

Snap elections: France's Left Needs Unity More Than Ever

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The New Popular Front represents the French left's best chance to block Marine Le Pen's path. But a purge of candidates in its biggest force, France Insoumise, is troubling its ranks — and highlights the need for more democratic decision-making.

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A supporter holds a placard during an open-air legislative campaign meeting of the electoral coalition of left-wing parties dubbed the Nouveau Front Populaire (New Popular Front) at Place Jean-Jaures in Montreuil, France on June 17, 2024. (Ludovic Marin / AFP via Getty Images)

All things considered, it was a good week for France's left.

On June 9, Emmanuel Macron had called snap elections, hoping to dig a knife into the deep divisions among the country's four main left-wing parties. The idea was to force as many voters as possible into yet another "republican front" standoff between the president's centrist coalition and the far-right Rassemblement National.

Instead, within just days France Insoumise, the Parti Socialiste, Les Écologistes, and the Parti Communiste formed a fresh alliance. With Macron's own party lagging in most polls, and as the traditional center-right Républicains devolved into civil war, the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) offered a rare case of unity and pragmatic discipline in the fight to fend off the possibility of far-right government. On Friday, the left-wing alliance rolled out [a broad platform](#) for democratic reform, renewed public services, wealth redistribution, and green investments.

But no sooner had the NFP formed, many of the Left's tendencies toward self-destruction again started to resurface. With hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets this past Saturday, there's likely enough momentum and sense of urgency to keep the various forces together. But the latest outbreak of controversy — kicked off by a purge in France Insoumise, the party founded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the largest left-wing force in the outgoing parliament — represents the habits that threaten to undermine a durable alliance.

On Friday evening, hours after the leadership of the NFP presented the bloc's "legislative contract," France Insoumise issued its list of candidates seeking election in the 229 constituencies reserved to the party according to the alliance agreement. To the concern of many both inside and outside France Insoumise, the party's list excluded several prominent outgoing MPs, including old stalwarts of the Mélenchonist force such as Alexis Corbière and Raquel Garrido, who have argued for a more conciliatory approach toward the other left-wing forces. Their sidelining comes despite the claims in

the alliance negotiations last week that an NFP would mostly reselect outgoing deputies elected as part of the Left's previous alliance, the New Ecological and Social Popular Union (NUPES) formed in 2022.

If what was needed was building trust, the move by France Insoumise to exclude these figures sent entirely the wrong message. Leaders of the other left-wing forces, alongside several key figures of France Insoumise, have widely denounced the move as a "purge." They see it as the sort of hardball antics that have tarnished the image of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and that, in their view, have made the seventy-two-year-old leftist veteran a political liability. Despite not holding elected office since 2022, Mélenchon still exerts a considerable degree of control over France Insoumise and has a base of devoted followers both in the party and among the wider electorate.

"This decision . . . affects MPs that strongly pushed for a union between left-wing and ecological forces and against whom there is nothing to reproach in terms of their political engagements," eighty intellectuals and civil society leaders wrote [in a letter](#) published by *Le Nouvel Obs* on June 16. "It throws into doubt the project for democratizing society proposed by the Nouveau Front Populaire, of which [France Insoumise] is one of the major component forces."

Tight-Knit

Many France Insoumise figures brush off the narrative of a Mélenchon-dictated party purge, insisting that this scandal won't resonate beyond political and media circles in Paris. But figures like Corbière and Garrido were already sidelined from [the new France Insoumise directorate](#) created in late 2022 to formalize the centralization of decision-making around a Mélenchonist core. "These people made our caucus's life impossible in the last National Assembly," one reselected France Insoumise MP said of the ousted figures, at Saturday's massive anti-fascist march in Paris. "We could hardly hold a party meeting without our discussions being essentially funneled right to the press."

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A standoff between a faction of France Insoumise and Mélenchon had been brewing for some time already. Beyond criticizing the lack of internal democracy, Garrido and Corbière were among the figures arguing that France Insoumise should work at all costs toward reviving an alliance with the rest of the Left. One obstacle to this alliance was the right wing in the Parti Socialiste, which had ardently opposed a pact with France Insoumise. This faction ultimately gained the upper hand over party secretary Olivier Faure and forced the Parti Socialiste's suspension of its participation in the NUPES last fall. Yet France Insoumise's internal dissidents considered that their own party's often aggressive rhetoric and confrontational strategy — code, really, for Mélenchon's lingering clout — [was also to blame](#) for the crack-up of the prior alliance.

On May 30, *Libération* reported that several France Insoumise figures — including Garrido and Corbière — were [in discussion](#) with other left-wing forces and actors in civil society and preparing calls for [the refoundation of a left-wing](#) alliance after the European elections. With everyone

prepared for the Parti Socialiste to edge ahead of France Insoumise — as did indeed happen in the June 9 vote — this new push for unity would inevitably entail the marginalization of Mélenchon.

Something along the lines of that alliance became a matter of necessity with the surprise dissolution of the National Assembly. Many observers thus view this weekend's purge as an attempt by Mélenchon and his closest supporters to hold on to influence within the party. Before last week's dramatic turn of events, in fact, Mélenchon seems to have been suspicious of the advantages of rebuilding an alliance with the center left: "Political union with a [Parti Socialiste] that has returned to its right-wing demons would be an obstacle to popular unity," he wrote in a blog post on May 28. The crisis that intervened brushed under the rug what would have been a full-frontal confrontation between a newly confident Parti Socialiste, and quite possibly a faction of France Insoumise, and Mélenchon. A glimmer of that was also seen on Monday, June 10, when the Parti Socialiste's lead candidate in the European elections, Raphaël Glucksmann, took to television to declare his conditions for unity and boast that the "balance of power" had changed.

The new union is still looked at by many — certainly within France Insoumise — as a marriage of necessity. France Insoumise MP Danièle Obono confirmed to *Jacobin* that the ousting of the deputies was about the political goal of maintaining a "unified" and "tight-knit" group — not only against the far right or what remains of the Macronist coalition, but also in preparation for the power struggle that will persist in an eventual NFP bloc in the next parliament. For Obono, France Insoumise needs to be prepared to maintain a *rapport de force*, or a confrontational stance relative to the other left-wing parties. "Life-time seats don't exist," Mélenchon explained [in an interview published Saturday](#). "Political coherence and loyalty in the largest left-wing caucus in the National Assembly are also a necessity for governing."

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Not all critical voices within France Insoumise were sidelined, however. Both known to be considering presidential election runs in 2027, Clémentine Autain and François Ruffin — prominent figures who've long sought to cultivate their political independence relative to Mélenchon — were renewed in their respective constituencies in the Paris area and Amiens.

The two have joined the chorus of dissent over the delisting purge, however. "The far-right is on the cusp of power, an unprecedented front has just been built on the left, and [France Insoumise] decides to fracture our movement and weaken this unity," Autain [wrote on Twitter/X](#). Hendrik Davi, a Marseille deputy and an ally of Autain, was among the ousted MPs. These deputies were likewise internal critics of the party line adopted in the aftermath of Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, which the party referred to as an "armed offensive of Palestinian forces" in a press release that day. This further isolated France Insoumise and served as the final pretext for the Parti Socialiste's suspension of the NUPES alliance in the National Assembly.

Certain France Insoumise candidate selections have shocked left-wing voters and NFP partners, serving as yet another reminder of the lack of party democracy. Together with the purges, the party's initial announcement that it had renewed a candidacy for Adrien Quatennens, a close Mélenchon lieutenant, was at the center of controversy over the weekend. In 2022 condemned to a

four-month suspended prison sentence for domestic violence — actions that he admits — Quatennens briefly had to step back from the France Insoumise group, although he has since been reinstated. In the face of mounting criticism, the outgoing deputy announced on Sunday morning that he would withdraw from the race.

Political differences aside, Frédéric Mathieu, an outgoing MP from Brittany, appears to have also been the target of complaints of harassment from local militants, according to [a June 16 press release](#) from the Rennes chapter of France Insoumise. France Insoumise national coordinator Manuel Bompard said on Sunday that the party “stood by” its decision to deselect the candidates. Meanwhile, Garrido, Corbière, Davi, Mathieu, and outgoing Paris MP Danielle Simonnet are now leading dissident campaigns, meaning that they will be running against France Insoumise’s officially selected candidates. June 16 was the deadline for candidacy submission, two weeks from the June 30 first-round vote.

Hollande

France Insoumise was not the only left-wing force to see internal score-settling and arm-twisting over the weekend. Former president François Hollande came out in support of the NFP alliance last week — in contrast to other old-guard leaders of the Parti Socialiste, like Hollande’s last prime minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, as some party figures opposed to the NFP alliance are leading their own dissident campaigns. To the surprise of many, news began to circulate on Saturday morning that Hollande would also be a Parti Socialiste candidate in his old Corrèze stronghold. The Parti Socialiste formerly disavowed Hollande’s candidacy, however, before reversing course and announcing that the party would withdraw its previously selected candidate in favor of the former president, one of the powerbrokers of the party’s right-wing.

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That Macron’s political mentor Hollande is running — the figure who finalized the Parti Socialiste’s pro-market turn during his 2012–2017 presidency, a shift largely stewarded by Macron, then the economy minister — is one of the peculiar ironies of France’s NFP. In another surprising announcement, Aurélien Rousseau, health minister under Macron between July and December 2023, was selected as a candidate on the Parti Socialiste–Place Publique list. Rousseau resigned from government last December over the adoption of a stringent immigration bill that relied on the votes of the Rassemblement National, a law that Marine Le Pen referred to as an “ideological victory.”

There are legitimate arguments for running candidacies like Rousseau’s and Hollande’s. The point of the NFP is to build a big-tent opposition against the far right. France’s last center-left president and a former Macronist minister formally support a program that not only rolls back the most aggressive policies of the Macron years, but that also lays out a plan to make a firmer “rupture” from the political and economic status quo, including the restoration of taxes on capital, changes to the constitution leading to a Sixth Republic, and “ecological planning.” Their at least formal support cuts against the argument that the NFP does not represent a serious force capable of government.

But they are also the seeds of future divisions. In an attempt to divide the NFP alliance by bolstering the center left, Macron's coalition has announced that it will not run candidates in constituencies reserved for many Parti Socialiste-affiliated candidates, as well as center-right candidates for Les Républicains opposed to party leader Éric Ciotti's alliance with Marine Le Pen. In total, Macron and his allies have withdrawn candidacies from sixty-seven constituencies.

The restrengthening of the Parti Socialiste is already looked on with deep suspicion by members of France Insoumise, in a prelude to the coming battles within the NFP. "If we remain the majority force [on the Left] in the next parliament, we need to be ready to preserve the balance of power," Obono told *Jacobin*, describing France Insoumise strategy in relation to the other left-wing forces.

Combustible

However united they may be in their opposition to Le Pen, there is just as much that sets the forces in this alliance apart. France Insoumise's often ruthless party discipline was designed for confrontation with France's other left-wing parties — a strategy that has long set the tenor of Mélenchon's communicating strategy. This has been an asset in building a committed base of a support for the far left as well as a big handicap in cultivating ties with other forces, as the firebrand's [declining popularity](#) among the broader public seems to suggest.

In evicting internal critics and specifically some of the voices within France Insoumise who've been most vocal in favor of working with the center-left, the party is sending a message that a rapprochement can only go so far. And coupled with the possible reinforcement of the center-left establishment, that's no doubt a fact. All the ingredients are there for more combustible infighting. But it's not really the time.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 06.19.2024:
<https://jacobin.com/2024/06/france-left-divisions-new-popular-front>