power without the ability to respond to the institutional crisis, but with a strong class arrogance, where Macron says only that he is going to prolong his neoliberal reforms and support Ukraine against Putin.

What we see today, then, is a consolidation and expansion of the far-right and neo-fascist vote. Indeed, the result is unexpected for Marine Le Pen and the Rassemblement National (RN/National Rally). The Macronist strategy of choosing the extreme right as its "best adversary" in order to present itself as the last barrier in the democratic struggle, inflating Le Pen to marginalise the radical left, only managed to further consolidate a neo-fascist option in France.

First, we have seen how she managed to reach the second round of the presidential election once more and obtain more than 40% of the votes with more than 13 million votes (remember that the RN had obtained only 4.6 million in 2007). What was not expected, particularly from the left, is its exceptional, historical result in the legislative elections. The extreme right achieved a vote never seen in the history of the Fifth Republic, with more than 3.5 million votes and 89 seats, an enormous result despite the weakness of its local presence. If we compare this with 2017, its presence in Parliament multiplied by 10! This in a context where the electoral system is initially very unfavourable to formations such as the RN. We see its consolidation nationally in the north and southeast of France, in areas where there was strong deindustrialisation, where the Communist Party lost its footing and where now Marine Le Pen is capable of appearing as "the party" of the white working class. Also the RN devastated rural areas, stripping spaces of public services where employment is precarious and scarce. The sociologist Ugo Palheta speaks of the constitution of an ultra-nationalist and cross-class "white bloc" that rejects all class discourse in order to construct an

ultra-nationalist discourse where the enemies are migrants, foreigners and "globalisation", but it also has internal enemies: youth from neighbourhoods of post-colonial migration, Muslims, trade unionists, feminists and the LGBTQI movement. In several regions there is an enormous consolidation, in entire departments, where all the deputies are from Rassemblement National, where there is an enormous rejection of Macronism but also a scenario in which the left is not capable of competing with the RN. So we see a consolidation of an extreme right around an openly anti-immigrant, anti-feminist, racist programme articulated with an in quotes, "social", anti-Macron discourse, where there is a mix of Islamophobia, vindication of the police and their violence, with, at the same time, a rejection of the policy of Macronist social destruction (although its economic programme is, in reality, also ultraliberal, something already confirmed by its first votes in Parliament).

Now, the RN is going to have a huge capacity to politically influence from within Parliament and thanks to the support of Ensemble they have just won the two vice-presidencies of the National Assembly: two neo-fascists in the presidency of the second organ of state power! The party will receive more than 10 million euros per year throughout the mandate. Obviously, we are facing a risk of neo-fascist consolidation, in alliance with other forces at a European level, which will allow the Le Pen dynamic to be cemented with its possible allies in the European extreme right, with a policy regarding the need to unify the right in France but around Marine Le Pen, in the same way that Melénchon tried to unify the left around his own programme. So the immediate anti-democratic danger is there. It is the democratic urgency of the moment "to deny it would simply be political suicide.

Obviously, it is necessary to add to this the international European context, with all that the war in the heart of Europe signifies, an ongoing tragedy with hundreds of thousands of dead and the flight of millions of people from Ukraine to Western Europe. Macron, who recently assumed the rotating presidency of the European Council, tried to present himself as a war chief and great diplomat, but above all we see his impotence and his alignment with NATO, without real proposals and without alternatives to seriously defend the right to self-determination of the Ukrainian people in the face of Putin's invasion. Beyond that, what weighs heavily in this second term is the economic crisis and the way in which inflation is generating a lot of social discontent in an increasingly militarised European geopolitical context (for example of Germany) and danger at a global level.

The question is what will be the capacity of the social and popular movements to reactivate and defend a broad, unitary policy that combines post-neoliberalism, opposition to Macronism, anti-fascism, anti-racism, feminism and a perspective of ecological transition, in this context of many dangers alongside some opportunities?

In recent years, we have seen key social struggles in France, in particular around the reform of the labour law in 2016, with strikes, trade union unity and important fights. But it is also necessary to reflect on the limits of the possibilities of the large trade union federations to conduct these strikes and class conflicts. We have seen a sector of the youth that adheres to perspectives of civil disobedience around the themes of ecology and "defence zones" (ZAD), for example in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a politicised youth that mobilises around the theme of the capitalist climate crisis in a radical and autonomous way. And obviously, we remember the importance of the mass movement of the yellow vests, which was the big surprise of recent years, where a new popular actor appeared mostly outside the "framework" of traditional, political or union organisations, but who, on both a symbolic and political level, inflicted the first defeat on Macronism, twisting its arm and forcing it to inject more than 10 billion euros in favour of the poorest sectors, despite the violence of state repression and the class contempt of the "big" media. What is also interesting is to see that now, with the legislative election and the NUPES coalition, figures from the social movement were elected as deputies to the National Assembly; I am thinking of Rachel Kéké, a very combative black woman, leader of a very important strike in hotels in Paris. Also, for example, we can cite the election of Christophe Bex, a trade unionist and former yellow vest from the Toulouse area, another figure like Aurélie Trouvé, from the anti-globalisation movement, who was elected as a deputy from the popular neighbourhoods of Paris. Obtaining these seats is extremely positive if they are not fooled by strong institutional-media pressure, the logic of power and the framework of the Bourbon Palace, the better.... It will not be an easy task. The challenge is to create a bridge between the social and the political, between the popular movements and the institutional sphere, not in terms of

co-optation-moderation from the state institutions but rather of exacerbation-rupture "from below". That bridge has to be revitalised while always preserving the autonomy of the popular movement. And what needs to be built continues to be the self-organisation of the people and forms of democratic popular power, in a clear break with the French capitalist and militarist state. Something that appears, in many aspects, far from the will of many leaders of the current NUPES...

And the big question is whether initiatives such as the Parliament of the Popular Union built by France Insoumise during the campaign, which brought together trade unionists, activists from associations, intellectuals and artists around the construction of an electoral programme for post-neoliberal and ecological transition, could be transformed into some sort of political tool from next September. At the moment, a movement like FI does not have a national backbone, an organic neighbourhood presence, nor spaces for democratic debate, which means that all decisions are made around Melénchon and his captains, another overwhelming problem. Without a national and democratic framework, France Insoumise is above all an electoral and parliamentary machine, without body or legs.

To think about the responsibilities of anti-capitalist organisations and activism in this new scenario, we obviously have to reflect on the new space that NUPES occupies: it is a central event that polarises the entire discussion on the left today. And it was to Melénchon's and FI's merit that things were stirred up. From a sectarian position, one can think that it is "more of the same", a simple reformulation of the "plural left" of the 2000s or a mere neo-reformist attempt doomed to failure like SYRIZA or Podemos. This is not my position. Firstly, it is necessary to characterise NUPES, a challenge for collective discussion because militants still do not have the same vision and because, as I have already mentioned, NUPES is crossed by many contradictions. In the first place, because of the presence of the PS, which has always been a party of order, despite its new "leftist" discourse, but, on the other hand, taking into account FI, which has had the capacity to develop a more groundbreaking discourse with neoliberalism and even forging a highly developed programme, which managed to bring together in a Popular Parliament intellectual figures, artists and social leaders who did not come from France Insoumise but who adhered to the perspective of a united social and political front to confront both Macron and a very powerful extreme right. This tool is full of problems (one of them is its international policy or its vision of the State), but it has the courage to exist and its orientation can (and should) be fought for because FI-NUPES has a mass impact beyond parliament and we must debate with its militants.

In this context, the NPA has not been able to enter the coalition, although it has shown that it is willing to discuss openly and try to push to create a united front. It has not been possible in particular because of the presence of the PS in the coalition, as I said. However, the organisation supported a large number of NUPES candidates in most constituencies. For example, in Paris, with people like Danielle Simonnet, Rachel Kéké or Aurélie Trouvé. That at the national level was a public tactical option of the NPA, assumed as an independent organisation, in order to defend a unitary, non-sectarian and at the same time anti-capitalist perspective, without hiding our differences regarding the strategic logic of NUPES. In this space, it is necessary to push, debate, radicalise positions and defend the creation of a united anti-neoliberal and anti-fascist front, without neglecting the need to regroup with other forces, collectives and groups in a clearly independent anti-capitalist organisation that can, in a given moment and according to the cycle that opens, even integrate into NUPES in a transparent and loyal way, but also with its own strategic perspectives and centering the popular movements, mobilised society, class-struggle unions, workers, feminisms, youth and migrants in struggle in these perspectives. We have the task of continuing to defend the need to build a mass eco-socialist force in France. Precisely because there will be no possible alternative if we do not draw lessons from what the Tsipras government was in Greece, from what the evolution of Podemos was and its incorporation into a PSOE government in the Spanish State or in terms of the almost total disappearance of a genuine left in Italy. In this sense, it is about developing democratic practices of organised common militancy, because until now NUPES is a conglomerate where parties coexist, but where there is no space for real democratic debate, where parliamentarism dominates, where former PS ministers walk around unpunished after having driven antisocial policies when they were in government. As anti-capitalists we need to advance our own proposals in a unitary but at the same time radically autonomous way from social-liberalism. The challenge is gigantic: the evident failure of the founding project of the NPA also has to be the object of (self)critical assessments in order to project others, adapted

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to the new cycle of class struggles that France and Europe are experiencing. And the urgency, I insist, is to think about how to push back this monster that is growing more and more: the possibility of fascism.

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Translated by David Fagan for *International Viewpoint* from [Jacobin America latina](#).

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