

# Understanding the French presidential election

Friday 5 May 2017, by [BONZOM Mathieu](#), [ROSO Darren](#) (Date first published: 3 May 2017).

**Darren Roso speaks to Mathieu Bonzom, an activist and an editor of the online socialist magazine *Contretemps*, about the 7 May presidential election in France.**

The 23 April first round French presidential election revealed the political effects of inequality and attacks on social welfare, with the electoral routing of the Socialist and Republican parties. Neither made it through to this weekend's second round. Between them, the traditional parties won just over a quarter of the vote, with the fascist Marine Le Pen and left-populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon making serious gains.

## INSTABILITY

The French electoral system was designed to prevent this kind of result. But the institutional arrangements of the Fifth Republic couldn't circumvent popular rage against the "extreme centre" – the full-throttle pursuit of neoliberal policy – and its political representatives. Mathieu Bonzom, an editor of the online socialist magazine *Contretemps* explains via email:

"At the root of it all lie the contradictions of neoliberalism, worsened by the economic and social crisis sparked about 10 years ago, which has had deep consequences even while mainstream politicians tried to pretend the crisis was over. Mainstream parties have responded to the crisis by accelerating neoliberal attacks, which made them increasingly unpopular.

"They also resorted to a racist, patriotic and imperialistic strategy along the lines of the global war on terror, which delayed their decline but also accelerated the rise of the fascist National Front (FN). This race to the right of the political spectrum has negatively influenced even the left, but also opened up space for a left alternative."

The neoliberal race to the bottom created a paradox. There was an unprecedented level of lesser evil "strategic" voting, with some polls showing that more than half the support going to Emmanuel Macron, who won the first round of voting and is now favourite to win the presidency, came from people who don't actually support his broader program of neoliberalism-as-usual.

Yet strategic voting could not stop the National Front's challenge, or the independent, anti-neoliberal left. There is nothing surprising in this. For years, the two main government parties have increasingly stood for the same rotten policies. Discontent had already taken the fascists to the second round in 2002 when the Socialist Party (PS) vote dropped after five years of a very neoliberal socialist government.

"The similarities between 2002 and today are obvious", Bonzom says. "Long before the election, the popularity of the PS under president Hollande and prime minister Valls had sunk to an all-time low, and most people pretty much expected the FN to reach the second round." However, people assumed that a Republican candidate would run off against Le Pen in a re-run of 2002, when Jean-

Marie Le Pen was beaten by Jacques Chirac. But, mired in corruption scandals, the Republicans lost votes to Macron.

None of this means that the traditional parties are finished. Bonzom argues that the Republicans will probably make a comeback in the June legislative elections. And if Macron claims victory in the presidential race, "he is probably going to rely on many PS incumbents". Whatever combination of president and parliament – it is unlikely that Macron could garner a majority in parliament – there will be pressure from the FN and the left-populist Mélenchon. It will be an unstable government.

## **THE LEFT**

Forces to the left of the PS had a significant breakthrough in the first round. "It was the most successful electoral initiative of the left running independently of the PS in decades", Bonzom says. "It's one of the rare pieces of good news in the 23 April results."

One of the key debates on the French left is about the nature of Mélenchon's "Insubordinate France" movement. Mélenchon is controversial – a former Trotskyist and confessed Freemason who spent decades in the PS before creating the Left Party in 2009. The Left Party then formed the Left Front with the French Communist Party, but serious disagreements plagued the formation: the communists were far softer on the PS than Mélenchon's group.

Mélenchon, Bonzom says, has "replaced explicit references to class with rhetoric about the French people (opposed to the elites), and replaced the symbols of the labour movement with those of the French Republic (flags, anthems, mottos and all)". He even refuses to use the word "left". Most people associate the left with the PS, so a rejection of the label was part of distancing his campaign from Hollande and Valls. But there is more to it:

"It was also a matter of strategy in the face of a nationalist, racist opposition to neoliberalism – in the FN and beyond. It seems that the strategy was meant to recapture 'the Republic' for 'us', but it meant imitating some of the right's or even the far right's language, in the hope of 'taking back' part of the FN vote. Mélenchon's platform and campaign on issues like immigration were a mix of solidarity and insistence that it be reduced.

"Mélenchon once blamed immigrant guest workers for lower wages and working conditions, but also had a mass rally in Marseille and held a minute's silence in memory of the many migrants who died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. His anti-FN credentials are real, and yet he inserted a well-known and decades-old FN motto in the conclusion of one of his televised speeches, 'Giving back France to French people', which he tried to reframe within his denunciation of the 'oligarchy'.

"At the same time, the weaknesses of his campaign on the issue of racism and especially Islamophobia are reflections of similar weaknesses of the French left on those issues, despite some recent advances of independent and radical anti-racist mobilisations. This aspect of the Mélenchon campaign was bound to repel some of the people that Mélenchon aims to represent, especially immigrants and people of colour."

Mélenchon both opens a space and creates an obstacle for the radical left. The rest of the left was outflanked – despite brilliant interventions against the rich in various debates – by Insubordinate France. The argument for an uncompromising and intransigent struggle of class against class, rather than a watered down populist discourse, was sidelined. The space opened is not only constrained by the political limitations of Mélenchon, but by whether he will squander his momentum after this weekend. Bonzom believes that the far left should not, however, get fixated on his shortcomings:

"The future of the left depends on its ability to create a lasting, independent, democratic force that is

willing and big enough to take on neoliberal austerity and racist authoritarianism at once – fighting the ruling class while keeping the FN at bay. Much as the far left likes to insist on the role of ‘the street’ (social struggles) as opposed to ‘the ballot boxes’, the electoral and institutional arena should not be left out of a strategy for the renewal of anti-capitalist struggles.

“Our struggles have not been hampered only by concession-prone leaders: the labour movement itself has been declining. Meanwhile, the economic conjuncture does not leave the ruling class with a lot of leeway, which means that the bar is set higher; our struggles have to be much more powerful than at other times to have a shot at any significant victory or advance. Such a high level of struggle is much harder to reach today.”

## **LE PEN’S NEO-FASCISM**

Nearly every article written about Marine Le Pen peddles garbage about a so-called detoxification process in the FN, implying that the fascist core and history of the party has been broken with simply because it has changed the way it talks and because it has become more media savvy:

“The best way to understand words like ‘detoxification’ is to see that the FN has made some real changes without giving us any reason to believe that its leadership has renounced fascist views and goals. We are dealing with a leadership that has been very good at using every opening offered by the ruling class’ strategy ... A lot of what’s going on regarding the war on terror, Islamophobia, discrimination in the name of the Republic, denial of racist police brutality, etc. plays into the FN’s hands.”

The party has waged an ideological battle for decades and constantly points to the fact that its ideas are spreading and being imitated by politicians on the right and left and that people “prefer the original rather than the copy”.

Its republican discourse – presenting the party as the heir of Charles De Gaulle rather than Phillipe Pétain – is a means to combat a republican front that itself is falling apart in the neoliberal decay. The party, under Le Pen’s leadership, has also engaged in a more aggressive fight over economic issues as a way to promote its “French First” solutions to unemployment, distress and poverty. There is no doubt that this discourse speaks to real anger and has won the party electoral influence in the de-industrialised north and north-east beyond its historic strongholds.

“We could say that they have made some changes as a way to increase their influence”, Bonzom says. “But the leadership is arguably looking for ways to carve out a new path to fascism. Even people who argue that there has been a kind of ‘right-republican conversion’ of the FN do not necessarily conclude that it is incompatible with fascism ... If elected, Le Pen could do a lot of damage with the existing institutions, which give a lot of powers to the president.”

Le Pen is confident that she will win a sizeable slice of failed Republican Party candidate François Fillon’s voters who aren’t going to vote Macron. Indeed, she has already taken a significant section of the traditional right wing vote. She’d like to build on this – as she has done through a deal struck with the reactionary Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who won around 5 percent of the first round vote.

But Le Pen is also fighting for voters who backed Mélenchon, arguing that they should reject Macron. The FN has release point-by-point comparisons of both platforms, attempting to place Mélenchon’s policies closer to the FN’s than they actually are. In the northern city of Amiens, she upstaged Macron at a Whirlpool plant – which is likely to close – by greeting crowds of disgruntled workers while he was downtown having a meeting with a few union representatives.

Her argument to the popular classes is that Macron is their worst enemy: the system, with Macron

as its official representative, is corrupt to the core and the FN is the only party that fights in the name of "the forgotten". This is part of the far right's strategy of creating a new electoral alliance of the middle classes and sections of the working class.

## **WHERE IS THE RESISTANCE?**

Anti-fascist organising in France has been weaker and less coherent than in Britain, where the Anti-Nazi League and Unite Against Fascism had successful campaigns to beat back the far right. There has also been a decline in anti-fascist campaigning since 2002. At that time, when Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second round run-offs, many people understood that the FN was a fascist threat. Many had been to or seen demonstrations protesting against FN leaders who visited their towns. And many people thought the FN was weaker and destabilised after a split in the late 1990s. But today, Bonzom says, things are different:

"This time, the FN's result hardly surprised anyone ... Most people expected a Fillon-Le Pen second round. Yet attempts to build the anti-fascist movement have had limited success. This is one of the reasons why the wave of protest has been much smaller so far. It also has to do with the success of the detoxification strategies, which seems to have erased, especially among younger generations, what used to be obvious: the FN is racist, very reactionary and dangerous. Some people who would never think of voting for the party, including some people on the left, don't seem to believe that it poses a specific threat or that it is indeed the worst enemy of non-white people, women and the working class."

It is an open debate on the left about whether or not to vote for Macron against Le Pen – even among those who do not accept the republican consensus. Macron is weakened by the fact that he is hardly a convincing figure. Few actually believe that his policies would better the lives of ordinary people. According to Bonzom, it would be a disastrous policy to uncritically back him against Le Pen:

"The anti-fascist movement we need cannot follow the path of the 'republican front' and avoid criticising Macron and everything he represents. It cannot call (or even appear to call) for abstention, otherwise it would cut itself off from most people of colour for example, who realise what the FN is; but it cannot support (or even appear to support) Macron, otherwise it would cut itself off from broad sections of the working class that are tempted to put Le Pen and Macron on the same level, and who must be convinced first and foremost not to vote for Le Pen. 'Not one vote for Le Pen' should be the most unifying slogan.

"The relatively small but energetic youth protests of the last few days have been organised with a 'neither Le Pen nor Macron' line. In this, the tendency to underestimate the FN is mixed with something else: many of these young people don't have the right to vote yet, or got it recently, and this slogan best expresses their disgust at a political system which tries to force them to choose between two options they instinctively reject, especially following last year's protest movement aimed mainly against the neoliberal order.

"Yet it remains necessary to convince them not to place Macron and Le Pen on the same footing. That should be possible, if political and labour leaders who have expressed themselves along the lines of 'not one vote for Le Pen' try their best, and succeed, in bringing out larger crowds. However, because the labour movement remains in crisis ... they may be having a hard time connecting to their base while walking the line I've just explained, which may be a thin line in some unions."

The dangers of the situation are manifold. In 2002, the massive vote for Chirac – more than 80 percent – was a May '68 for the right. The new president used his mandate to attack workers and students. So a weaker vote for Macron – if Le Pen is kept out of power – is a weaker mandate to rip

up social welfare and attack workers.

Yet if a weaker Macron vote were seen as (or actually is) a result of a surge in Le Pen votes, this would only boost the momentum of the FN. In any case, Macron's program will not have mass legitimacy - he will be attacked from the left, the social movements and the far right. This could open serious fractures in his government if it tries to face down resistance. If Macron wins, his will be a turbulent reign.

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\* <https://redflag.org.au/node/5790>