

Opinion

Presidential election in France: Anti-capitalists, Melenchon and 7.7 million voters of the left

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The emboldened French left must seize the moment, writes Kevin Ovenden.

The statement of the New Anticapitalist Party following the first round of the presidential election:

“On Sunday, 7 May, we understand why many will want to block the FN (National Front) by voting Macron.” But it is the austerity and security policies, especially when implemented by a so-called left government, that are the cause of the rise of the FN.

“Macron is not a bulwark against the FN. In order to bring about its lasting retreat, there is no alternative but to take up path of the street, as the youth did in 2002, as we did last year against the labor law.”

It goes on to argue that the principal beneficiary of the Hollande government has been the FN.

Of course Le Pen gained. But is it really true that she and the FN have had the biggest gain? That the only gainers have been Le Pen and Macron out of all this bitterness at the Hollande government?

In 2012 Le Pen got 6.4 million votes. That was 2.8 million more than in 2007, when Sarkozy was elected. That gain under Sarkozy was the biggest the FN has ever had since it began contesting the presidential election in 1988.

The hardline authoritarian and racist government of Sarkozy really did benefit the FN.

It continued to gain under Hollande. Its vote on Sunday was 7.7 million, up 1.3 million from 2012. But it was lower than predicted by the polling all the way up until two weeks before election day.

And it was lower than what the FN would have got had its performance and share of the vote in the regional elections of 2015 been repeated. Then it took 6.8 million votes in the second round, 27 percent, on a turnout of 58 percent.

Had that been repeated on the higher turnout on Sunday, it ought to have got close to 10 million votes.

In fact, the big gain in this presidential election was Jean-Luc Melenchon. He won over more 3

million votes compared with 2012.

His campaign surged at just the time that Le Pen's faltered.

The New Anticapitalist Party is rightly critical of the left-sovereigntist politics and strategy of Melenchon. It also says that - notwithstanding the howls of the pro-EU establishment - his EU policy does not, in fact, propose a rupture with the European institutions.

It's true that it does not propose a strategy of anti-capitalist rupture. It is to seek to negotiate a fundamental transformation of the EU, with a fallback position, Plan B, of breaking from it if that is not achieved. "We will change Europe, or leave Europe," Melenchon said on the campaign trail.

It is broadly not so different from the formal position of Syriza in 2013. But there is a difference, arising in part from how Syriza's position in reality meant staying in the euro at all costs, and led to the capitulation of July 2015. Melenchon's campaign did talk up breaking with the EU when reform proved impossible - a line which was a key public division between him and Benoit Hamon of the Socialist Party.

So it cannot be right to disregard the rise of Melenchon as a rise of the left as whole.

Voters moved from the Socialist Party to Melenchon. It's not just that they chose a more left wing option - someone denounced in *Le Figaro* as the "French Hugo Chavez". Some of them will have moved under the impetus of the big strikes and clashes with the police, empowered by a state of emergency, last year over the anti-worker labour law brought in under Hollande by undemocratic presidential decree.

There is an open question as to how many of those who shifted from the Socialist Party to Melenchon did more than simply transfer a political allegiance at the ballot box. For many of them arrived to the ballot box through the experience of the struggles of 2016.

The same happened in Greece between 2010 and 2015. Former Pasok voters went to Syriza and to the left, not by watching party election broadcasts at home, but via the street - where they had marched and interacted with the activists of the anti-capitalist left. For some, it was not just party choice that changed, but deeper political understanding as well.

Some in France will have moved out of their experience of police racism and violence, and having participated in mobilisations of young, especially Black and Arab, people.

Exit polling showed that Melenchon was the most popular choice among French Muslim voters - at 37 percent.

Whatever the weaknesses of his position on migration and immigration, Melenchon is an anti-racist, and his campaign did make basic anti-racist arguments.

There is some evidence of it winning working class voters over directly from the the National Front. The NPA reports that experience from its own campaign.

Where that happened it would be for the same reasons that the NPA won people - with arguments put so well by its candidate Philippe Poutou in the televised debates.

And the profile of the Melenchon vote is not only clearly of the fighting left. It also is the big bloc of vote which most closely approximates to what the NPA is arguing.

Melenchon's voters are exactly those who, about 45 percent of them, say they will vote Macron for the reasons the NPA identifies among left and working class voters generally. But about one in three say, at this stage, they will abstain for exactly the good reasons the NPA gives. And then there is about one in seven who may vote FN, again for reasons the NPA understand.

They need to be won not to do so, with very much the line of argument Poutou put in the debates.

There is far greater potential support for the strategy the NPA is arguing than merely the 390,000 votes it won on Sunday.

Whatever your view of the electoral tactics of the anti-capitalist left in the first round, Poutou's blistering class-based attacks on Fillon and Le Pen in the debates won widespread plaudits - with even the international media recognising his effectiveness alongside Melenchon.

But recognising this does mean, I suggest, seeing the profound and positive shift represented in the rise of the Melenchon vote. He and *La France insoumise* are fighting to preserve and take it to the polling booths in five weeks time at the National Assembly elections, which are sort of a "Third Round" of the presidential process.

The vote for radical change, and with many of the voters understanding that that requires some strategy of social and political struggle, is way beyond the 390,000 NPA voters. That is the basic understanding of surely more than half - 3.5 million - of Melenchon's voters.

It is not just that they will comprise "activists" who will be involved in one or other of the many social struggles we can expect, and which the business website Bloomberg warned its readers this week to anticipate under a Macron presidency.

It's that many more have politically advanced under this experience of the Hollande presidency and the breakthrough by Melenchon in the last few months.

That means that the anti-capitalist left can aspire to helping to give a lead in the broad working class and social movements. Not just by being good activists in those movements. But politically - through forging common initiatives.

It means helping to answer the political dilemmas - such as how to unite the left to be effective in this second round, where the left is not on the ballot paper.

That places a premium upon political clarity; but also on recognising that Melenchon and *La France insoumise* are not going to go away, and that the anti-capitalist forces can influence its course of development. Not primarily through ideological debate or polemic. But by political leadership in united action.

It helps in that to appreciate firstly, and above all, everything that is positive about the rise of Melenchon and the swing of 3 million people to the left. Only upon that basis can one practically and decisively address the weaknesses, with and alongside much wider numbers of people.

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P.S.

* April 29, 2017:

<http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/18911-anti-capitalists-melenchon-and-7-7-million-voters-of-the-left>

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