

Presidential Election (France): The role of the Poutou candidacy

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Philippe Poutou's campaign, backed by the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA), in the 2017 French presidential election was a small success: in the televised debate of 5 April, we gained a certain notoriety in the confrontation with the right and the extreme right, Fillon and Le Pen. We succeeded in promoting the profile of a radical figure, a worker who does not accept the situation of the popular classes.

Five years later, the most frequent feedback on the campaign is that Philippe is "someone who talks like us". His refusal to be photographed with the other candidates during the televised debate, his ability to assert himself on difficult issues such as the role of the police and support for struggles against oppression have promoted a figure with a mass profile.

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In 2017, we did not manage to go further. It was almost impossible to advance political perspectives at a broader level, whether for the struggles or for the construction of an alternative and a party. Recruitment was limited, and the NPA crisis was not over.

The third Poutou campaign must set goals in relation to these starting points, in the context of the aggravated global crisis of the system. The success of the meetings of the last few days, in Toulouse and Strasbourg in particular, shows the potential of the campaign.



Copyright. Crédit Photo Meeting à Rennes avec Philippe Poutou le 2 décembre 2021. © NPA

The class struggle at an unstable equilibrium point

It is not the purpose of this text to review the latter, with its ecological, health, social and political dimensions. But we must note its effects at the political and institutional level. France, like many

other European countries, is experiencing a crisis of political representation, of the parties managing capitalism. The discredit of the classical right, based on the traditionalist bourgeoisie, Les Républicains, continues. The institutional left remains unable to (re)construct itself. The extreme right continues to grow stronger, with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement national struggling to position itself in the fight #for power but remaining a marker for the far right while Éric Zemmour embodies an openly fascist fringe, with the support of the billionaire Bolloré and a populist discourse aimed at the most reactionary fringes, especially among the petty bourgeoisie and those disappointed by Le Pen's "de-demonization".

The left, what remains of the organized workers' movement, is fragmented. The Socialist Party (PS) is paying for its policy of managing capitalism and its anti-social attacks, as are its allies such as the Greens, the Communist Party (PCF) or Génération.s. La France insoumise, led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, is distancing itself from the traditions of the workers' movement and the left, ignoring the huge gap between an institutional strategy in the absence of internal democracy and an attempt to rebuild a current opposed to the policies of the dominant parties. But these problems – and many others, especially on imperialism, the role of struggles and so on – are not enough to explain why there is to date no political expression of the world of work and an organization – even if reformist – capable of expressing the rejection of the policies of the government and the employers.

The weakness of the workers' movement and the centralized political expression of the interests of the working class is a key issue in the situation.

It is all these elements – the weakness of the left, the endurance of a weakened right, the rise of the extreme right – that allow Macron to stay in business, in an unstable equilibrium. His legitimacy is weak, but his regime is strong, that of a Bonaparte supported by the institutions of the Fifth Republic, which show their ability to build a strong regime despite a reduced social base.

This instability can be resolved in several ways, depending on Macron's successes, the social and political balance of forces, and the needs of the bourgeoisie in the context of international competition. The mobilizations that have existed for several months on a small scale, in health, for wages, for employment, and especially mass mobilizations such as those in Guadeloupe and Martinique, echoing the mobilizations of the Gilets jaunes or, with their ambiguities, against the health pass, show a potential for the working class to change the balance of forces. Even if the reactions against the pass and its liberticidal consequences have been limited and have not raised the demand for the rejection of patents and for health resources.

Thus, at this stage, it is the ruling class that holds the cards and guides the pace of anti-social attacks. This is the second key element of the situation: there is an urgent need to build a militant opposition to the government, to inflict a major defeat on it. This point is completely intertwined with the possibility of reconstructing a political expression of the world of work. Classes that take the initiative, which are able to equip themselves with representatives and a policy, which win struggles, are strengthened. Macron constitutes the dominant, majority political representation of the bourgeoisie, while the proletariat is deprived of political leadership and unity of action and, quite simply, actions.

The beginnings of a recomposition on the left

The situation on the left is blocked: the parties most linked to the institutions – PS, Greens and PCF – have no other perspective than to try to position themselves as a reasonable recourse against the right and Macron. But it is difficult to see how this could work, since they seem unable to give any hope other than to make a system in which the population no longer believes work.

La France insoumise, on the other hand, tries to formulate the possibility of a radical alternative to the political personnel and the orientations given. But the Mélenchon system has reached its limit: the ambiguous discourse concerning some markers for the politicized sectors of the popular classes (on immigration, on the left-right divide and so on) does not excite, while his posture as a man of destiny was defeated in the two previous elections, especially since it is formulated in a sectarian way in relation to the rest of the workers' movement, as a refusal to unite the left and to concretely support the trade union and associative movement. Initiatives such as the "popular primary" illustrate that sections of the popular left are fed up with its division.

So, it seems that a significant fringe of the world of work is looking for something new, which responds to the global crisis of the system and the erosion of the institutional parties, something that raises hope on the left.

These hopes are full of ambiguity. Many young people and employees are nostalgic for a left that brings social progress, which is close to them, that does not betray its commitments, but that is part of an approach within institutions, social dialogue, national cohesion. There is no revolutionary consciousness and conscious alternative project to capitalism in this aspiration. But, on the other hand, who, apart from our current, can represent such a left, honest, combative, unitary and radical, which does not renounce any of its commitments both on questions of capital-labour relations and on internationalist and democratic questions, especially in the struggle against oppression? Certainly not far left organizations like Lutte Ouvrière, the POID (Lambertiste) or Révolution permanente, since these organizations are characterized by their sectarianism towards other currents of the workers' movement and thus refuse to discuss the problems that arise for those who want to rebuild it, sincerely, without having a strategy to do so.

It is therefore our responsibility to create a bridge between this aspiration for a political project that breaks with the policies pursued and our revolutionary project.

There is no doubt that following the presidential election, new problems will arise. The PS will not be able to continue in the same way, La France insoumise will be hit hard by a new failure on Mélenchon's part. Recompositions will take place within the institutional left, posing to millions of activists, more than ever without a clear political perspective, the question of the party. In this new period, we will have to try to pose the decisive problems: the need to rebuild a workers' movement, united, capable of influencing the political scene, and a party whose *raison d'être* is to have a strategy to overthrow capitalism, a revolutionary project, and construct a socialist society.

Basically, the meaning of Poutou's candidacy is to pose the question of a party for the exploited, its construction in opposition to bourgeois politicians, its strategy in a period of deep crisis of capitalism and class consciousness. Asking the question, without being able at this stage to solve it. To vote for Philippe Poutou is to affirm support for this project.

Four political points to articulate

From these issues, there are a few salient points that form the basis of our campaign:

1/ We are part of the (re)construction of the workers' movement, we want to get rid of Macron and all those who follow this type of politics.

2/ The extreme right is our worst enemy, we must fight it, silence it, and let the popular classes and all those who believe in democratic rights unite against it, without illusions in institutional solutions.

3/ We want to overthrow capitalism, this system in deep crisis and governed by the pursuit of profit, to build another society. We want to build a party to prepare this confrontation, this social revolution. We want to organize now all those who want to work on this project.

4/ We want to be useful now for those who do not want to wait for the revolution, by putting forward emergency demands that break with capitalist logic.

Some key programmatic points for the period

1/ Faced with the threat to humanity, a revolutionary ecology

The IPCC report, the failure of the COP and the pandemic show that there is no progress in global policies and that humanity is heading for disaster. Macron's response is the promotion of nuclear power, that is, the threat of an even faster devastation of the world.

Our solution combines planning, under the control of employees, in all areas, particularly energy, which will lead to energy and productive restraint, an exit from fossil fuels, and massive investment in public services, whether in transport, health, research or education.

2/ Faced with the growth of poverty, take back the money stolen by the employers

Millions of people are working harder and longer while millions more are falling into poverty or precariousness. We must increase wages by 400 euros, with a minimum income of 1800 euros, share working time until unemployment is eliminated, prohibit lay-offs and job cuts, give an autonomy allowance to all young people to study, train or look for a first job. Faced with the crisis, we must requisition the banks and cancel the debt, stop all gifts to large companies (exemptions, CECI and so on) and tax fraud.

3/ Faced with the democratic crisis, repression and oppression

Bourgeois democracy is in crisis. The rise of the far right and authoritarian policies are a support for super exploitation, disciplining, oppressing. The reactionary currents of the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie are organizing. On our side too, we must organize, unify all the oppressed and exploited to confront them, for an egalitarian and solidarity-based world.

We demand equality for all, against discrimination, at work, whether for women's wages or the right to work for foreigners, for freedom of movement and settlement. We want freedom for oppressed peoples, whether dominated countries or French colonies, for whom we demand the right to self-determination, public services and decent wages, an end to repression. We want to dissolve the anti-democratic institutions of the Fifth Republic, whether it is the presidential office, the Senate or its repressive police, we want to limit the salary of elected officials to the average salary, to make all functions revocable.

A transitional approach

In an election period, many employees and young people turn to us because they are looking for a solution and think that honest activists like us can be actors. People who do not necessarily believe in our social project but can no longer bear capitalism.

To all these people, we propose to be active together, from now on, to defend slogans for a definitive

break with current policies, to work for the reconstruction of a strong, unitary, militant workers' movement, in connection with the struggles of recent years, the Gilets jaunes, strikes for pensions, wages and employment, feminist and LGBTI struggles, anti-racist mobilizations and against police violence.

Our position, as a small organization, can paradoxically play a positive role: we do not sell dreams, voting for Philippe Poutou will not solve problems, we need a balance of power. Being active with us, defending this candidacy, getting the highest possible vote, being present in the legislative elections to build a national network and activist collectives throughout the country, this helps to advance our ideas, to prepare the battles before us that will change the balance of forces between the classes. We are a small organization with regard to what is at stake in this period, we must build a mass party, we propose to all those who recognize themselves globally in our project to join us to contribute to it.

The party we want is the concrete realization of this political project. Also, we want to set up broad committees of support for Poutou, which will aim to involve the thousands of people who recognize themselves in the general ideas of the campaign. We all see when we distribute leaflets that a significant enthusiasm is expressed in the popular neighbourhoods for the Poutou campaign, it is up to us to transform it into a militant force. The meeting at the University of Toulouse Le Mirail, which brought together more than 500 young people and during which a hundred made contact, shows the existing potential, the possibility of conducting an experience of political action with thousands of employees, young people, precarious workers. At the end of this campaign, a good part may be interested in regular activism, in the construction of the party, while others will not want this but will be strengthened by a militant experience that will contribute to rebuilding the workers' movement over the long term.

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P.S.

- Fourth International.
<https://fourth.international/en/europe/414>

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