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Why the New Popular Front Won

On the evening of our stunning victory, I listened to the speeches of our politicians: “Glory to the people!”, “We must stay mobilized to push forward the program!”, &c. And then as the orators turned to depart the stage, Jean-Luc Mélenchon paced back up to the microphones and addressed the crowd, “I have heard that some of you do not understand the words of the Marseillaise. I am going to explain the two parts that may agitate your ears: the country was invaded by all the monarchies of Europe that sought to reestablish inequality against the Declaration of the Rights of Man. And so the people, armed, drove off the invaders: hence, ‘To arms, citizens! &c.’ And as for ‘impure blood’, don’t grimace! In that day, the nobles were supposed to have ‘pure blood’, and we the poor people were supposed to have ‘impure’. And so they bellowed, ‘Oh? Impure blood? Come and see what you can get!’ In this anthem—yes it is a song of warriors!—there is nothing other than the honor of the people marching to victory, fearing nothing and no one!” And he led the crowd singing.

The New Popular Front (NFP) sees itself as having saved the Republic. This was not merely an election like any other, but a struggle for France, a contest over the definition of French identity. Against the racist and xenophobic far-right drunk on conspiracy theory and islamophobia, the French left united to insist that this nation, this people, is not determined by skin color, neither by religion, nor by language: but is constituted as a legal community by its common good. And it is now the Popular Front that rallies the people anew around its program of free school lunches, increased wages, and repairing the damage done to society by neoliberalism.

This conception of France explicitly includes both immigrants in mainland (or “metropolitan”) France and indigenous peoples in the overseas collectivities, regions, &c. (“*outré-mer*”). This was brought up several times on election night by various speakers, and always with a universalizing angle: the natives of the *outré-mer*, the immigrants of the Paris suburbs, and even Mélenchon, the son of pied-noirs himself, are all striving for dignity, liberty, and justice. This universalism allows for the inclusion of members like Emmanuel Tjibaou, a militant in the Kanak independence movement elected to represent New Caledonia on the NFP ticket. For the French left, solidarity with Palestinians is critically important; the flag of Palestine is everywhere flown as a symbol of universal, socialist, and republican values: liberty, equality, and fraternity.

To anglophone ears, this discourse may at first seem confusing. To understand its inner logic requires following the historical thread of French socialism back from 2024 to 1968, 1917, 1871, 1848, and 1789. Auguste Blanqui, Jean Jaurès, Léon Blum, & al. had their political imaginary bound up by in republican thread. And throughout French history, from the days of Abbé Sieyès and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* to Simone Weil and *The Need for Roots*, the question of France, of how the Republic is constructed, recurs. We hear this resounding through the words of Manès Nadel, vice-president of the high-school student union, who at a recent NFP meeting got up and quoted Lenin, saying, “There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen”, before going on to urge the audience, “we have two weeks left to finally produce in France the social Republic and to root in this Republic our social gains!”

Macron’s gamble cost him more than he thought possible; he united the left against him and fumbled legislative initiative to his newly-made enemy. Technocratic neoliberalism has been rebuffed by the risen “extremes”, a nightmare of Emmanuel’s own making. His allies on the center-right are at daggers drawn against one another, and frankly they all look like fools—consider the miserable figure of Eric Ciotti, spending his TV-time beefing with local rivals while his own party tries to eject him.

And what more needs be said about the neofascists? The National Rally (RN) ran antisemites, racists, and a hostage-taker. Some of their candidates appeared to have not campaigned at all. As much as the RN has gained over the last few election cycles, as much as the bourgeois press has worked to normalize the party of Nazi collaboration then and now, the people of France continue to oppose the suit-and-tie skinheads. Le Pen and

Bardella smell power, yet cannot taste it; even with the help of the media and influential figures, the RN is thin on the ground.

Apart from the municipal bulletin boards where all candidates, including the most quixotic, are allotted space for a poster, I saw almost no RN propaganda—and I myself was out and about in districts that the RN finally carried. My wife was handed one RN flyer on the last day of the campaign in a touristy area. The frazzled centrists pulled together a better ground game than the neofascists, but the NFP exceeded all my expectations. I met scores of activists from the coalition that I did not know previously while canvassing. Strangers approached me, even up to the final hours of Friday evening, and asked for stacks of flyers to distribute to their neighbors. There was a palpable urgency, not only among activists but also the veiled mothers and queer youth picnicking in the park; our solidarity was met with silent nods and warm smiles wherever the people were gathered.

And we overcame the odds. We proved the pollsters and experts wrong: history is not written in advance. The Popular Front showed what strength the working class can muster. Now the NFP faces a new challenge: to deliver the goods. Our majority is only relative, and while several elements of the program can be accomplished by decree, it remains to be seen who beyond the ranks of the NFP in the National Assembly is willing to support which proposals.

Macron's project has been repeatedly censured by the French people. If he had shame, he would resign. Yesterday he definitively loft the last shred of whatever mandate he thought he had. The center is rejected. The right has splintered. The left now must push the advantage and implement the program of the New Popular Front: anything less than this would be a shameful betrayal.

Henry Wallis writes on French politics at helotage.com.

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