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Macron, neo-fascist Le Pen advance to runoff in French presidential election

In yesterday's French presidential election, in a replay of the first round of the 2017 elections, outgoing President Emmanuel Macron and neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen advanced to the final round of the presidential contest on April 24. According to initial estimates last night, they received 27.4 percent and 24.0 percent of the vote, respectively. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the former Socialist Party official who was the candidate of the Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, obtained 21.6 percent of the vote.

Mélenchon's campaign manager, Manuel Bompard, issued a statement overnight calling Mélenchon's vote "an extraordinary result," but conceding, "unhappily, this will not be sufficient to qualify for the second round."

If these figures prove correct, it would be the third time, after the 2002 and 2017 elections, that a neo-fascist candidate advances to the runoff of the French presidential elections. The fact that voters are being presented yet again with a poisoned choice between Le Pen and the right-wing "president of the rich" exposes the political bankruptcy of the organizations that the ruling establishment falsely promotes as the "left." They proved incapable of defeating either a despised outgoing president or a neo-fascist.



A screen shows French President Emmanuel Macron and far-right candidate Marine Le Pen at her election day headquarters, in Paris, Sunday, April 10, 2022.(AP Photo/Francois Mori)

The election confirmed the collapse of what were France's dominant electoral parties in the era after the May 1968 French general strike. Valérie Pécresse of the right-wing The Republicans (LR), the latest incarnation of the Gaullists, and Socialist Party (PS) candidate Anne Hidalgo, representing France's two main parties of government from 1968 to 2017, took 4.7 and 1.8 percent, respectively. Green candidate Yannick Jadot took 4.5 percent, and Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) candidate Fabien Roussel 2.4 percent of the vote. All these candidates are now eliminated.

Far-right journalist Eric Zemmour, who has been convicted of inciting racial hatred and is close to sections of the officer corps that agitated for a military coup after the COVID-19 pandemic began, took 7 percent of the vote.

The campaign for the second round is beginning amid enormous uncertainty and popular alienation from the political establishment. There was a high abstention rate of 26.2 percent of registered voters in the first round—a larger number of voters than voted for any of the candidates. Polls have shown Le Pen taking 48 or 49 percent of the vote against Macron, and there is a real possibility that Le Pen could defeat Macron.

While Macron campaigned in 2017 as an investment banker who would revolutionize the economy, France is in shambles. Nearly 1 million people caught COVID-19 over the last

week in France, and 768 have died, yet the Macron government encouraged people to come out to vote without masks even if they were positive for COVID-19, making voting a likely superspreader event. Rationing of natural gas and shortages of sunflower oil and other key products are emerging due to NATO sanctions against Russia amid the war in Ukraine.

In a brief speech late Sunday evening, Macron claimed he would build a “great movement of unity,” rallying the French people “in order to block the path of the far right.” He claimed: “I am ready to invent something new to bring together different convictions and sensibilities to build with them a common action in the service of our nation in the coming years. It is in our power.”

Le Pen demagogically portrayed herself as preparing to lead a popular, democratic government. She called on voters “of the right, the left, from elsewhere, from all backgrounds to join this great national and popular rally.” Officials of Le Pen’s National Rally (RN) told the daily *Libération*, “It is the left that, one can say, almost holds the keys to this election.”

Le Pen’s speech combined threats to “get immigration back under control,” pledges to build up the police, and demagogic appeals to opposition to Macron’s anti-worker policies. After Macron pledged to raise the retirement age to 65 and to force welfare recipients to work for their benefits, Le Pen pledged to defend the “solidarity we grant to the more vulnerable, the possibility to have guaranteed rights, or to retire while still in good health.” Amid reports that Le Pen might try to ban Muslim headscarves, she pledged to defend “women’s rights” and “secularism.”

The neo-fascists have been allowed to posture as “left” because Macron’s presidency has faced no left-wing opposition from within the political establishment. Macron actively legitimized fascistic policies, including his murderous policy on COVID-19 of “living with the virus.” He hailed France’s Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain while unleashing hordes of riot police to assault “yellow vest” protests calling for social equality. Macron government officials even publicly attacked Le Pen as being “soft on Islam.”

Yet in this toxic atmosphere, the parties that the media and ruling elite have built up as the “left” consistently ceded the ground of political opposition to the far right. Mélenchon and pseudo-left parties like the Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) or Workers Struggle (LO) isolated or denounced the “yellow vests.” They lined up behind anti-vaccine protests led by the far right, even as 142,000 people in France and nearly two million across Europe died of COVID-19.

Finally, Mélenchon, the NPA, Stalinist organizations like the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, and LO all aligned with Macron and NATO in the war with Russia in Ukraine, where NATO is arming Ukrainian neo-Nazi militias such as the Azov Battalion against Russia.

Whether Macron or Le Pen emerges victorious in the second round, the new president will oversee a reactionary government that will come into violent conflict with the working class. The election of a neo-fascist president in France poses enormous dangers. However, candidates who are now calling on voters to support Macron as the lesser evil against Le Pen are perpetrating a political fraud: Macron is not an alternative to a neo-fascist presidency.

While Zemmour and the minor far-right candidate Nicolas Dupont-Aignan both called to vote Le Pen on the runoff, most of the defeated candidates lined up behind the “president of the rich.”

Pécresse said, “I am deeply worried for the future of our country, as the far right is closer than ever to winning the election.” Predicting that Le Pen’s election would lead to “discord, impotence and failure” at home, and “France’s disappearance from the European and international stage,” she said: “Thus, despite profound divergences I stressed throughout the campaign, I will vote Emmanuel Macron to prevent Marine Le Pen’s arrival in power and the chaos that would result.”

The Greens, PS and PCF also called for a Macron vote, and Mélenchon has made clear LFI will issue a cynical, barely-veiled call for a Macron vote. LFI officials fear the widespread opposition that emerged in 2017 among LFI voters, especially in working class areas of major cities, to voting for either Macron or Le Pen. Mélenchon’s assistant Adrien Quatennens told France2 television that LFI will hold a ballot among its members

to allow them to choose what to do, but that a Le Pen vote would not be on the list of choices.

Mélenchon, who is 70 years old and has said that he will not stand again in the 2027 presidential elections, presented his failure to advance to the second round as a victory that would strengthen his party. “A new page of our struggle is opening. You will turn it, we will turn it with the sense of pride in work well done,” he claimed, adding that France faces “a political state of emergency.”

It is apparent, however, that Mélenchon is setting out to play the same reactionary role he played in 2017: corralling millions of his voters behind Macron’s violently reactionary presidency. Indeed, at the end of his concessions speech, Mélenchon was reduced to repeatedly chanting: “You must not give any votes to Mrs. Le Pen! One cannot give a single vote to Mrs. Le Pen!”

In reality, the entire militaristic and fascistic course of Macron’s own presidency shows that Mélenchon’s perspective is a false one and a dead end for workers and youth seeking to oppose the turn towards the far right in France. Mélenchon similarly let it be known that he preferred a Macron vote in 2017 to oppose Le Pen. Yet the result was that LFI helped Macron get elected and turn French politics far to the right.

Stopping this turn to the far right requires mobilizing the working class, independently of and against the entire political establishment, on a socialist and internationalist program.

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