

La France insoumise, a political current with feet of clay that dominates the left

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La France insoumise (LFI) now occupies a central place in the French political left, centred on the personality of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. It has succeeded, on the basis of the results of the 2022 presidential election, in regrouping in Nupes (Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale - New Ecological and Social People's Union) the Socialist Party (PS), Europe Ecology-The Greens (EELV) and the French Communist Party (PCF) on the basis of the essence of its presidential programme, which opposes the neoliberal policies of left and right governments in recent years, and proposes a break with productivism by an ecological transition.

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It is a shift of the centre of gravity of the left towards radical political, social and ecological positions, without being anti-capitalist.

The impact of the 2022 presidential and parliamentary elections

LFI have achieved this by coming close to being present in the second round of the 2022 presidential election in France. But this election was very special. The alignment of the term of office of the president and the parliament from 2000 onwards was designed to give the president all the political levers. On the left, given the score of the far right (more than 30%), many votes were cast in the first round for the candidate who was likely, according to the polls, to prevent far right leader Marine Le Pen from being present in the second round. It is by benefiting from this “useful vote” that LFI has electorally crushed the social-liberal PS, while keeping the PCF and EÉLV at the lowest levels.

If the national political impact is the product of the presidential election, the means to exist financially and politically throughout France depend on the parliamentary elections. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's choice to boost the Nupes prevented Macron from obtaining an absolute majority in the Assembly, a first in 20 years, and limited the advance of Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN). At the same time, it froze the balance of forces in favour of LFI which has 67 deputies (17 in 2017) while allowing the PS and the PCF to maintain their representation (32 and 12 respectively), and the EÉLV to have a parliamentary group (16 MPs instead of 1 in 2017).

These results considerably increase the resources LFI will have for the years to come, both political and material: its financing by the state will exceed 4 million euros per year, not to mention the resources of the deputies who pay 12% of their allowance and have parliamentary attachés: the apparatus of LFI has changed scale.

LFI within the institutional left

This sequence marks an evolution in the positioning of LFI. In 2016, Mélenchon staged meetings with theorists of “left populism” such as Chantal Mouffe. If he has retained from this current the place of affects in politics as well as the vital role of the leader, the nature of the electoral programme is fundamentally different from Laclau’s theories. “L’avenir en Commun” (“The Common Future”), which largely repeats the 2017 electoral programme, presents more than 80 key measures and nearly 700 proposals, it “is the fruit of a laborious work of ideological harmonization between different sensitivities, traditions and currents” and with many interlocutors outside LFI. This is a far cry from the relationship to the Laclau programme: “the unity of the group is [...] the result of an articulation of requests. But this articulation does not correspond to a stable and positive configuration that could be grasped as a unified whole.”

Mélenchon never broke the mould of the French left. LFI, resulting from the decantations of the institutional left, is a construction well adapted to the political system, impregnated by French republicanism, breaking with social liberalism, with structuring ecological positions.

The Nupes and its components

The small mobilization in the second round did not stop abstention in the parliamentary elections in working-class neighbourhoods. In parliament, the Nupes is an intergroup that brings together four independent groups (FI, PS, PCF, Greens), which do not always make the same choices, the same votes. In reality, there are no Nupes structures open to all, organizing unity from below, anchoring it in popular milieus. It remains only an electoral agreement.

EELV held its congress in December 2022 (12,700 members, 5,600 voting) which did not reject the Nupes, but the majority wants to rebalance the balance of power during the European elections in 2024 and is preparing an autonomous presentation. The current defending an anchorage to the left was clearly defeated, with less than 20%.

The congress of the PS in January 2023 (41,000 members, 23,200 voting) was a relative defeat for the party’s First Secretary, Olivier Faure, who had negotiated the entry into the Nupes. The party is split in two between his orientation and that which brought together many historical leaders opposed to any agreement with LFI and others who are for unity on the left, but under the leadership of the PS. The PCF congress in April 2023 (41,000 members, nearly 29,900 voting) was a victory for national secretary Fabien Roussel who had led a campaign with a workerist profile, reactionary on ecological and societal issues, on a text that rejects the “erasure” of the PCF by associating identitarians, orthodox nostalgics for the USSR and supporters of a union of the left with the PS with a vote of 82%, marginalizing the supporters of unity with LFI.

But none of these parties is questioning this framework in the immediate future for two reasons. First of all, the extremely rare context of trade union unity in the mobilization in defence of pensions pushes in the direction of unity: whoever appears against this aspiration would be crushed. Secondly, the current parliamentary instability raises the possibility of a dissolution of the Assembly.

All those who have gained MPs with the Nupes would then have too much to lose if it disappears.

LFI is at a pivotal moment. Structured around the presidential election, it is led, by its dominant position, to transform itself if it wants to maintain its leadership and consider becoming hegemonic on the left.

Absence of democratic structuring in LFI

When LFI was created in 2016, it presented itself as something other than a party, a “gaseous” movement, without national democratic structuring, without congress, without votes. Anyone can join, in a few clicks, without paying membership or dues. Hundreds of thousands of people have done so, perhaps 500,000 since its inception. During elections, tens of thousands of people make donations, which are not dues, or are “cyber-activists.”

Members join a local “Action Group” whose ideal number is set at 11 members and should not exceed 15. More than 2,800 action groups have been announced. How many members is difficult to say, since there is no congress with votes as moments of truth.

The figures of Manuel Cervera-Marzal, who has studied in depth the functioning of LFI, illustrate these uncertainties. He estimates that “between 2018 and 2020 LFI had about 6,000 activists. By activists I mean ‘active in a support group’... a somewhat reductive definition... The figure could be revised upwards.” In November 2021 he made another approximation: “I estimate that out of 500,000 members, ten times fewer are activists in the field”. Another estimate is possible from the number of action groups, which could have more than 30,000 members.

The action groups have no finances, premises or printing equipment. There is no intermediate structure, no geographical grouping, no permanent frameworks for action and reflection where collective thinking can be developed, where decisions can be taken democratically.

Legally LFI has only three persons with full powers. It is a plebiscitary democracy with major decisions taken by a limited number of leaders, a tight formation around the leader, which allows political agility, but constitutes a very hierarchical structure, verticality of decisions cohabiting with a horizontality of members, depriving them of any possibility of influencing orientation and decisions. By rehabilitating individualism as a mark of insubordination, “the centralized character of La France Insoumise is in the image of the Jacobin structure of the French state.”

A free news site, Média, was created in 2018 by people close to LFI, while claiming to be independent. An extremely broad appeal from left-wing and far-left figures supported the initiative.

But the initial team quickly shrank, and some key figures have left. We are far from a cooperative, independent, collaborative, pluralistic media. It appeared very quickly as an organ at the service of LFI. The opportunity to create a pluralistic place is being missed. Its audience gives an idea of that of LFI: the number of daily views on YouTube is around 150,000, and weekly views around one million.

During the 2022 campaign, the “Popular Union Campaign Parliament” was created, bringing together 125 members of LFI and 125 personalities, trade unionists, intellectuals, association leaders, leaders of struggles, chaired by Aurélie Trouvé, former spokesperson of Attac. It could have been the beginning of a process of reorganization on the left but had no existence. Enlarged during the constitution of the Nupes, it has now totally disappeared.

Pressures to structure the movement

Following the campaign, voices were raised for a new organisation of LFI. They came from intellectuals and political currents present in LFI, who pose the problems of internal democracy and the construction of a counter-hegemony, but also from grassroots activists who seek to have an organization that allows daily activism.

Clémentine Autain distinguished herself by publishing a text in which she reaffirmed the merits of LFI “breaking with the functioning of traditional parties” and made concrete proposals for “an identified leadership that could combine three levels of legitimacy: elected officials, action groups, the forces of the social and cultural movement that are committed to us”.

The economist Cédric Durand and the sociologist Razmig Keucheyan see LFI as follows: “From an agile movement, calibrated for lightning electoral battles, it must transform itself into an irresistible force, capable not only of gaining power with its allies in the Nupes, but also of succeeding in engaging in a systemic ecological and social bifurcation beyond capitalism. For this, it must structure in the long term a popular force of the social and ecological left capable of being a decisive political actor for the decades to come.”

Headed by 15 leaders from the central core, they submitted “reforms” submitted to the “representative” assembly of December 10, 2022, made up of 160 leading cadres and members chosen by lot, without any substantive debate organized throughout the movement. It obviously endorsed the proposals and appointed Manuel Bompard, a faithful supporter of Mélenchon, to replace him in the presidency.

Regarding grassroots organization, the only novelty is to allow the coordination of action groups at the local level which can now create “departmental loops” capable, thanks to “voluntary contributions” from activists (which are not contributions materializing membership and giving rights), to have local expenses and buy premises in rural and peri-urban areas.

Chaired by Mélenchon, the Institut La Boétie has become a much more prominent place of intellectual elaboration and a tool for popular education. It brings together a large number of intellectual figures, publishes notes, fact sheets, organizes symposia and round tables and a national training school twice a year for around 70 activists. What will be the degree of openness of the leadership of the LFI, a condition for the intellectuals involved to participate in the long term?

A new leadership is put in place

The response to the demands for inclusive leadership has been a new tightening of the leadership group. At the end of the assembly a weekly leadership of 21 people, appointed by co-optation in opacity, was appointed by “consensus”. This was the hitherto informal hard core of LFI with a few people not from the inner circle, carefully discarding critical personalities. A council of about forty members was set up, to meet every four or six weeks, representing the “plurality of the movement” which closely resembles the former “Political Space” of LFI, which disappeared for lack of *raison d’être*.

Public reactions criticizing this clan functioning have been numerous, sharply denounced by Mélenchon who calls on activists to remain united. Now nicknamed the “rebels” of LFI, Clémentine Autain, François Ruffin, Alexis Corbière, Éric Coquerel and Raquel Garrido even held a joint meeting on February 16 in Bobigny against the pension reform, with limited success.

The LFI parliamentary group brings together the historic core, without Mélenchon who decided not to stand again, elected officials with different trajectories, with very rich experiences of struggles, such as Rachel Keke, former spokesperson for the maids strike at the Ibis Batignolles hotel, Alma Dufour, environmental activist, spokesperson for Friends of the Earth from 2017 to 2021, Aurélie Trouvé, co-president of ATTAC from 2006 to 2012, then spokesperson from 2016 to 2021. It also includes elected members of the political organizations which are members of LFI, the POI and the Gauche écosocialiste.

This parliamentary group is not totally controlled by the central core of LFI. It makes decisions by majority vote on parliamentary tactics or on other matters, which are not always strictly what the leadership would have wanted. This was illustrated during the crisis that occurred when Adrien Quatennens, who Mélenchon saw as his successor, was accused of domestic violence. He acknowledged the violence and withdrew from office. Mélenchon then published a message of support “for the dignity and courage”... of Adrien Quatennens. After his four-month suspended prison sentence, the parliamentarians voted and decided on a “temporary removal from the group” for four months, and a return conditional on the commitment to follow a course concerning violence against women. His return to the parliamentary group following a secret ballot appears to many to be a serious moral and political error. Regarding the parliamentary tactics relating to the pensions counter-reform, Mélenchon again intervened publicly, to criticise the other groups in the Nupes “who have, alas aligned themselves on the lessons on good manners given by Macronism.”

On the evening of the first round of the presidential election, Mélenchon suggested that he was retiring, saying: “Do better.” This openness has whetted the appetites of all those who see themselves taking his place. What will happen in the end? It’s hard to know. For the moment, far from focusing on the Institut La Boétie, Mélenchon has shown he is still to be reckoned with.

The place of LFI in the pensions mobilization

LFI has a functioning focused on electoral success that does not favour the training of activists capable of playing a leading role in a trade union, an association or a unitary mobilization, which requires knowing how to work with others in the long term, to gather, debate, adapt according to the debate, decide democratically, be in the majority. It is striking to note that in these contexts there are very few LFI activists who are also very dynamic at the political level.

Indeed, those who mobilize, politicize, radicalize, organize themselves in multiple forms are neither driven nor structured by LFI. To think that these different forms could naturally be placed under its political leadership is an illusion. The friction is therefore permanent. As former CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez said in response to Mélenchon, on forms of action, “it is not one who decides in place of all, but we talk to each other, and we decide...”

In the mobilization in defence of pensions, LFI would like its deputies to be the natural correspondents of the struggles. But this is not the case. The totally unified inter-union coordination appears to millions of opponents of the government as the framework adapted to the needs, as Mélenchon was in the electoral field. Therefore, after the “sound and fury” of the parliamentary joust, in the demonstrations LFI is a political current like the others on the left and does not play a specific political role to organize the confrontation, which is the central question for all those who want to win.

To conclude, in the political field, in the media space, LFI is an unavoidable force. In the field of ruins that is today the political left in France, it appears as the central, decisive force. But, built on a fragile foundation, it is unable to assume the responsibility of working on the organization of the

camp of the dominated.

Those at the bottom need much more than just an organized movement to win elections. What is sorely lacking today is a hegemonic political force on the left, which offers an alternative to capitalism, which effectively structures the exploited and oppressed, in their workplaces, in their neighbourhoods, which links the struggles against capitalist exploitation, the ecological crisis, and oppressions into an emancipatory whole, which puts the broadest democracy at the centre of its practices.

LFI is far from that! And for the moment, the reorganization measures that aim only to maintain an electoral machine are far from being commensurate with the stakes of the period.

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P.S.

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