

Parliamentary Elections: A breakthrough for the French left?

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The second round of France's parliamentary elections saw the president lose his majority, a new left alliance becoming the second largest force, but also a worrying increase in far-right representation. Ian Birchall explains the background and looks at what may come next.

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In a world heading towards more wars, economic crisis, climate catastrophe and the resurgence of the far right, any success for the left is good news. So the results of the second round of elections for the French National Assembly will have been welcomed not only in France but far beyond its frontiers.

The setback for the newly-elected president Macron is well-deserved. His first five years in power have led to growing inequality, with the poorest sections of society suffering the most; his taxation policies provoked the [vigorous opposition of the *gilets jaunes*](#) (yellow vests).

Macron's rule has been marked by growing authoritarianism, and in particular by increasing use of police violence. Action against the *gilets jaunes* left serious injuries to demonstrators. And he has deliberately encouraged Islamophobia - under the pretext of opposing 'jihadism' a number of mosques have been closed down.

A few weeks ago Macron confidently expected a majority for his supporters in the National Assembly which would have enabled him to carry through his policies. Now that majority has slipped out of his grasp. His supporters have only 245 seats (out of 577), over a hundred fewer than in the previous parliament, and fewer than most of the pre-election forecasts. He will need to negotiate alliances with other political forces to get a majority in parliament, and in some cases his policies may be blocked. Macron will now be much weaker - and from the point of view of the left weak government can only be a good thing. Certainly popular mobilisations will be needed to win any reforms, but this is at least a significant shift in the balance of forces.

And the team he has built up around himself has suffered some real damage. Three ministers have lost their parliamentary seats and as a result must give up their jobs. A particularly welcome defeat was that of Christophe Castaner, who had been Interior Minister directly responsible for police violence against the *gilets jaunes*.

In the first round there was a very high level of abstentions; fewer than half of those entitled to vote in fact did so. Obviously this reflected a sense among many voters that elections had nothing to offer

them in terms of real solutions to their problems. And it was the young and the economically deprived who were the least likely to vote. The second round turnout of 46.2% was down on the first round, and shows that the left's campaigning failed to make sufficient impact and that over half the electorate remained indifferent to the whole process.

The gains made by the *Rassemblement National* [RN], the party of Marine le Pen are alarming. Eighty-nine seats - as against just eight in the previous parliament - is a massive increase. And under French election rules the RN's result entitles it to receive 54 million euros in public funding.

The RN score is far bigger than anyone expected - perhaps twice as many seats as most forecasts predicted. It seems that when faced with a choice of Macron or the RN, many who originally voted NUPES opted for the RN, on the grounds that anything was better than Macron.

That millions of voters have endorsed a party which, despite cosmetic changes since the days of the Front National, is an openly racist organisation poses a serious threat. Not every RN voter is an active racist - many may just be frustrated by Macron and the whole edifice of conventional politics. But that still leaves a huge pool of people prepared to go along with racist ideas, and who would support Islamophobic initiatives and even engage in racist violence. The left cannot afford to be complacent.

NUPES - a new left alliance

Yet simply denouncing and challenging the far right is not enough. It is necessary to offer an alternative, some way of responding concretely to the problems and frustrations that led people to racism in the first place. The only way to counter the RN is to build a more active left. The huge growth of the RN would be even more alarming if there were not an active left prepared to oppose it in the National Assembly and beyond.

Up to the time of the presidential election [Macron saw his main rival to his right](#). The significance of Le Pen was not so much the danger that she might win (always unlikely though not impossible) as the fact that she - and the even more noxious Eric Zemmour - dragged the whole political debate to the right. Now Macron will have to take into account the pressure of opposition from the left as well. That will not radically shift his policies - he remains committed to neo-liberalism and ruling in the interests of France's upper classes - but it may make it more difficult for him to implement anti-working class measures.

But the most important result has been the substantial support for NUPES - the New Popular Ecological and Social Union. After the first round of the presidential election, the left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon was widely criticised for not calling for a vote for Macron in order to block Le Pen. In fact he could hardly have done so when he was planning within the coming few weeks to organise an electoral alliance to oppose Macron. Nonetheless many of his supporters understandably did vote for Macron to block Le Pen.

To bring together the main components of the left - Communists, Socialists, Greens - together with his organisation *La France Insoumise* (LFI) in an electoral alliance in which all parties agreed on a single candidate for each seat, and to do so in the few weeks between the presidential election and the National Assembly poll, was a remarkable organisational achievement. The hope that NUPES could actually get a parliamentary majority was always remote, and was perhaps merely a propaganda aim rather than a realistic target. But NUPES's achievement in getting 131 seats is nonetheless striking and marks the beginning, if only the beginning, of a restructuring of the French left, and hopefully, the emergence of forces which can begin to challenge the corruption and

injustice of French society.

It remains to be seen how the electoral bloc will develop. It is one thing to organise an electoral alliance, something quite different to function as a united bloc over five years. How coherent NUPES will be remains to be seen. Mélenchon has proposed that NUPES should form a single parliamentary group. The other parties involved in NUPES have immediately refused; each will act as an independent entity. Among the Socialist Party members elected there are some who might well ally with Macron at some point.

In an interview in [Jacobin](#) Stathis Kouvelakis (a supporter of LFI) argued that

the Left is the common enemy of both Macron and Le Pen. And it is a rising force, grouped around its main actor, Mélenchon and France Insoumise, which is challenging the neo-liberal framework to the point of fighting for a majority in the parliamentary elections. Independently of its success, are we not close to a reconfiguration of political conflict — and perhaps a return to something more like the classic right-left conflict?

Perhaps this is a bit over-optimistic; for the moment it would seem wise to be a little cautious.

Nonetheless it is clear that the political map of France is being redrawn. Until a few years ago French politics was dominated by two main forces - the Gaullist right and the Socialist Party. Now the Gaullists - *Les Républicains* - have only 64 seats, about half their previous figure. The Socialist Party collapsed to an abysmal figure of 1.8% in the presidential election; now NUPES has given it a lifeline, increasing its representation to 26 seats. But henceforth it will exist in the shadow of LFI, rather than being a major political force in its own right.

Reshaping the left

But the most encouraging feature of the elections has been the success of LFI, to which most of the new MPs belong. (Their name is generally translated as France Unbowed, which seems a little passive. Back in the days of compulsory military service the *insoumis* were those who refused to turn up - 'draft-dodgers'. Perhaps Insubordinate France would be a better translation.)

LFI originally came from a split in the Socialist Party. It already had seventeen deputies in the old parliament, but has now increased that number to 72. It will be impossible for Macron to ignore it. LFI has a number of radical policies offering a sharp alternative to Macron. In particular it is calling for an increase in the minimum wage, lowering the retirement age to sixty and freezing prices of basic necessities. The evidence of the first round was that LFI gets its main support from the young and from the less economically prosperous.

It should also be remembered that LFI is an open organisation with different currents within it. As LFI supporter [John Mullen noted](#), various revolutionary factions flourish.

At least three small revolutionary groups, two of around a hundred members each (Gauche révolutionnaire and Révolution!) and one larger current (Ensemble Insoumis) are active inside the FI. Each of them had a stand at the August 2021 Summer School, and two of them produce independent revolutionary papers.

It is also important to be clear that LFI is not simply Mélenchon's personal organisation. Because of Mélenchon's presidential campaign a lot of comment has focussed on him personally. The British press tend to refer to him as 'hard left' and 'former Trotskyist' (true, but a very long time ago), but

there is little attempt to come to terms with what he actually stands for.

But LFI has developed a team of activists and it cannot simply be reduced to Mélenchon alone; indeed Mélenchon himself will not even be a deputy in the new parliament.

For example, among the deputies in the National Assembly is François Ruffin, a journalist and film-maker. He helped to initiate the *Nuit Debout* (Up All Night) movement which involved mass occupations of public places lasting through the night in opposition to government policies.

Danièle Obono is a long-standing socialist activist and has jointly edited a selection of Trotsky's writings on racial oppression. As a black woman she has suffered her share of attacks - one right-wing paper thought it amusing to depict her as a slave with an iron collar around her neck. But despite attacks she was re-elected in the first round in Paris.

The LFI deputies have now been joined by some new activists, notably Rachel Keke, one of the leaders of a successful two-year [strike by housekeepers](#) at an Ibis hotel in Paris. She will bring an experience of low-paid manual work and class struggle to the National Assembly - things not commonly found there.

The rise of LFI and NUPES has had a significant impact on the far left. In 2002 the far left was still dominated by the Trotskyist organisations that had grown rapidly in the aftermath of 1968. In that year's election Trotskyist candidates got over 10%, with just short of three million votes, and there was a flood of books and articles about the Trotskyist menace.

Now the far left is noticeably weaker (just as the British far left was weakened by Corbyn's short-lived success). *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO - Workers' Fight) made a certain impact with the six presidential campaigns of Arlette Laguiller (her best result was 5.72%). They have taken a completely negative attitude to NUPES, dismissing it as just another bourgeois electoral initiative of no interest to workers, and simply counterposing their own organisation. In the first round they ran candidates in 554 constituencies - a remarkable achievement for an organisation with some 8000 members - but got just 230,000 votes, far short of their previous results. It shows that LO retains its ability to mobilise its members' time, energy and money, but it is unlikely to achieve anything.

The *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* (NPA) showed a more balanced approach. In principle it supported NUPES, and in most areas it campaigned publicly for it. But it considered that some of the candidates endorsed, in particular from the Socialist Party, were unworthy of support, and it ran or supported candidates against them. This meant that the NPA withdrew from NUPES. This was a principled position. although it meant that the NPA forfeited any chance of getting candidates elected as deputies or even of raising its profile significantly in the campaign. Whether the NPA is capable of any significant growth remains doubtful. It may be that the political generation of 1968 is coming to the end of the road. A new left of a different kind is required to face new problems and new challenges. Whether the LFI can become that new left remains to be seen.

Only a beginning

While the NUPES achievement should certainly be welcomed, it is open to criticism. Mélenchon is not a revolutionary and does not claim to be one, so simply to note that he is a reformist does not get us very far. But there are certain important questions that will have to be argued in the months and years ahead.

Mélenchon's flair is for electioneering, and he has run a number of good election campaigns. But

perhaps he puts too much hopes in electoral politics and what it can achieve. French capitalism remains deeply entrenched and to achieve any significant change in the position of the working class will require mobilisation and action that goes far beyond simply marking ballot papers.

Moreover, LFI is still deeply immersed in nationalism. In particular the demand that France should leave NATO, but should continue to maintain its own nuclear deterrent, is hard to take seriously. The need to develop a consistently internationalist strategy is something that will be crucial for LFI in the coming period.

Mélenchon and NUPES can expect continuing vilification from Macron and his supporters, and from the mainstream media in general. We know from the experience of Corbyn that any force that offers even a minimal challenge to the existing order of power and privilege will meet massive opposition.

Rebuilding a left that can confront the challenges of the twenty-first century will be an enormous task, and if there are hopeful and positive features in LFI, there is still a very long way to go. But the left around the world can take some encouragement from a small but real victory. As we used to say in 1968 *Ce n'est qu'un début; continuons le combat*. It's only a beginning; the struggle goes on.

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P.S.

• RS21. 23 June 2022:

<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2022/06/22/breakthrough-for-french-left/>