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## First Priorities

The French left is at a crossroads. Having failed to win the presidency or assemble a parliamentary majority in 2022, Jean-Luc Mélenchon is now attempting to chart a way forward for La France insoumise. The party faces a hostile media, voter apathy and an increasingly authoritarian government. NUPES, the electoral alliance over which it presides, has fractured. The only way for LFI to prevail in this unfavourable conjuncture and preserve its fragile hegemony over the other progressive parties is to expand its electoral base ahead of the 2027 presidential elections. But there are competing theories of how to achieve this, and deep uncertainties over the most viable strategic direction.

At present, LFI's only strongholds are Paris, its surrounding banlieues, the peripheries of major cities such as Marseille, Toulouse and Lyon, and the French overseas territories. The party has struggled to attract support in the peri-urban areas that produced the gilets jaunes. For many activists, this signals a problem with its organizational culture. Since LFI was established in 2016, it has been dominated by a small group of parliamentarians and staffers close to Mélenchon. Stefano Palombarini has described it as a 'pirate ship' where all major decisions are taken by the captain. This nimble, centralized structure was partly what enabled its rapid ascent. Yet, today, some members have become convinced that the party will not break out of its Paris bubble unless it is thoroughly democratized. Clementine Autain, the deputy for Seine-Saint-Denis, argues that it is time to 'throw open the doors' and 'become a mass movement'. The leadership and its supporters, however, believe that this cannot occur until robust internal mechanisms for mediating political disagreement have been developed. Since the membership has now expanded beyond the core of loyal Mélenchonistes, they

warn, ‘throwing open the doors’ could mean abandoning political discipline and watering down their left-internationalist programme.

This dispute relates to the vexed question of who will lead LFI into the next election. One contender outside the circle of Mélenchonistes is the filmmaker-turned-parliamentarian Francois Ruffin. Born in Calais in 1975 and raised in Amiens, the constituency that he now represents, Ruffin is a self-described ‘petit-bourgeois intellectual’ – his father a manager at the Bonduelle vegetable company, his mother a housewife – who attended the same high school as Macron. In 1999 he founded *Fakir*, a left-wing satirical journal, and in 2003 published a searing critique of France’s media landscape, *Les petits soldats du journalisme*. Throughout the 2010s he directed documentaries on life in peripheral France, the dynamics of deindustrialization and the gilets jaunes. His 2016 film *Merci patron!*, a blistering takedown of France’s wealthiest citizen, the luxury goods magnate Bernard Arnault, so enraged its subject that he bribed the French security apparatus to spy on the director. Ruffin was elected in 2017 as a candidate for the micro-party Picardie Debout, before joining the LFI parliamentary group later that year.

Ruffin is in favour of throwing open the doors of LFI. For him, the path to the Élysée runs through the rural areas and deindustrialized small towns once dominated by the Socialist and Communist parties, where much of the population are manual labourers, low-waged service workers or retirees. The only way to win back such voters from the RN, he argues, is to speak to their material concerns: ‘the discourse of real life’, as he calls it. In practice, this means promoting protectionist economic policies and a strong welfare state. He lambasts the government for unleashing an ‘epidemic of bad work’ and calls for limited forms of workplace democracy, with a third of the seats on company boards to be given to employees. This focus on employment conditions is an attempt to connect LFI’s current base to more peripheral constituencies. As Ruffin observes, there are clear commonalities in the working lives of urban racialized populations and those of white people in small towns. As part of this strategy, the politician typically avoids domestic issues deemed too sensitive, such as migration, and moderates his line on international ones. When he speaks at Palestine rallies, he demands an immediate ceasefire and denounces Israel’s war crimes, but he also insists, against LFI’s official position, that Hamas is a terrorist organization. When riots broke out over the death of Nahel Merzouk, a teenage boy shot by police in the Parisian suburbs, the Mélenchonistes denounced the killers as bloodthirsty racists, while Ruffin called for institutional reform.

Ruffin's approach can be compared to that of Sumar in Spain. He argues that a populist strategy – maintaining a permanent war footing and provoking perpetual conflict with the establishment – will simply exhaust the party's activist base and alienate large swathes of the electorate. He claims that LFI has already won the battle for hegemony on the left, and that it must now convince voters outside the fold. While many of his LFI colleagues have split with their erstwhile NUPES partners, Ruffin continues to collaborate with figures such as the Ecologists' Marine Tondelier. Privately, those on the left of the Ecologists say that they would prefer to work with Ruffin than with a Mélenchoniste, and that a NUPES revival in 2027 would be more likely under his candidacy.

The Mélenchonistes have a different outlook. For them, the high rates of abstention in both the banlieues and peripheral France suggest that scores of voters remain disenchanted with the present political system. The party must therefore advocate a rupture with that system: its foreign policy, its economic orthodoxies, its security services and its social ethos. The aim should be to sharpen each political antagonism so as to achieve a state of what Mélenchon calls 'permanent insubordination'. In a recent debate with Thomas Piketty and Julia Cagé, Mélenchon accepted that the left needs to win back rural France – 'who could argue otherwise?' – but insisted that a focus on the urban *quartiers populaire* is even more essential. These areas tend to vote for LFI at a rate of 80%, but with a turnout of only 30%. The left should therefore strive to activate these abstentionist populations rather than gambling on the possibility of winning back Le Pen voters.

One Mélenchoniste who has been mooted as a future leader is Mathilde Panot. The 34-year-old deputy, who represents Val-de-Marne just south of Paris, is the daughter of a mathematician and an agricultural scientist. She studied international relations at Science Po and worked as a community organizer for a social enterprise operating in the banlieues before becoming an LFI staffer. Elected to the Assembly in 2017, she now serves as the party's parliamentary leader. The optimum strategy, as she sees it, is to construct cleavages in which the left is polarized against the RN and Macronists – revealing the latter to be two sides of the same coin. She has been particularly vocal in her support for Palestine, aware that this issue plays well in banlieues.

Yet Panot is consistently upstaged by Mélenchon himself, who remains a major national presence despite claiming that he is willing to hand over to a new leader. Since October he has been more forceful in denouncing the siege of Gaza than any other national politician. He has attended the ICJ hearing and organized protests against France's arms shipments to Israel while attacking Macron's sabre-rattling on Ukraine. Mélenchon seems to be aware that Panot

lacks the national profile to have a plausible shot at victory; and he is keen to kibosh the ascent of Raphaël Glucksmann, the ultra-hawkish PS candidate who is currently riding high in the European election polls. This, along with his desire to keep LFI aligned with his vision, may well motivate him to run again in 2027. Mélenchon's supporters note that each of his previous campaigns has brought him closer to the second round (his longtime friend Lula, who was elected president of Brazil on his fourth attempt, is cited as proof that persistence can pay off). His detractors, meanwhile, claim that he is unable to unite the broad left and point to polling which shows that he would have been beaten had he made it to the run-offs in 2022.

There is plenty of common ground between Ruffin and Mélenchon, both of whom have indicated that their positions could be reconciled. The LFI leadership has established several working groups dedicated to winning over rural areas. They have also deployed a number of so-called 'popular caravans': cadres who are dispatched to strategic constituencies to engage with the population and then relay their views to the central party apparatus. For the Mélenchonistes, LFI could yet become a *parti de masse* by stepping up such campaigns and providing local services like food distribution to deprived communities. Yet when it comes to the party's overall priorities, the divergence remains stark. Ruffin emphasizes the need to alter the current distribution of voters, while Mélenchon aims to enlarge the total electorate. The first approach implies moving beyond populism, while the second means refining and intensifying it. The two sides disagree over the extent to which the official polling underestimates Mélenchon and whether there are enough potential voters in the banlieues to propel him to power.

Whoever leads LFI into 2027 will have to appeal to the parts of French society which are disenchanted, but which currently have no affiliation with the left. This problem is exemplified by the ongoing farmers' protests. As with previous bouts of unrest, the government is trying to halt the demonstrations while the parties to its left and right are competing to capitalize politically. Here, LFI should be in an advantageous position, since its manifesto calls for radical agricultural reform – repudiating the free-trade agreements passed in the European parliament – and one of its allies, the Confédération Paysanne, is among the organizers of the movement. Yet the party has struggled to gain a foothold, partly because of the media's emphasis on the reactionary elements of the protests and their rejection of environmentalism. In an attempt to shift the tide, Ruffin has been rubbing shoulders with farmers at the annual Salon International de l'Agriculture, which Mélenchon has boycotted

for the last decade, hosting his own counter-salon that promotes peasant farming over agribusiness. Yet neither has managed to cast their party as a vehicle for farmers' interests. Over the coming years, the two factions will have to answer a number of difficult questions. Is it possible to shift the allegiances of Le Pen voters? Can this be achieved without alienating LFI's current electoral base? And does the alliance with the centre left risk corrupting the project? Conversely, is the strategy of constant conflict capable of reaching a broader constituency? Can the radical left win without the centre left? Is there a sufficient number of abstentionists who could be activated? Whatever course the party takes, it will have to operate in a turbulent political climate which is increasingly hostile to the left. The institutions of the Fifth Republic – the state, the media, the mainstream parties, big business, the police – are determined to crush the rebellion that LFI represents. Reversing France's reactionary drift will be a Herculean task.

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*Read on: Serge Halimi, 'Condition of France', NLR 144.*