

French Presidential Elections:

The Left need to mobilise against the Fascists

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The French presidential elections take place on the 10th and 24th of April, 2022. While the neoliberal banker Emmanuel Macron is expected to win a second term, his two closest contenders in the polls, Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour, are both fascists who represent a huge danger for democracy and the working class. Catherine argues that the French Left needs to overcome its divisions and act now to stop them.

Éric Zemmour was born in Paris in 1958 to a family of Sephardic Jews who emigrated from Algeria when it was a French colony. A columnist for the right-wing daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, he also had a regular slot on the television news programme *CNews*, despite being convicted for incitation to racial hatred for comments on Muslims. In a series of bestselling books on the theme of French decline, he has made a name for himself as an advocate of the theory of the “Great Replacement” of White French people by Muslims, arguing that they should be expelled from France. He is also a misogynist, attacking feminists in his book *The First Sex*, and a bigoted homophobe.

Legitimising Racism

He is a polemicist who has perfected the technique of making provocative statements which push back the barriers of what is acceptable in public discourse, then adopting the posture of the victim when criticised. For example, he recently said that handicapped children should not be in schools with others, which caused the kind of outcry that keeps him in the headlines.

Zemmour is also anti-Semitic, and the bearer of a fascist political project. He develops this project in his 2014 book, entitled *The French Suicide*, which sold over 500,000 copies. While blaming neoliberalism for the country’s present economic difficulties, he idealises the past. He argues that Marshall Pétain, who headed the Vichy government in wartime France, protected French Jews and only rounded up foreign ones, thus saving many lives. He has repeated this argument during his presidential campaign. But

Pétain and the Vichy government were pro-Nazi collaborators who deported thousands of Jews, French included.

Historian and Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld, who with his wife Beatrice tracked down Klaus Barbie, the Nazi “Butcher of Lyon,” and brought him to justice, has denounced Zemmour’s historical revisionism in a recent interview, saying:

“For the far right, Vichy is an important question which comes back repeatedly in the historical debate. Since there’s no referee, the far right uses this argument to try to exonerate Vichy. For this they use a fictionalised history, opposing the facts with what could have happened if Vichy hadn’t cooperated with the Nazis in carrying out the final solution. You can invent all sorts of fictional scenarios. But what happened, happened... the truth is that when, in addition to the exclusionary anti-Semitism of Vichy, the Nazis proposed extermination, that is, to deport families, old people, children, Vichy accepted, when in fact it had a lot of freedom for manoeuvre. Vichy didn’t use this freedom, on the contrary, it offered to arrest foreign Jews. In 1942, 40,000 Jews were arrested. Most of them by the French police.”

“Today Éric Zemmour and others pretend that Vichy protected French Jews by handing over foreign ones. But the best way to defend French Jews would have been to refuse to arrest foreign ones. Among the deportees of 1942, 4500 children were French-born. Over 6500 French-born Jews were deported that year. In all, over 20,000 French-born Jews were deported.”²

This was a crime against humanity, Zemmour claims that France committed no crime. Klarsfeld adds that Zemmour talks about Muslims today the way people talked about the Jews in the 1930s, and warns of the dangers if Zemmour gets into power.

Anti-Semitic

Many hesitate to brand Zemmour as anti-Semitic because he is Jewish. But he knows how to divide his audience, and directs his accusations against Jews who allegedly refused to assimilate, giving new life to old anti-Semitic arguments. Debating his ideas at the Synagogue de la Victoire in Paris with Gilles Bernheim, then chief rabbi of France, Zemmour spoke of the alleged frustrations caused by the influx of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, the Ashkenazy³ or Yiddish-speaking Jews, in the interwar years.

“At the time, it was believed that the Jews had too much power, that they were too influential, they had excessive domination of the economy, the media, and French culture, as they did, moreover, in Germany and in

Europe. And indeed, this is partly true...some French people found that the Jews behaved with the arrogance of colonisers. France is the country which received the most refugees. And suffered the greatest consequences. French doctors complained that Jewish doctors stole their clients. There was a terrible competition. There was trafficking. There was the Stavisky affair. All this was not invented by the anti-Semites. And the French Jews were the first to complain of the problems caused by the Ashkenazy Jews.”⁴

The audience was so shocked that the video recording was not made public just after the debate. Editorialist Claude Askolovich denounced Zemmour, but there was little echo of this in the mainstream press. Zemmour has continued to use the media to advance his claims about history. He has said that Maurice Papon, who had nearly two thousand Jews deported when he was secretary of the Prefecture of Bordeaux during the war, should not have been charged because he was “just following orders.” Zemmour also questioned the innocence of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish army officer accused of espionage, who was defended by novelist Emile Zola in *J’Accuse*.

Zemmour was up in court in December 2020 for “questioning a crime against humanity” but was found not guilty. He has called for the repeal of the law making Holocaust denial a crime. The historian Gerard Noiriel has drawn parallels between Zemmour’s present career and that of Édouard Drumont, who became known as “the pope of anti-Semitism” in France at the time of the Dreyfus affair. Against the background of a deepening economic crisis and endemic corruption in public life, exacerbated by a banking crisis in 1882, Jews became convenient scapegoats for all that was wrong with French society.⁵ After the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, ultra-nationalists put it about that the defeat was caused by Jews—those who betrayed Alsace-Lorraine and those who participated in the Commune, which tried to defend Paris against the Prussians. There were too many Jews in the army, and too many in finance and politics, the nationalists said. In 1886, Drumont published *La France Juive*, an anti-Semitic diatribe which sold 500,000 copies. From then on, he escalated his attacks, reaching the height of his fame during the Dreyfus affair, in which the Jewish army officer was accused of espionage in place of the real traitor, Esterhazy.

Though he does not call Zemmour an anti-Semite, Noiriel says that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are produced within the same discursive framework. He shows how Zemmour, searching for the enemies of the nation, opposing the elites to the people, takes his arguments from the pages of Drumont. For example, both argue that the Rothschild bank made its fortune by speculating on the defeat of Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo, and that it acted on

the side of the English against France, while preventing France from reconstructing its economy.⁶

The chief rabbi of France, Haïm Korsia, said Zemmour was “certainly anti-Semitic, and obviously a racist.” He later emphasised that he was opposed to the anti-Semitism of the far left and the far right equally, and said that anti-Zionism was clearly a form of anti-Semitism.⁷ Francis Kalifat, the chairperson of the CRIF (Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France), the official body representing France’s Jewish community, has also said Zemmour is anti-Semitic, and that “not a single Jewish vote” should go to Zemmour. But he also denounced Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the left-wing France Insoumise (FI), saying that the CRIF rejected the far left and the far right equally. Similarly, the editorialist Claude Askolovich has criticised Zemmour but also attacked Jean-Luc Mélenchon for writing a letter of support to Jeremy Corbyn after he was accused of anti-Semitism inside the Labour Party.

Zemmour is unequivocally defended by far-right media personalities like Élisabeth Lévy, who says that no Jew ever had to leave France on account of the RN (National Rally), whereas many Jews have had to leave France because of the anti-Semitism of the banlieues, code for immigrants and Arabs.⁸ Philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, who accused Yellow Vests of anti-Semitism when they jeered him at a demonstration, says Zemmour is right about the threat posed by African and Maghrebian immigration, and says nothing about his anti-Semitism. “France has an obsession with antifascism,” he says.⁹ When Green Party candidate Yannick Jadot accused Zemmour of anti-Semitism, saying he wanted to reconcile part of France with French Algeria, Pétain, and anti-Semitism, which Jean-Marie Le Pen had never succeeded in doing, he was attacked from all sides. Gilles-William Goldnadel, a far-right lawyer and columnist in *Le Figaro*, former chairperson of the France-Israel Association, who has made a career of attacking journalists and personalities who criticise Israel, was vociferous.¹⁰ Goldnadel accused Jadot of anti-Semitism, as did Zemmour’s campaign boss Guillaume Peltier, who said Jadot’s accusation was proof of the anti-Semitism of the Islamo-leftists, though Jadot’s politics are pro-capitalist and neoliberal. Far-right media personality Élisabeth Lévy also defended Zemmour, saying, “anti-Semitism, in any case that which aggresses or kills, comes from Islamo-leftists rather than from the far right.”¹¹ But historians of Judaism Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias argue that Zemmour is giving the traditionally anti-Semitic far right a respectable veneer¹².

Le Pen

In this context, Marine Le Pen, leader of the equally fascist RN, is able appear quite respectable, and she is exploiting this to get ahead in the polls. She is currently credited with 17–18 per cent of

voter intentions, followed closely by Zemmour at 16 per cent. One or the other will probably face Macron, currently at 25 per cent, in the second round. To discredit her rival, Le Pen said Zemmour has got Nazis in his team. This is true. Most of them were in her party when it was called the National Front. They left when she was forced to distance herself from some of the more outright anti-Semites, like her own father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Zemmour reacted angrily to her accusations, saying there was not a single Nazi working with him. This is a blatant lie.

Zemmour's new party, Reconquista, aims to stand candidates in the June 2022 general election, which will follow the April presidential elections. Philippe Schleiter is in charge of candidatures. He is a nephew of dead Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, who maintained that the gas chambers never existed. Schleiter writes for the mainstream right-wing press *Le Figaro* and the far-right *Valeurs Actuelles* as well as the far-right think tank Polémia. This was founded by former Le Pen aide Jean-Yves Le Gallou, who is now Zemmour's political advisor. Le Gallou, who left the FN with Bruno Mégret in 1999, talks openly of a coming racial war. Tristan Mordrelle, in charge of fundraising, is also a Holocaust denier. He is co-founder of the Parisian far-right bookshop Ogmios, and is part of a network of revisionist and Nazi booksellers. He translated the 1930 work *The Myth of the XXth Century* by Nazi theoretician Alfred Rosenberg, which opposes Jewish culture and the supposedly Nordic Aryan culture. He is the son of a Breton nationalist, Olivier Mordrel, who collaborated with the Nazis and was sentenced to death for this after the war but escaped to South America, obtained a pardon and was able to return to France. Philippe Milliau, ex-leader of the Nazi thugs Bloc Identitaire, chairperson of far-right TV Libertés, is in charge of Zemmour's campaign in Brittany. Damien Riaud, former spokesperson of fascist youth organisation Generation Identitaire, is now in charge of Zemmour's digital campaign. He used to organise racist attacks against young Arabs in the streets. Apart from the renegades from Le Pen's party, Zemmour is also attracting the traditionalist Catholics, like Laure Trochu, who left Valerie Pécresse's Les Républicains (LR), along with her group the Conservative Movement, to join Zemmour. This information on Zemmour's Nazi support was leaked to the press by Pécresse's campaign.

Big Business

Zemmour could not have got to where he is without the backing of the media and some important businessmen. The backing of top businessman Vincent Bolloré has been crucial. Classified by Forbes magazine as having the 548th biggest fortune in the world, and the fourteenth richest French fortune, worth over five billion euros, Bolloré is involved in transport, logistics and most recently the media through the Vivendi group. He likes to explain that he

saved his family business from ruin and built it into the million-euro business it is today. But his fortune owes far more to investments in the former French colony of Cameroon in West Africa. A friend of Nicolas Sarkozy, Bolloré bought up privatised national infrastructure like railroads, ports and logistics networks in West Africa, as well as a number of palm oil plantations. Investigative journalist Thomas Deltombe has exposed Bolloré's brutal methods in Cameroon; exploitation, conflict with unions, mass sackings of workers or union leaders who refused to comply. Deltombe described the palm oil plantations as "*Germinal* in the tropics."¹³ Since then, the businessman who proclaims his love for liberty has started suing anyone who writes about his holdings, and a number of journalists have been taken to court to silence them. Bolloré was fined twelve million euros for corruption in Africa, before selling his African subsidiaries for 5.7 billion euros to rival MSC.

With the money from his African investments, Bolloré set about buying into the mass media in France. In 2015, he took control of the popular television channel Canal Plus, and immediately got rid of any left-leaning satirical or political programmes. Then he provoked a strike, and got rid of the staff after a brutal strike-breaking operation. He replaced them with presenters willing to promote the far right and fascists. Immediately after buying Canal Plus, he bought news channel i-Tele, and imposed J.M. Morandini as the head of news. Morandini had previously been accused of sexual harassment, and the channel's journalists went on strike to protest. After thirty-one days on strike, the longest in the audiovisual sector since May '68,¹⁴ over one hundred journalists left. Rebranded CNews, the chain has become a conveyor belt for ideologues of the far right and fascists. Bolloré recruited Zemmour to CNews in the wake of the strike. The same thing happened more recently at radio station Europe 1. After a strike, most of the professional journalists left, and were replaced by far-right pundits like Zemmour. Bolloré is associated with far-right Breton nationalist movements and is close to traditionalist Catholic groups, and has not hesitated to put fascists in editorial positions in his media acquisitions.

When he bought news magazine *Paris Match*, he made Patrick Mahé director. Mahé was in his youth a member of the notorious far-right group Occident, and is close to Breton nationalists. Bolloré also appointed Guillaume Zeller to the head of i-Tele. Zeller is the grandson of André Zeller, one of the four generals who attempted a putsch in 1961 during the Algerian War to prevent independence going ahead. Guillaume Zeller is associated with the far-right website *Boulevard Voltaire*, and contributes to far-right weekly magazine *Valeurs Actuelles*. He is also a regular on the Nazi radio Courtoisie. On the 4th of December, 2013, he published a blog headlined: "Paul Aussaresses could have been a national hero." General Aussaresses ran death squads and publicly

defended the use of torture during the Algerian War. He assassinated the FLN (National Liberation Front) leader Larbi Ben M'hidi after he was captured by the army in 1957. Zeller only stayed a year at i-Tele, but when it became CNews, the far right had total freedom to express its ideas. In June 2021, J.M. Morandini hosted an ex-general, Delawarde, who had signed an appeal in *Valeurs Actuelles* in April 2021. The general warned of a civil war to come, in a rallying cry to fascists and anti-Muslim racists everywhere. On Morandini's show, Delawarde expressed the view that the media was controlled by a "well-known community," in a clear allusion to Jews. He mentioned BFMTV, owned by Israeli businessman Patrick Drahi, as an example of what he was talking about. The anti-Semitism was challenged by SOS Racisme and the Union of Jewish Students in France, as well as by the revolutionary left.¹⁵ But such ideas are now becoming mainstream. At the same time, Bolloré, when called before a senate inquiry into media concentration in France, explained that he was a small fry, a "dwarf" in an international arena dominated by Netflix and other media giants.

Fascist roots

Marine Le Pen is losing some of her entourage to Zemmour, notably the RN senator Stéphane Ravier and RN chief in Normandy Nicholas Bay. Her niece, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, looks set to follow. But we should not be fooled into thinking the RN and Reconquête are fundamentally opposed. Zemmour's rabid racism makes Le Pen look respectable, like a credible head of state. But Zemmour's party is just the latest offshoot of the fascist party founded fifty years ago by Jean-Marie Le Pen. An officer and torturer during the Algerian War, Le Pen founded the FN in 1972 with a member of the Waffen SS, a former head of Vichy's fascist Milice and other admirers of Hitler. Le Pen was repeatedly condemned for selling recordings of Hitler's speeches and for making jokes about the Holocaust. François Duprat, a leading member of the FN in the 1970s, was a notorious anti-Semite and Holocaust denier, author of a brochure called "Six million dead. Did it really happen?" But the party's anti-Semitism meant it failed to become a mainstream party on the Right.

Louis Aliot, Marine Le Pen's ex-husband and party vice-president, saw that the memory of the Holocaust was all that was stopping the Front from winning elections. In an interview with historian Valérie Igounet, Aliot said, "Giving out leaflets in the street, the only glass ceiling I could see wasn't immigration, or Islam. It was the anti-Semitism that stopped people voting for us. That was all. The moment you pick this ideological lock, you free the rest."¹⁶

In an interview in *Valeurs Actuelles*, Marine Le Pen said that her hostility to Islam made her the best protection against anti-Semitism. But anti-Semitism remains a key element of far-right and fascist ideology in France. No-one should be fooled into

thinking the RN has changed. Even as she denounces Zemmour for harbouring Nazis in his party, Le Pen aims to win over his voters.

"We have similar objectives—immigration and giving their country back to the French," she said in an interview in *Valeurs Actuelles* in October 2021. In another interview she said that Zemmour could constitute a reservoir of votes for her for the second round of the election. He could help her by mobilising people who are tempted to abstain.¹⁷ Le Pen's only fear is that Zemmour's outrageous statements might provoke a reaction from the Left. "He will over-mobilise his adversaries by his outrageous arguments," she says. A large number of people on the streets against fascism would affect her chances too, and she knows it. She is therefore taking a very "softly, softly" approach, trying to come across as warm and caring while staying on friendly terms with Hungarian fascist Viktor Orban. At any event, her campaign is being financed by a Hungarian bank.

While Le Pen is second in the polls, at 17 per cent behind Macron's 25 per cent, the results of last summer's regional elections were not reassuring for her. Despite being ahead in the polls, her party's failure to take control of a single region in the elections in June 2021 was a major setback. Voter participation was only 34 per cent, and she failed to make the breakthrough predicted. There was a return to the traditional division of power between the discredited Parti Socialiste (PS) and the conservative Les Républicains (LR). This failure of Le Pen's party is one of the reasons the outwardly more radical Zemmour is attracting the more extreme fringes of the far right. Her base is destabilised by both Zemmour and, to a lesser extent, Valérie Pécresse of the LR.

Pécresse and the conservative right

Trailing Macron, Le Pen and Zemmour in the polls, and hurt by the defections of her tradi-Catholic base to Zemmour, Valérie Pécresse (LR) has just declared herself a feminist, saying she was refused a job on account of a pregnancy early in her career. This is a blatant attempt to win the votes of women.

Pécresse was minister for higher education and research, then minister for the budget in Nicolas Sarkozy's government (2007–12). She prepared the way for privatisation of universities by making them "autonomous," thus dependent in part on private finance, while redirecting research money to private enterprise in the form of tax credits. Companies like pharmaceutical giant Sanofi got millions for doing nothing, shutting down research and firing research workers, which goes some way to explaining France's failure to produce a Covid vaccine. When Sarkozy was replaced by François Hollande in 2012, Pécresse became active in the movement against justice minister Christiane Taubira's law authorising gay marriage in 2013. Pécresse even promised to "undo" any gay marriages if she got elected. She was part of a

movement of traditionalist Catholics which was active inside LR. This group, initially called Common Sense, now called the Conservative Movement, wanted to establish links with the far right and Marion Maréchal Le Pen, niece of Marine Le Pen. Pécresse took control of the Ile de France regional council in 2015 with the support of Common Sense, and began to give them a helping hand. She removed the “contraceptive pass” which allowed fourteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds to get free contraception anonymously. She also directed public money to two charities allegedly helping with crisis pregnancies but which were totally opposed to abortion. Pécresse was also accused of giving fifty thousand euros to a foundation for private traditionalist Catholic schools, and of subsidising two Catholic associations linked to the Communauté de l’Emmanuel, a traditionalist Catholic sect which facilitated the “re-education” of homosexuals by “conversion therapies” of the kind denounced by Amnesty International. This traditionalist sect’s publishing house has produced anti-abortion works by Jérôme Lejeune, a 1950s geneticist who is now being canonised by the Vatican for his anti-abortion campaigning. The Conservative Movement want to make the reduction in the number of abortions a national cause, and want to abolish the law making it a crime to prevent abortions from being performed.

With anti-abortionist François-Xavier Bellamy on her campaign team, it is small wonder Pécresse’s opponents accuse her of “feminist washing”. Her campaign offers nothing to women. Her main promise is to remove taxes from inherited wealth, something which will principally benefit people like herself. Otherwise, she is for more of the budgetary austerity already practised by Macron, with reform of pensions and unemployment benefits and the obligation to work for the dole. It’s a guarantee of even lower living standards for the working class.

Macron’s callous neoliberalism

Apart from her more conservative social agenda, there is little to distinguish Pécresse from Macron. A recent survey shows the fragmentation of the LR base, with Pécresse failing to get the support of her own party.¹⁸ Only half of those who voted for the LR candidate Francois Fillon in 2017 intend to vote for Pécresse. Two in ten wish to vote for Zemmour, another two support Macron. Pécresse’s party appears to be coming apart at the seams.

Macron, with between 16 and 23 per cent of voting intentions, is most popular among the professional middle classes (30 per cent). A quarter of electors who earn more than 3,500 euros per month would vote for him, another quarter for Pécresse. Macron’s main support comes from the well-off: company bosses (47 per cent), the comfortably-off (61 per cent), Parisians (48 per cent) and residents of larger cities (46 per cent). Macron’s biggest support base is among the over-65s, with 28–29 per cent intending to vote for him, compared with 23–28 per cent for Pécresse.

Macron has benefitted from the decomposition of the PS and LR. A poll published by IFOP with Sud Radio noted that nearly 41 per cent of LR sympathisers and 38 per cent of PS partisans hope the outgoing president will be elected. On the other hand, 38 per cent of PS supporters hope J.L. Mélenchon will win. And nearly 29 per cent of LR supporters hope Zemmour will win.

But Macron’s callous neoliberalism has made him extremely unpopular outside his narrow upper-middle-class base. That is why he has waited until the last minute to declare his candidature. Under his rule, the rich have become vastly richer. Throughout the Covid crisis, Macron continued his attacks on social welfare, cutting unemployment benefits and attacking pension rights while starving hospitals of funds. He has whipped up Islamophobia and racism to sideline opposition to his highly unpopular “reforms.” When faced with resistance to the reform of universities, minister Frédérique Vidal started a witch-hunt of researchers, joining in with the far right in denouncing them as “Islam-leftists.”

But opinion polls consistently show that, more than any other voters in Europe, French voters are mainly preoccupied with the cost of living. In a survey published on the 29th of November, 2021, 43 per cent estimated that the question is very important, more so than questions of security or immigration.¹⁹ Eight French people out of ten consider that their purchasing power has been affected, and four in ten say they are in financial difficulty. Furthermore, they support government intervention to keep electricity prices down. Forty-one per cent are in favour of the state ownership of electricity provider EDF.²⁰

Mélenchon and divisions on the Left

In 2017, Le Pen got 21.30 per cent of the vote and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the left reformist France Insoumise (FI) got 19.58 per cent in the first round, as against Macron’s 24.01 per cent. Five years ago, Mélenchon was the most popular candidate among eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds, one quarter of whom voted for him. According to a recent IFOP survey, Macron has 24 per cent of voting intentions among this age group, compared with 21 per cent for Marine Le Pen, 13 per cent for Mélenchon and 9 per cent for Zemmour.

The working classes vote principally Mélenchon or Le Pen. The press is making much of Mélenchon’s vote going to Macron this time to keep out Le Pen in the first round. But the real problem is despair at a plethora of candidates on the Left and the lack of a credible left project. The Green Party, Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV), has presented a pro-market neoliberal, Yannick Jadot,²¹ while the PS, has put forward one of former president François Hollande’s allies, Anne Hidalgo. She is currently the mayor of Paris, and has no intentions of rocking the boat. She is a neoliberal with no alternative to Macron’s austerity. Former justice minister

Christiane Taubira was seen as a candidate who might unite the Left and lead a fightback against racism, but her record as a member of Hollande's government holds her back even as she tries to present herself as the voice of anti-racism. She has to confront disgusting racism from the far right, but has failed to convince on issues like housing or social policy. The Communist Party (PCF) has put up Fabien Roussel, who is leading a shameful, patriotic, jingoistic pro-nuclear campaign while attacking the rest of the Left. Their prospects are dismal; Jadot is doing best, at 5 per cent in the polls. The divisions on the Left are one reason why there is so little interest in the election. Left voters are in despair. On the far left, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) is split, with Philippe Poutou at 1 per cent and a breakaway group, Revolution Permanente, providing another candidate, Anasse Kazib. Another fraction inside the NPA is calling for a vote for Mélenchon. Nathalie Arthaud, the Lutte Ouvrière candidate, even said in a radio interview that the divisions on the Left didn't concern her.

Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and fractions of the NPA cling to the idea that the worst thing that could happen would be unity with the reformist left in the PS and elsewhere to fight fascism. In an article on the mobilisations against Zemmour in Lille, Poutou supporters rejoiced that the demonstration they organised in the afternoon had twice as many people as the one called that morning by the PS mayor of Lille, Martine Aubry.²² This is not going to give confidence to anyone who wants to fight fascism.

Instead, the Left should rally behind Jean-Luc Mélenchon and support his campaign. Currently around 11 per cent in the polls, he could present a challenge to the hegemony of right and far right ideas if the Left got behind him. In his meeting at Montpellier on the 13th of February, he raised the question of equality and denounced the rise in the number of millionaires in France since the beginning of the pandemic. He attacked capitalism as a parasitical system that fed off the disasters it provoked and promised to fight against inequality. The difficulty for Mélenchon will be to get people to come out and vote. He needs a participation rate of about 80 per cent to get through to the second round.

Mobilisation is key

To do this, he must mobilise on the street. But the far right is trying to capitalise on protests too, especially around sanitary passports and vaccines. Macron's sacking of health workers who refuse vaccination can't be accepted by the Left, nor should angry health workers be left to march behind Marine Le Pen's former second in command, Florian Philippot, who is leading marches of anti-vaxxers.

Though there was much hesitation about the Freedom March on Paris on the 12th of February, since it looked similar to the

reactionary Canadian one, Mélenchon's FI and the NPA came out in support of it. There was a lot of nationalist flag-waving and anti-vax slogans at the demonstration, but the main theme that came through was anger against the spiralling cost of living. The brutal repression the cortège met with in Paris was reminiscent of the Yellow Vests' protests, as was the arrest of leaders associated with that movement. Macron does not want the Yellow Vests to come back.

The other issue where the government is encountering resistance is over the Islamic hijab. While the government rammed through another battery of repressive laws aiming to keep women with hijabs out of public places, a group of young women football players organised a protest about the French Football Federation's ban on their wearing of the hijab during matches. When they planned a demonstration, the Parisian police chief Didier Lallement banned it. But equality and diversity minister Élisabeth Moreno said women should be allowed to wear the veil while playing. She was immediately slapped down by the government's inner circle, Islamophobe feminist and former minister for equality Marlène Schiappa among them. Moreno's position, however, underlines the fact that the government has lost the ideological battle among young people, and this could have an impact on the general election that follows the presidential one.

It is hard to describe the impact that Black Lives Matter has had on young people subjected to institutional racism in France. As Americans were demonstrating for justice for George Floyd, French youth were in the streets to protest against racist and homicidal police. On the 2nd of June, 2020, twenty thousand people demonstrated against police racism behind Assa Traoré's campaign for justice for her brother Adama, who died in police custody four years previously. Despite savage police brutality and judicial harassment, Traoré has organised rallies and demonstration to support her judicial campaign to get to the truth. None of the organisers could have predicted the size of the rally. Other demonstrations took place in cities like Toulouse and Montpellier, and Floyd's words, "I can't breathe," were taken up by the crowds.

Attitudes among young people have changed fast. In one opinion poll, one high school pupil in two said the police were racist. Others showed a majority out of sync with the government's definition of *laïcité*, or secularism, with 52 per cent agreeing that religious symbols should be allowed in schools. Forty-nine per cent saw no problem with public servants being allowed to show their religious beliefs, and 38 per cent overall were in favour of pupils being allowed to wear a burkini.²³ Over half of the pupils polled were against the "right to blaspheme," which has been a key idea justifying Islamophobia in recent years, with caricatures of the prophet Mohamed being shown as part of classes on civic awareness.

The French Left needs to fight Le Pen. Black Lives Matter had a significant impact on young people in France, releasing energy that could be used to fight. On issues like the hijab, young people's attitudes are far from the racism of older generations. Mélenchon is the candidate best placed to lead this fight. He has announced the beginning of door-to-door campaigning, and everyone worried about the present situation should be involved in his campaign. But election campaigning is not enough. People need to get out to stop the fascists wherever they show their faces. There are enough young people angry about racism to make this possible. The victory of fascism in France is not inevitable.

¹ Catherine, originally from Ireland, is a socialist living in Rouen.

² Serge Klarsfeld interviewed on *Mediapart*, 24 January 2022, available online from: <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/240122/laurent-joly-zemmour-une-capacite-inverser-la-realite-des-faits>

³ Claude Askolovich, 23 June 2016, available online from: <http://www.slate.fr/story/119925/zemmour-kippa-precheur-petaïniste>

⁴ <https://fr.timesofisrael.com/eric-zemmour-son-judaisme-son-identite-francaise-et-toutes-ses-polemiques/>

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