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Macron and neo-fascist Le Pen advance to run-off in French presidential elections

By Alex Lantier

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In a historic collapse of the two-party system that has ruled France since the May–June 1968 general strike, the candidates of the Socialist Party (PS) and The Republicans (LR) were eliminated in the first round of the French presidential elections. Ex-PS Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron will face Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) in the May 7 run-off.

According to official Interior Ministry figures, Macron obtained 23.55 percent of the vote to Le Pen's 22.32 percent. LR candidate François Fillon obtained 19.88 percent, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Unsubmissive France movement, backed by the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), obtained 19.01 percent of the vote.

PS candidate Benoît Hamon received only 6.12 percent of the vote. This is a historic collapse of a leading European social-democratic party comparable only to the disintegration of Greece's Pasok party, after it imposed economically suicidal European Union (EU) austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 Wall Street crash. The PS government's deep austerity measures, its imposition of a state of emergency suspending basic democratic rights and its overtures to the FN under President François Hollande have discredited the party.

Fillon and Hamon both endorsed Macron, calling on voters to choose him in order to prevent Le Pen from winning the presidency. Hamon called his defeat a "deep wound," a "moral defeat,"

and “historic punishment” imposed by voters on the PS, for the second time in 15 years. In 2002, PS candidate Lionel Jospin was eliminated by right-wing candidate Jacques Chirac and the FN’s Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine’s father.

Fillon called for party unity in LR, declaring, “This defeat is mine. It is up to me and to me alone to bear responsibility for it.” Warning of “chaos,” “bankruptcy, and “an exit from the euro currency” if the FN were to come to power, he said, “I will vote in favor of Emmanuel Macron.”

Whether it is Macron or Le Pen who wins the second round, the election will resolve nothing and only set the stage for explosive social conflict. The electorate faces the choice between a neo-fascist and Macron, a former Rothschild banker who formulated Hollande’s bitterly unpopular economic policy and has called for a return to the draft in order to prepare an “era” of major wars. Macron offers no alternative to Le Pen for working people, having endorsed the PS’s state of emergency, which suspends basic democratic rights, as well as deep austerity and war planning.

Macron’s attempt last night to rally popular support against Le Pen in the second round was shot through with contradictions. While presenting himself as a young independent who is obliterating the distinction between right- and left-wing politics and totally renewing France, he is a former PS economy minister running with the support of virtually the entire political establishment. Were he to win the presidency and implement his reactionary program, workers would soon realize that he aims to continue and deepen Hollande’s reactionary policies.

Macron, 39, declared he was humbled by his success at supposedly re-orienting French politics. “I am aware of the honor and the great responsibility this represents,” he said, boasting: “In a year, we have changed the face of French politics.”

He thanked all the other presidential candidates besides Le Pen, including not only Mélenchon but Workers Struggle (LO) candidate Nathalie Arthaud and New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) candidate Philippe Poutou. He then launched a nationalist appeal for a campaign against the FN. Declaring that his goal was to be the “president of patriots in opposition to the danger of nationalism,” he said: “From tonight on, it is my responsibility to go forward and bring all French people together.”

This is empty political posturing. Macron’s On the March movement consists of a small layer of young entrepreneurs and political operatives whose influence is dependent on the support of top PS government officials, starting with Hollande and Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

Given the deep unpopularity of France’s major parties, moreover, Macron’s strategy only hands Le Pen an opening to put herself forward as the sole candidate challenging France’s despised political establishment. This is indeed how she reacted last night.

Le Pen spoke from her campaign headquarters in Hénin-Beaumont, a town in the socially devastated coalfields of northern France that elected FN mayor Steeve Briois after its PS mayor Gérard Dallongeville stepped down amid a corruption scandal. Having run on a nationalist

opposition to the European Union (EU) and violent anti-immigrant policies, she pledged to make the election a choice between EU and PS austerity and her nationalist defense of France.

“The great political debate will finally take place. The great question in this election is uncontrolled globalization, which threatens our civilization,” she said. “Either we continue towards total deregulation and the reign of King Capital ... or we move towards a France with borders that protect our national identity.”

Significantly, TV commentators discussing the election results yesterday evening largely skipped over the significance of the fact that, for a second time in 15 years, the FN is again on the second round of the presidential elections. In 2002, this produced shock and mass protests of millions of people horrified by the possibility that the FN could come to power. Today, however, the political and media establishment treat Le Pen’s presence on the second round as unfortunate but unsurprising.

This is the product above all of the unrestrained opportunism and reactionary policies of the PS and the various middle-class parties like LO and the NPA that have orbited it over a period of decades. In 2002, LO and the NPA’s predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), rejected the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) call for an active boycott of the Chirac-Le Pen run-off. The goal was to prepare the working class to mount strong opposition to the wars and social attacks that Chirac and the entire European ruling class were preparing to mount.

Instead, LO and the LCR aligned themselves with the PS’s campaign for a Chirac vote. This not only sent the signal that millions of people who protested were essentially wasting their time, as they could have simply stayed home and voted for Chirac. By backing such a right-wing candidate, they made clear that they were entirely integrated into the capitalist political establishment and would offer no alternative to the ruling elite. Indeed, they ultimately endorsed Hollande in 2012. This set the stage for a rapid growth of the FN, which was allowed to pose as France’s only opposition party.

Now, a historic collapse of the PS and France’s reactionary establishment is underway, and the ICFI’s newly-founded French section, the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste*, is intervening to call for the building of a genuine Trotskyist party. The various middle class “left” tendencies, starting with Mélenchon’s Unsubmissve France movement, are intervening to prop up Macron and block growing social anger in the working class.

Mélenchon supporters are unmistakably endorsing statements calling for a Macron vote against Le Pen. PCF chairman and Mélenchon supporter Pierre Laurent made a barely masked appeal for a Macron vote, calling on voters to “beat” Le Pen by using “the other ballot.” Similarly, Mélenchon advisor Clémentine Autain launched an appeal “to defeat the far right.”

Mélenchon himself spoke briefly in an angry and obviously disappointed speech, indicating that he would accept the Interior Ministry’s election figures as a legitimate election result. He cynically refused to take responsibility for the Macron endorsement his organization is making. Instead, he announced that the 450,000 people who signed up online for his Unsubmissive

France movement would be given the right to vote to decide whether to support Le Pen or Macron.

To the extent that such forces manage to suppress opposition to Macron, and Le Pen however, this only sets the stage for the coming to power of more reactionary governments and explosive conflicts with the working class.