

France's New Popular Front Has a Plan to Govern

Tuesday 18 June 2024, by [STETLER Harrison](#) (Date first published: 15 June 2024).

France's snap elections are widely seen as an opportunity for Marine Le Pen's far right. But the left-wing parties' Nouveau Front Populaire has a real possibility of stopping her — and it's laid out a radical program to rebuild France's dilapidated democracy.

Contents

- [After NUPES](#)
- [First Days](#)
- [Horror Stories](#)

Manuel Bompard of La France Insoumise speaks during the New Popular Front press conference at the Maison de la Chimie in Paris, France, on June 14, 2024. (Amaury Cornu / Hans Lucas / AFP via Getty Images)

The Nouveau Front Populaire has officially been born. On Thursday evening, France's four leading left-wing forces finalized a wide-ranging alliance aimed at defeating Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in the upcoming snap elections and laying the groundwork for a different kind of government.

France Insoumise, the Parti Socialiste, the Parti Communiste, and Les Écologistes will be running a common bloc of candidates across France's 577 constituencies for the first-round vote, to be held on June 30. Lingering left-wing divisions kept such a deal out of reach in the June 9 European elections, which Jordan Bardella's Rassemblement National list won with a double-digit lead over any of its rivals. The far right's historic victory pushed President Emmanuel Macron to announce the surprise dissolution of the National Assembly on Sunday evening.

On June 14, left-wing party leaders met at a conference center near the National Assembly to lay out in greater detail the 150-measure "legislative contract" that makes up the alliance's policy platform. "We're going to govern to change people's lives," said Écologistes president Marine Tondelier, as she and rest of the left-wing alliance's leadership exchanged the microphone. They laid out the major axes of a governing program that includes an increase in the minimum wage, investments in public services, a repeal of Macron's 2023 retirement reform, a restoration of taxes on the wealthiest fortunes, and a move toward "ecological planning."

With the imminent possibility of a far-right government, the Nouveau Front Populaire is more than just a survival pact between parties. Its leaders are promising to work closely with social movements and associations to build a durable coalition against the far right. After the statements from party top brass, a Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) trade unionist from a recently shuttered Stellantis automobile factory in the Paris suburbs took to the podium to offer his "full support" of the alliance. He was followed by the director of Greenpeace France, who praised the Popular Front's program as "rising to the challenge of transforming society" — and pledged to hold it to account.

After NUPES

France's often fractious left-wing parties had to overcome many obstacles to pull off this agreement. The Nouveau Front Populaire is largely a revival of the Nouveau Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale (NUPES) alliance formed in the lead-up to the June 2022 legislative elections, which denied Macron an absolute majority in the National Assembly. But this ever-unstable pact definitively fractured after the Hamas-led attacks on October 7 and the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. That these forces were able to reunite in under one week after they ran against each other in the European elections has caught many by surprise — likely even Macron, whose call for snap elections was timed to exploit a fractured French left.

Sunday's European Union (EU) elections threatened to further inflame the confrontation between the center-left Parti Socialiste and France Insoumise, which was the dominant party in the NUPES alliance and the largest left-wing force in the outgoing parliament. A reenergized Parti Socialiste looked forward to pointing to its relative success in last Sunday's vote (rising from 6 to 14 percent) as justification for marginalizing France Insoumise (which scored 10 percent — down from 2022, albeit up from the previous European election vote from 2019). There was a new "balance of power," said Raphaël Glucksmann, the Parti Socialiste's lead candidate in the European elections, in a hotheaded television interview on Monday evening, just as left-wing leaderships were meeting to hash out the initial framework for a pact.

Hundreds of thousands of people are expected to again take to the streets against the Rassemblement National. And they now have a political program to rally behind.

Alliance negotiations were briefly suspended Thursday morning, primarily over the division of parliamentary constituencies but also over disputes about the substantive elements of the alliance program. In the first-round vote on June 30, France Insoumise candidates will run in 229 seats, followed by 175 candidacies for the Parti Socialiste, 92 for the Écologistes and 50 for the Parti Communiste. This distribution reflects a slight shift away from France Insoumise, mainly in favor of the Parti Socialiste.

Other points of tension included the platform's reference to Hamas as a "terrorist" organization and the war in Ukraine. France Insoumise's response to October 7, which the party refused to term a terrorist attack, was the immediate trigger for the Parti Socialiste's abandonment of the NUPES alliance last fall.

But these divisions merely papered over an obvious fact: without unity, France's left-wing parties would stand no chance in these snap elections, in all likelihood increasing the odds of a victory for the Rassemblement National. In Paris and other cities, thousands of people have held rallies over several evenings this week demanding left-wing unity. On Saturday, June 15, hundreds of thousands of people are expected to again take to the streets for the first day of national action against the Rassemblement National. And they now have a political program to rally behind.

First Days

Although it contains some changes from the 2022 NUPES platform, the “legislative contract” proposed by the Nouveau Front Populaire lays out a wide program of democratic reforms. The Left’s plan is divided into three phases. The first fifteen days of left-wing government are meant to see a slate of “emergency” measures, including an immediate increase in after-tax minimum wage to €1600 per month, price freezes on necessities and as energy bills, investment in social housing, and a rejection of EU deficit spending rules — albeit without reasserting France Insoumise’s previous mantra of “disobeying” the EU treaties.

Next, the first one hundred days would lay the groundwork for proposed “changes of course” through five legislative packages covering purchasing power, education, the health care system, “ecological planning” and the “abolition of billionaire privileges.” The months beyond — titled “transformations” — are to see the sustainable reinforcement of public services, the “right to housing,” green reindustrialization, reforms to policing and the criminal justice system, and constitutional changes leading to the founding of a “Sixth Republic” to replace the current quasi-monarchical presidency.

The Left’s “legislative contract” would mark a clean break from the leitmotif of the Macron years: attacks on welfare state protections and the erosion of public services in favor of a transfer of economic power to the wealthiest. A new left-wing government would cancel Macron’s tightening of the unemployment insurance system, the latest edition of which is scheduled to come into effect this summer. The plan calls for wage increases for public sector workers and free school cafeteria lunches from this coming September. In the first fifteen days, Macron’s 2022 increase of the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four years would be abrogated. However, the program seems to have walked back France Insoumise’s promise to return the retirement age to sixty.

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Unwinding Macron-era handouts for the wealthy and big capital, the Left’s plan offers to restore several former fiscal regimes. The alliance is calling for the revival of a wealth tax on large fortunes, which was replaced early in Macron’s presidency with a smaller, less progressive tax on real estate wealth. Likewise, it seeks the restoration of a canceled “exit tax” on the withdrawal of wealth from the country, as well as the tightening of a new flat tax on capital gains. With corporations like French oil major Total raking in windfall profits since the post-pandemic energy crunch, the alliance is also calling for a new tax on “superprofits.”

If elected, the Popular Front would enact the biggest policy shift by a Western power on the Israel-Palestine conflict since October 7. The deal calls for an immediate cease-fire in Israel’s war in Gaza, alongside the liberation of all Israeli hostages in the Gaza Strip and Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli jails. To put pressure on Israel, it calls for an arms embargo and the suspension of the EU’s association agreement with the Israeli state. While defining the Hamas’s October 7 attacks as “terrorist,” a left-alliance government would seek sanctions against Benjamin Netanyahu’s

government and work to enforce potential International Criminal Court warrants against Israeli officials, including Israel's current head of government. Working within the framework of a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the left-wing alliance calls for "immediate recognition" of Palestinian statehood.

Also on international policy, the alliance's agreement says it "unconditionally supports the sovereignty and liberty of the Ukrainian people as well as the integrity of their borders." It will pursue further arms deliveries, the cancellation of Ukrainian foreign debt, and the seizure of assets in France owned by Russian oligarchs.

Horror Stories

In the coming weeks, the Nouveau Front Populaire and its "legislative contract" will surely be the target of innumerable smears. Macron's allies and pundits will tell horror stories of a de facto French exit from the European Union or an impending financial crisis. On the Israel-Palestine conflict, others will allege that antisemitism is on the cusp of becoming official state policy. Centrists will bemoan a left-wing alliance still under the yoke of France Insoumise, and construct elaborate moral arguments about why a vote for it is as dangerous as a vote for Le Pen.

In fact, it's far from inconceivable that the Popular Front could emerge as the main competitor to the Rassemblement National. Polls suggest this is plausible or even likely. But more than just a response to Le Pen, it is running with a detailed and far-reaching plan for a different kind of government.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 06.15.2024:
https://jacobin.com/2024/06/france-popular-front-macron-le-pen?mc_cid=5e5c4daa40&mc_eid=ed033bb17d

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