

France Insoumise's "Consensus" Model Is Cracking Apart

Friday 23 December 2022, by [STETLER Harrison](#) (Date first published: 22 December 2022).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise claimed to replace old political parties using ad hoc structures based on "consensus." But battles over its post-Mélenchon future have pitched this model into crisis — and show the need for real democratic structures.

Contents

- [Coordinated](#)
- [Centralism](#)
- [Quatennens](#)

La France Insoumise (LFI), the electoral vehicle founded in 2016 by veteran left-wing leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, is caught in an untimely internal power struggle. At a closed-door assembly on December 10, MP and "coordinator" Manuel Bompard unveiled the makeup of LFI's new central committee, marking an organizational evolution as it adapts to its new position as the center of gravity on the French left.

Leveraging his close ties with Mélenchon, whose 2022 presidential campaign he directed, Bompard is maintaining a structure sticking to the centralism long embraced by his mentor. Decision-making power will be concentrated in weekly, twenty-one-member "coordinating committee" meetings, peopled largely by Mélenchon loyalists and figures he's shepherded to the center stage of national politics.

Un beholden to internal party democracy — the self-styled "movement" has no fees-paying members or system of grassroots leadership selection — the coordinating committee will remain largely autonomous in steering the party line and strategic direction. Bompard tellingly [quipped](#) to left-wing outlet *Mediapart* that "voting is not the alpha and omega of democracy," as party insiders remark that decisions have always and will continue to be made by "consensus."

Rounding out the opaque organizational structure, a weaker and larger "council" is slated to hold monthly meetings, bringing in figures excluded from the coordinating committee. But in a [blog post](#) published on December 11, Mélenchon referred to this body as a "consultative council," leading critics to suggest it will be little more than a shell that could soon follow similar previous experiments quickly rendered obsolete. Lead by Mathilde Panot, the parliamentary caucus will retain a considerable degree of agenda-setting power, bringing together its now seventy-four MPs in the National Assembly.

Internal party critics and outside observers decry the new coordinating committee as a power grab by Mélenchon loyalists. At a time when the question of the eventual succession to seventy-one-year-old leader Mélenchon is again being posed, many interpret it as symptomatic of his continued sway

over LFI. Formally absent from national politics after having declined to seek reelection as an MP in June, Mélenchon has remained heavily implicated in the political force he brought into existence, intervening constantly in national debates and interparty wrangling.

Mélenchon's most fervent admirers view this as a boon to the movement — crediting his name recognition, political acumen, and ability to reorient the public debate. But for others, it kicks down the road the eventual process of rallying behind new figures.

Coordinated

The new coordinating committee sidelines many of Mélenchon's more notable fellow travelers like Clémentine Autain, Éric Coquerel, Raquel Garrido, and Alexis Corbière. They have all been on LFI's leading roster since the party's founding, loyal foot soldiers of France Insoumise and Mélenchon. But the exclusion of a few internal party critics has nourished accusations of a party purge.

An MP representing suburbs north of Paris, Autain has long voiced criticism over the "left-populist" line cleaved to by Mélenchon, urging that France Insoumise prove more flexible in its relations with other forces on the Left. A prominent writer and feminist activist before winning election to parliament in 2017, in an [extended interview with *Libération*](#), Autain denounced what she deems a "closing off" of the movement's structure and called for France Insoumise's "democratization."

François Ruffin, who had carved out a national reputation as a journalist and documentary filmmaker before entering electoral politics in 2017, will also not sit in the coordinating committee. Ruffin has criticized France Insoumise as a party representing major metropolitan centers at the expense of rural working-class regions like Picardy, which he represents in Parliament.

Eleven of the twenty-one coordinating committee members are from Paris and the surrounding suburbs, as the force has made its greatest inroads in major urban areas. In that regard, Ruffin's call for the party to directly target former left-wing voters swayed by Marine Le Pen is laudable. But the position has at times led him into questionable terrain, such as challenging the broader movement's critiques of structural police violence.

In *Le Monde*, Ruffin regretted that the new coordinating committee reflected a "little group that has come to an agreement among itself." Contacted by *Jacobin*, the Picardy MP's press team replied that France Insoumise "doesn't interest François," specifying that he'd be happy to speak about the difficult conditions facing French people. Cultivating a political-maverick persona, Ruffin leads his own local micro-party, Picardie, Debout! but has caucused in Parliament and campaigned with LFI.

The debacle is less reflective of major ideological differences, however, and could be more a function of the desire to reduce access to figures who take liberties communicating with media to vent party disagreements. Though they may at times make different strategic critiques of LFI, Ruffin and Autain have in common the fact that their stature partially predated and is thus not entirely beholden to France Insoumise and therefore Mélenchon. They are likewise figures presumed to be nourishing presidential candidacy ambitions, a justification for sidelining them from access to the coordinating committee, according to sources.

Defenders of the new coordinating committee claim that the opacity surrounding France Insoumise's institutional structure is part of what has allowed it to succeed in recent years, growing from a presidential campaign organ into a political force consisting of scores of parliamentarians. Danièle Obono MP told *Jacobin* that "this debate needs to be contextualized within the broader political context, which is about the new responsibilities that our movement now has."

"The form of this movement is not unconnected to the fact that we've been able to pull off what we've achieved," says Obono, who will sit on the new committee.

For sociologist Manuel Cervera-Marzal, author of a [2021 study](#) on France Insoumise, controversy over France Insoumise's internal functioning is "cyclical," having bubbled up after the 2017 election when it also faced the task of moving forward strategically. "Everyone knew from the beginning in 2016 that this organization was made for its leader to have free rein," Cervera-Marzal told *Jacobin*.

If the new coordinating committee is well within the pattern of France Insoumise, other developments point toward the emergence of a more traditional partisan structure. The party is currently in the process of acquiring local offices in départements not represented by LFI deputies and is now authorizing intermediary party structures at the municipal and regional levels, between the preexisting local action groups and the upper-level echelons of party leadership.

"They seem to be evolving toward more local anchoring, but on the question of party pluralism, there is clearly a closing off," Cervera-Marzal told *Jacobin*:

There's a massive overrepresentation of young thirtysomethings whose political capital is entirely beholden to Jean-Luc Mélenchon and who are therefore the loyal of the loyal. There's an overrepresentation of MPs [eighteen of the twenty-one members] — so little autonomy of the "movement" relative to parliamentary leadership. And an overrepresentation of Parisians and officials from Île-de-France [the region surrounding the capital].

Candidate or not in 2027, Mélenchon will have his say. France Insoumise is soon slated to launch a [training academy](#) for young party activists, with Mélenchon leading a seminar on his 2014 essay, "L'Ère du peuple."

Centralism

Pundits have chalked up France Insoumise's seemingly engrained centralism to Mélenchon's Trotskyist roots. Like several eventual Socialist Party leaders, Mélenchon came of age politically in the Trotskyist student movement before joining François Mitterrand's party in the mid-1970s. The latter half of Mélenchon's three-decade-long tenure in the Parti Socialiste likewise had him swimming against the tide of a political force tugged toward neoliberalism by its more right-wing factions.

France Insoumise's centralism and personality-based politics are hardly an exception in French public life. Le Pen's Rassemblement National and Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance (formerly La République en Marche) are also ultra-top-down party-movements that largely serve as organizational buffers for presidential campaigns. In France, like in just about every liberal democracy, it is the traditional mass-membership party as such that seems irreparably in crisis.

Something of Mélenchon's political ruthlessness was no doubt necessary through — or symptomatic of — the general breakdown of France's party system over the last decade. For now, at least, the broader left has avoided the fate of other continental counterparts like in Italy, with France Insoumise having successfully stitched together an autonomous political space free of the doldrums of the old Parti Socialiste and the puritan one-upmanship of the ultraleft.

But it's hard to shake the impression that France Insoumise has outgrown its own model of functioning. It is no longer 2008 or 2016: thanks to its own electoral success, France Insoumise has evolved from a scrappy presidential campaign vehicle into a force with a commanding sway over the left-wing pole in French politics, including the broad-left alliance known as [NUPES](#) (New Ecological and Social Popular Union).

What made sense institutionally to channel a protest vote and to weaken and eventually displace the Parti Socialiste has proven less effective in establishing a locally implanted political force, bringing in and expanding a committed swath of members and activists. Useful during presidential elections each five years, a top-heavy leadership structure is not effective for the interceding years when politics ought to be about durable coalition building and the extending of local roots.

Quatennens

The dangerous disconnect between a closed-off organization and the expectations of a broader movement has been on excruciating display throughout this fall. In September, news broke that Adrien Quatennens — a staunch Mélenchon loyalist and erstwhile heir apparent of LFI — had physically abused his wife. Throughout the unfolding saga, Mélenchon ceaselessly defended Quatennens, urging his lieutenant to not yield to what he dismissed as a media witch-hunt.

By all appearances, Mélenchon has exerted his sway over party leadership in Parliament to do the same. On December 13, Quatennens was sentenced in Lille to a four-month suspended prison sentence, as he prepares to regain his seat next spring. Snubbing calls from its NUPES partners and feminist activists to permanently expel Quatennens, France Insoumise's parliamentary group announced that he could be reintegrated following his completion of a prevention workshop on violence against women. The position reeks of double standards, contradicting the force's claim to be an institutional outlet for the feminist movement.

A thorn in the side of the left-wing opposition, France Insoumise's postelection debacles have only weakened its authority over the other parties in NUPES's orbit. France Insoumise has won a legitimate claim to leadership on the French left. But it needs to evolve and act like the big-tent force that it has become.

HARRISON STETLER

P.S.

- Jacobin. 12.22.2022:
<https://jacobin.com/2022/12/france-insoumise-melenchon-leadership-democracy>
- Harrison Stetler is a freelance journalist and teacher based in Paris.