

La France Insoumise: How New is the French New Left?

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As the *Yellow Vest* movement in France continued to hit the headlines week after week at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, one organisation in particular praised it as the beginnings of a new “citizens’ revolution”. This was the *France Insoumise*.¹ A radical Left movement (deliberately not a party), the FI was founded in 2016 and is led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who was previously (from 1976 to 2008) a left leader within the Socialist Party. It received 7 million votes at the 2017 presidential elections. Can it be considered a new political phenomenon with a novel strategy, a

populist grouping similar to others in Italy or elsewhere, or fundamentally a revival of left-wing mass reformism after a long hibernation? Much of the debate about the organisation in France has been desperately superficial and partisan, based on vague alleged personality defects of Mélenchon, so a cool-headed view is worth an attempt.

Not so new?

First, let us note what is not new. This is a movement which aims at capturing government through

parliamentary elections and using that position to bring about decisive change in ecological, social, constitutional and foreign policy domains. It is a movement which considers parliamentary activity alone to be insufficient: vigorously supporting the building of trade unions, strike action, community campaigns to save or improve public services and so on are an integral part of its priorities. It is a movement which considers alliances with all those forces hostile to the dictatorship of profit to be necessary, but which desires to affirm itself as a distinct actor in the progressive movement.

All of this might lead one to think that we are in the presence of the resurgence of an old Left, marginalised since the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the establishment of the elite neoliberal consensus - a resurgence which is occurring in parallel with influential anti-austerity organisations in other Western countries, whether it be around Corbyn's *Labour Party* in Britain, Bernie Sanders in the USA, the *Left Bloc* in Portugal, *Podemos* in Spain, or elsewhere.

From this point of view, the rise of the *France Insoumise* calls for the discussion of old questions: in particular, how far can government in the present forms of democracy act against the dictatorship of profit and get away with it, in the face of the classic weapons of pro-capitalist forces - from possession of the media and capital flight, to the more

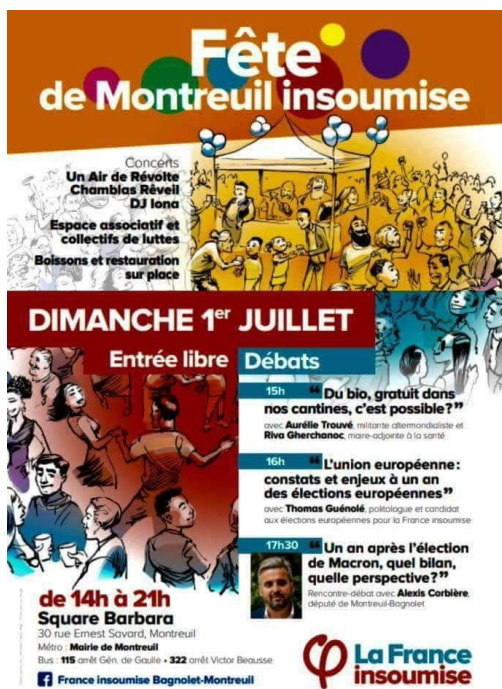
vicious interventions which laid waste to left experiments in Chile in 1973? Does the FI government-in-waiting give us reason to believe that the U-turns of *Labour* in Britain in the 1970s², of Mitterrand in France in the 1980s³, or of Tsipras a few years ago in Greece, to name but a few, will not occur in a future FI France?

Proposals

The movement's programme, *The Future in Common* includes the following proposals, to name but a few points: nationalisation of energy companies, some banks and other services, the end of nuclear power and a move to 100 per cent renewable energy, the establishment of a maximum salary, a shorter working week, a million low-rent houses, retirement at sixty, leaving NATO, free school canteens and a free health service. On the European Union, the plan is to renegotiate the treaties to allow for anti-austerity politics, and if faced with a refusal, consider leaving the EU. In many ways, then, this resembles a social-democratic programme of 50 years ago. It has brought 'planning' back into political discourse, after decades where pleasing 'the market' was generally presented as the only option. It has also integrated the urgency of dealing with climate deterioration.

The discourse of the FI often attacks "financial capitalism" which, it maintains, has excessive influence over

the rest of the economy and calls for “a severing of the links” between industry and agriculture on the one hand, and the financial world of speculation on the other. This is an old Communist Party view of the economy and depends on the idea that finance capital is separate from other sorts (whereas often industrial investors have a speculative financial operation on the go at the same time).



Advertising leaflet for public day of debate and entertainment

A government in waiting

The slogan put forward at the FI summer school in August 2018 was “We are ready to govern” (just as *Podemos* in Spain has declared its objective “to capture and transform state power”). With only 17 FI MPs and a vote of 19.5 per cent at the presidentials, this might seem ambitious, yet the continuing

economic crisis and the collapse of the traditional Right and Left parties make political upheaval the new normal, and Macron himself became president after obtaining only 24 per cent in the first round of the election. The “ready to govern” tone, along with the insistence that the proposed programme has been correctly budgeted by radical economists, underlines the fact that despite the term “citizens’ revolution” the project is to be carried out within the framework of capitalist institutions. This is logical, since the difference between a “citizens’ revolution” and a “workers’ revolution” (however far-off either might seem) is that workers produce the profit which allows the ruling class to exist, whereas citizens as citizens have far fewer powerful levers to oblige the powerful to agree to their demands. (This despite the creative tactics of *Yellow Vest* and other citizens’ movements.)

One of the FI’s radical demands responds to the question of how the state can be controlled by the people: the programme calls for the replacement of the present ‘Fifth Republic’ with its excessive presidentialism and many other defects, with a ‘Sixth Republic’ which would be characterised by a much bigger share of popular democracy, including the possibility of calling referenda by popular demand (now a key *Yellow Vest* priority), and of revoking the mandate of MPs between elections under certain

circumstances. The new Republic's precise rules would be drawn up by a constituent assembly. Indeed, if he were to be elected president, Mélenchon has declared that he would organise the constituent assembly and then resign, allowing the new constitution to redefine the role of president and assemblies in political life. This priority placed on constitutional reform has often been a strong strand in the French radical Left, and is generally popular, though how far the central dynamic of 21st century neoliberal capitalism can be affected by such measures is unclear, and a certain scepticism is justified.

The programme contains a commitment to fighting against racism and all other oppressions, and the 2018 summer school underlined the need for more non-white candidates at elections. The commitment included combating prejudices against Muslims. In practice however the FI are generally no better at fighting islamophobia than most of the French radical left (that is, they are pretty poor), and there are several extreme secularists among leading activists. This situation however is in flux. There are strong activists against Islamophobia in the FI who Mélenchon respects, and it was notable that he began a public meeting in November 2018 by denouncing the anti-Muslim racism of (ex-Prime minister) Manuel Valls.

New options

What then can we put down as definitely new? FI aims to be “a movement, not a party”. This involves avoiding traditional party structures of delegated democracy and factional struggle (this last has at times taken up inordinate amounts of energy on the French far left, far beyond what might be deemed the necessities of democratic debate). This turn has led to the FI programme being written by a series of thematic networks and validated by a movement conference made up of delegates drawn by lottery from among the willing – a novel option. In addition, just like in such organisations as *Momentum* in the UK, the FI *YouTube* channel and grassroots use of social networks have been central to FI campaigning.

The demand to “do politics in a new way” is, of course,⁴ a very old one. In the case of the FI, the emphasis seems to be particularly on not allowing electoral alliances to drastically water down demands for social change. Implicitly, the criticism is of the *French Communist Party*, which has some radical demands in its programme, but has often been accused of abandoning most of them in order to maintain seats on regional or local councils in alliance with a Socialist Party which has been moving rightwards for decades, leading to its present collapse (6 per cent of the first round vote in the 2017

presidentials, 3 per cent of the first round vote in the following legislatures, surely a record for an outgoing government).

Successes

The FI has some successes to its name. In the 2017 presidential election, Mélenchon received 7 million votes, the largest number ever obtained by a radical Left candidate, even during the heyday of the French Communist Party. His public meetings were and are huge, spectacular, and marked by stunning oratory and impressive pedagogy about the workings of capitalist society and the need for radical humanism. FI has been able to organise very large mass demonstrations against Macron. In opinion polls, the movement is consistently rated as the most effective opposition to right-wing president Emmanuel Macron. Its 17 members of parliament form a dynamic and diverse team, a people's tribune both inside parliament (proposing more amendments than any other group) and outside, on a wide range of issues.

Many of the activities of local FI supporters' groups are traditionally left in character: organising support for the mass strikes last year, organising debates on political issues chosen locally.

The leadership encourages popular mobilisations on local issues – “Know your Rights” caravans tour the poorer parts of some cities; a long-neglected local school was (illegally) repainted by a local network supported by the FI; these examples are relayed by the leadership and the social networks, though have not flourished as quickly as had been hoped. The FI held a summer school and a youth summer school as most French parties do. The youth summer school included lectures by well-known Marxists as well as representatives of the non-Marxist Left. Feminism, eco-socialism, self-

The leaflet is titled "JOURNÉES JEUNES INSOUMIS-ES MARSEILLE 22 & 23 AOÛT" and features a central image of a woman holding a flag. It lists the following activities:

- 11:30 Formation:** « Féminisme et anti-sexisme : un combat de tous les jours » avec Danièle OBONO. Description: La députée insoumise Danièle OBONO tiendra un atelier sur les luttes féministes et anti-sexistes, formation particulièrement nécessaire aujourd'hui et dans les nouvelles organisations progressistes.
- 16:15 Conférence:** « Réformes de l'ESR : vers la destruction de l'Université française » avec Étienne SAPPEY et Lara BAKECH. Description: Un nouveau temps pour revenir sur la destruction de l'Université française : les réformes de l'ESR dont l'arrêté licence et la loi ORE.
- 13h - 14h30 PAUSE REPAS**
- 14:30 Conférence:** « L'écosocialisme » avec Corinne MOREL-DARLEUX. Description: L'écosocialisme est au cœur de notre programme « L'Avenir en commun ». Cette conférence nous initiera à ce modèle politique et aux façons de le développer.
- 18:00 Formation:** « L'auto-organisation » avec Manon COLEOU, Leïla CHAÏBI et William MARTINET. Description: Une formation pour imaginer de nouveaux modes d'action et de militantisme, aussi bien dans les cités-U, les foyers de jeunes travailleurs, les universités ou encore les lieux de travail.
- 20h30 - 1h TEMPS FESTIF**: Pique-nique sur la plage, atelier prise de parole, soirée militante et festive.

Accueil (10:00): Introduction des Journées Jeunes par les député·e·s de La France insoumise Mathilde PANOT et Adrien QUATENNENS. « La France insoumise : construire le mouvement du peuple ».

Contact: journeejeunesFI2018@gmail.com

Advertising leaflet with the programme of the Youth Summer School

organisation and Left republicanism were the main highlights on the programme. They also organised in November 2018 the “Rencontres nationales des quartiers populaires”, which translates literally as “national meeting for the poorer parts of town”, and is understood in

French politics as an attempt to listen to and implicate the sections of the population who do not have a stable, reasonably paid job, in particular the non-white sections of the working class.

Organisation

If the FI leadership has preferred to form a movement rather than a party, it is also because it is a way of sidestepping some questions of relationships with other parties (since one can, for example, be a member of the *Communist Party* and an active supporter of FI), and of partly avoiding a tradition of political horse-trading which has plagued the French Left for decades. Critics of the movement method point out, with some reason, that a lack of structures for decision-making often leaves an inordinate amount of influence in the hands of the national leadership. It has also been noted that it can reduce much-needed debate on difficult issues. *Podemos* seems to have suffered considerable damage through not having a clearly defined position on the national question in Catalonia, to take one example.

French traditions

One or two elements of the FI approach are clearly rooted in distinctive aspects of the French Left. One is a sort of Left patriotism, a feeling that France has a progressive role to play in world politics (often in opposition

to the USA). This vision often includes the idea that symbols going back to the French Revolution, such as the *Tricolour* and the *Marseillaise* anthem, can mobilise a sense of a specifically French radical humanism. So, tricolours have sometimes been distributed at rallies, and both the *Marseillaise* and the *International* sung. Though these are striking symbols, it is not clear that this patriotic element is key to the FI support. In addition, since the tricolour has also flown for centuries over vicious French colonial and imperialist endeavours, the non-white working class in France may not find it so attractive. The vision of France playing a positive role in the international arena leads Mélenchon to hold some positions considerably to the right of his counterparts in other countries. For example, he is not opposed to France having nuclear weapons in the present international situation.

The other “very French” aspect of FI is Left secularism and anticlericalism, which can sometimes be a cover for Islamophobia. This has seen the broad Left express indifference or even support faced with Islamophobic laws. Muslim public servants and high school students are banned from wearing headscarves, Muslim mothers wearing them have often been hounded out of any participation in school trips, and the Niqab face veil was banned in the streets by a law in 2010. Attempts by mayors of various

towns to ban the wearing of full body swimsuits by Muslim women on the beaches of their towns saw practically no outrage from the Left, and Mélenchon disappointingly condemned both the racist mayors and the people who sell full-body swimsuits (they do it for political reasons, he claimed, without evidence).⁵ Although Mélenchon has more often recently condemned discrimination against Muslims, the FI is no better than most of the Left on the issue.

A recent row on the French Left concerning attitudes to immigration has been carried out at a high temperature, without it being completely clear what the political content is. FI leaders have repeated that they are not simply in favour of opening the borders, though they campaign for immediate legalisation of all immigrant workers, and welcoming refugees in danger in the Mediterranean. Mélenchon has declared that much immigration is not freely chosen and working with countries of origin to stop the problems which drive people to leave should be part of Left policy. This, in the context of the campaigns of Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany, has led to some currents suspecting that FI could conceivably move in a similar direction to *Aufstehen*. One of the reactions in France was an open letter denouncing those who suggest that the far right is asking the right questions about immigration, signed by 150 radical Left

personalities (and one FI MP). The FI leadership saw the document as a masked attempt at attacking the FI, which it no doubt was for some, and did not sign it.

Under attack

As an electorally credible radical Left movement, the FI, like Corbyn in Britain, is under continuous attack. The right-wing media like to paint Mélenchon as similar in appeal to the fascist Marine Le Pen, or as a supporter of Putin. A series of unprecedented (and probably illegal) police raids on FI offices and leaders' houses in autumn 2018 took away the organisation's computers, but mostly aimed at putting out an image of the FI as gangsters or as corrupt. Rather than defend free political organisation, one of the mainstream left-wing newspapers reacted by headlining on speculations about Mélenchon's love life!

The FI is also under attack from sections of the Left, even if most organisations declared their disapproval of the police raids. The *Communist Party* (which still has 12 MPs and 1600 local councillors) is anxious about the danger of being replaced as the institutional reformist Left, as its alliances with the austerity-wielding *Socialist Party* have discredited it in many towns, and it has reacted with a series of sectarian diatribes against FI. Its brand new general secretary, elected in November 2018, seems keen to continue allying with the *Partis Socialiste*.

Sections of the revolutionary Left (a current far more visible in France than in many countries) have been given generous space in TV chat shows, since they will denounce Mélenchon. The attitude of this far Left contrasts sharply with that of the British far left's attitude to Corbyn, generally one of critical support. This sectarianism can be explained mostly by the analysis defended by a part of French revolutionaries (that left-wing reformism is no longer possible in late capitalism and therefore that Mélenchon is simply planning to betray), but also by the fact that standing in elections and getting a fair number of votes (over 1 per cent in each of 50 constituencies) provides significant government funding for the French far left.

More measured Left critics underline the dangers of a situation such as happened in Greece when a Left *Syriza* government, brought in with mass popular and worker's mobilisation, decided to organise yet more austerity rather than stand up to international capital. FI leaders tend to say "we will do what we promise, we are not like Tsipras". Nevertheless, this suggests that the *Syriza* catastrophe was due to the individual weakness of Tsipras or other leaders. The question of the amount of pressure a panicked ruling class could put on the FI movement both before a hypothetical electoral success (with media campaigns etc) and after (with capital flight,

investment strikes and so on) is little discussed and can be considered, from the point of view of the anti-capitalist, as the real "elephant in the room".

Many commentators have labelled the FI as populist. It is true that leaders are interested in dialogue with such thinkers as Chantal Mouffe,⁶ and that the FI poses "uniting the people against the elite" as a central slogan, rather than "unite the Left". But rejecting the "Unite the Left" approach is mainly connected with rejecting political party horse-trading and rotten compromises with austerity socialists. Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a thousand times closer politically to Jeremy Corbyn than he is to Beppe Grillo, the Italian leader now in government with the far right.

Many millions of people, squeezed or crushed by the juggernaut of maximising profit, desperately hope that some government will make a real difference for the better in their lives, and can put excessive trust in Left leaders. Nothing is more understandable. Whether FI's future will be to produce an Alexis Tsipras, imposing ever more austerity on the people, a Jacinda Arden, delivering far fewer reforms than hoped, or an effective challenge to the dictatorship of profit, depends on multiple unknowns, but in the French political landscape today, it represents a new kind of challenge to elite business as usual.

2019

The nature of the *Yellow Vest* movement, which designates its enemies as elite politicians and multinational companies,⁷ rather than the employing class as such, means that organisations such as the FI, for which elections are central, are well-placed to benefit from the expressed anger. The European elections, which Mélenchon has announced to be “an anti-Macron referendum” will constitute an interesting test. For these elections, due in May 2019, the FI have joined a grouping of six Left parties from around Europe (counting a total of 9 Euro MPs and 143 members of national parties). These parties left the established *Party of the European Left*, since the latter supported the Tsipras government in Greece and its imposition of heavy EU-inspired austerity after the crisis of 2015.

Endnotes

- 1 Many translations have been proposed: France in Revolt, France Unbowed, Rebel France...
- 2 The stated intentions of the Labour government in the early 1970S to decisively move the balance of power away from capital (intentions symbolised by Denis Healey’s 1973 promise to draw “howls of anguish from the rich” were thoroughly abandoned, and 1977 and 1978 saw the first big drop in workers’ real wages since the war.
- 3 After an ambitious nationalisation and social reform programme in 1981, the Mitterrand government announced “a turn to rigour” which revealed itself to be another word for austerity.
- 4 See Isaac Deutscher’s thoughts in 1967 on “Marxism and the New Left”, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1967/marxism-newleft.htm>
- 5 See John Mullen “‘Beach secularism’ fuels racism in France” in: Red Flag, 28 August 2016. <http://redflag.org.au/node/5453>
- 6 Mélenchon and Mouffe organised together a meeting/ public conversation, which can be found online in French here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtriFMxsOWw&> It tended to show that the two were not really so close in politics.
- 7 Since its core is an alliance of low-paid workers, self-employed and small business owners.