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French elections too close to call, far right calls for national unity government

The first round of the 2022 French presidential elections is taking place this Sunday amid deep popular alienation from the ruling establishment and uncertainty as to who will dispute the second round run-off on April 24. Incumbent President Emmanuel Macron, 2017 neo-fascist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen and Unsubmissive France (LFI) party leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon could all reach the second round.



Far-right leader Marine le Pen attends a press conference in Toulon, southern France, June 17, 2021. (AP Photo/Daniel Cole)

The presidential campaign was widely unpopular, as all candidates advocated similar, reactionary policies of austerity, mass infection with COVID-19 and military threats

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against Russia. This left the electorate effectively disenfranchised. Masses of workers and youth were offered no prospect for averting the danger to their lives and living standards from rising inflation, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The deep popular disillusionment with the ruling elite is reflected in the fact that fully 21 percent of the electorate has still not made up its mind who to vote for on Sunday.

The vast number of undecided voters means that, based on current polls, all three leading candidates could theoretically come out on top in the first round, depending on whom undecided voters decide to support. The BVA polling institute estimates that Macron could get 20.5 to 28.5 percent of the vote, Marine Le Pen 19 to 27 percent and Mélenchon 14.5 to 22 percent. The elimination of Macron, widely despised among workers as the “president of the rich,” is possible.

The election of France’s first neo-fascist president is also a distinct possibility. In what has been considered to be the most likely run-off, a Macron-Le Pen contest as in the last presidential elections in 2017, the outcome is again now too close to call. Macron has been credited with as little as 52 or 51 percent of the vote in such a match-up, with the distance between the two candidates within the margin of error of the poll.

Reviewing the events in the candidates’ campaign stops only underscores that the election, whatever its result, will solve none of the burning problems facing working people.

Speaking on Thursday to RTL radio, Le Pen laid out her plans for a “national unity government” allying with forces around former Socialist Party (PS) Defense Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement to give herself a broader base within the political establishment.

“I will rule, as I have said, in the context of a national unity government, first of all with people with whom I work,” Le Pen declared, “but also with people who will join me. Of course I have a list of people, and I think my problem will be to choose rather than to find them, because there are many people in France, either in political life or in civil society who share the broad outlines of my policy.”

Le Pen said she would not “decide on all the positions definitively, to be able to greet people who would decide to participate in the national unity government.”

She stressed that she planned to include nominally “left” politicians in her national unity government. Asked if she could work with supporters of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, she cautiously replied, “Probably not.” However, she added, “I could very well have people who come for example from the left around Jean-Pierre Chevènement, that is to say, a left of national sovereignty, a left which defends re-industrialization, defends our great industries.”

Macron gave an interview to France’s online news channel Brut trying to tout his economic record, which has involved encouraging businesses to set up operations in France by slashing wages and labor costs. After his presidency, Macron boasted, “we build more factories than we close, something that had not happened in 30 years. ... These battles have been won. They nourished political extremism.”

An interviewer then challenged him, recalling his pledge in five years to reduce the number of voters voting for far-right candidates. The Brut journalist pointed out that Le Pen and her fellow neo-fascist candidate Eric Zemmour together are getting over 30 percent of the vote, more than Le Pen, the only neo-fascist candidate in 2017, had received in the previous elections.

Macron could only reply, “A man who is alone cannot solve everything, sometimes I have been criticized for trying to do that. I think the subjects on which we were attacked, we have begun solving them.” Without explaining how the president of the French Republic could be considered “alone” if he tries to solve problems, Macron then turned 180 degrees and admitted, “We did not manage to bring a sufficiently credible solution for people to turn away massively from extremist politics.”

Mélenchon is winning support from prominent artists and politicians and hoping to accelerate his rise in the polls in the final days of the campaign. A group of 50 artists including stand-up comedian Blanche Gardin, actresses Anny Duperey and Corinne Masiero, actor Bruno Solo, musician Yvan le Bolloc’h, and director Robert Guédiguian signed a letter calling for a Mélenchon vote, supposedly to keep Le Pen out of the second round.

Mélenchon, who already won praise from MEDEF business federation head Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux as a “credible” candidate, received endorsements from former Justice

Minister Christiane Taubira and Sébastien Nadot, a lawmaker from Macron's own Republic on the March (LRM) party. It is apparent that a faction of the political establishment that would previously have backed Macron is debating with itself whether to back Mélenchon. However, this only underscores that Mélenchon, if elected, will rule in the interests of the banks and disappoint his supporters.

None of these candidates has anything to offer workers on the most pressing issues: the danger of war with Russia, the mounting death toll of the COVID-19 pandemic or the impoverishment of working people by the rapid rise in prices.

A poll last month found that 76 percent of French people are concerned about the danger of nuclear war with Russia, even as nearly 1 million people in France have fallen ill with COVID-19 and 1,000 die every week. Yet all the French political establishment has to offer is further relaxing protections against COVID-19 and statements of support for NATO war threats against Russia.

There is also mounting concern among workers at the surge in prices for basic commodities, due to massive money-printing operations of Europe's central banks during the pandemic and NATO sanctions on Russia. State-regulated natural gas prices saw an unprecedented 12.6 percent increase last October. Yesterday, French natural gas distributor GRDF announced plans for rolling shut-offs of gas to its customers, due to supply shortages as NATO imposes sanctions on Russian energy.

As the UN reported that world food prices rose 13 percent in March, there are growing food shortages due to problems planting and exporting crops amid the Russian-Ukraine war. Russia and Ukraine provide 80 percent of world exports of sunflower, and Europe's reserves of sunflower oil will be exhausted in 15 days, impacting a dizzying array of products from margarine to pasta, potato chips, breaded fish, sauces and biscuits. Grain shortages are also expected to make meat prices explode and lead to significant shortages of chicken and eggs.

The fight against imperialist war, malign official indifference to COVID-19, the impoverishment of the working class and the danger of fascistic rule cannot be waged through any of the candidates running in the present elections. It depends on building an

independent revolutionary mobilization of workers and youth against all of these candidates, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

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