

Mélenchon denies France's responsibility for the Nazi-era deportation of the Jews

By Alex Lantier
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The repulsive decision of Unsubmissive France (LFI) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon to deny France's responsibility for the deportation of Jews from France to death camps in Eastern Europe during the Nazi Occupation is a political warning. The opposition he wants to build to President Emmanuel Macron's social cuts, allying the LFI with the union bureaucracies and various NGOs, would be a nationalist, petty-bourgeois movement hostile to historical truth and the working class.

Macron's election clearly marks a new historical stage in the class struggle. As in Greece, the bourgeoisie is working with the European Union to destroy social and democratic rights won through the workers struggles of the 20th century. By militarizing Europe, making the French state of emergency permanent, and unilaterally rewriting labor laws by decree, Macron aims to set up an openly authoritarian and anti-working-class regime. Mélenchon himself has said that Macron aims to repudiate the gains of the Liberation from the Nazis and the general strikes of 1936 and 1968.

This offensive will undoubtedly provoke powerful opposition among workers in France and across Europe. But to develop a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, austerity, and war, and unify struggles in France and internationally requires consciously rejecting Mélenchon's orientation. He ever more closely mirrors his Greek ally, Alexis Tsipras, the prime minister of the pro-austerity coalition government between Syriza (the "Coalition of the Radical Left") and the far-right Independent Greeks. Like Tsipras, Mélenchon criticizes the EU from a pro-imperialist and populist standpoint compatible with the nationalist right. This can only lead to disasters for the workers.

In a post on his blog titled "You can't make this up," Mélenchon attacks Macron for having mentioned France's responsibility in the Vél d'Hiv police round-up in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on July 16 in Paris. According to Mélenchon, "saying that France as a people, as a nation, is responsible for this crime is to allow an essentialist definition of our country that is totally unacceptable."

The history of the collaborationist regime set up by the French bourgeoisie after the Nazi invasion in 1940, including the Vél d'Hiv round-up, is well known. It was indeed the French authorities and police and members of Jacques Doriot's French Popular Party (PPF) that, on July 16-17, 1942, arrested 13,000 Jewish men, women and children, interning them in the Vélodrome d'Hiver (Winter Cycling Stadium) and in a network of camps across France. Finally, they were deported to death camps in Poland. Of the more than 75,000 Jews deported from France during the Occupation, only 3,000 returned alive.

In the period since presidential declarations by the conservative Jacques Chirac in 1995 and François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS), who both recognized France's responsibility in the round-up, the argument presented by Mélenchon had been advanced only by neo-fascists.

When National Front (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen denied France's responsibility for the Vél d'Hiv round-up during the presidential elections, this provoked loud attacks in the press. "France is not responsible for the

Vél d'Hiv," she said on April 9. "If there are responsible parties, it was those who were in power at the time, it was not France. France has been overly denounced in recent years." *Le Monde* reacted by denouncing Le Pen for having crossed "a red line," while Mélenchon himself called Le Pen's remark "stupid."

Now, Mélenchon is crossing the red line and presenting as his own the argument he attacked as stupid just three months ago. He tries to present his position as a critique of Macron's reactionary comments during his meeting with Netanyahu, where Macron declared that opposition to Zionism is "a reinvented form of anti-Semitism."

Mélenchon writes, "Associating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism is a very old claim of national-exclusivist circles. But this is the first time that this thesis is made official by the president of our Republic. It is not a small thing to connect a political opinion to a crime that is punishable by law in France ... After that, declaring that France is responsible for the Vél d'Hiv is yet again going beyond the boundary of most intense statements that can be allowed."

Macron's comment connecting anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism is indeed a serious threat to freedom of opinion. By amalgamating criticism of the aggressive policies of the Israeli state against nearby states and the Palestinians with anti-Semitism, Macron is leaving open the possibility that criticisms of Middle East wars could in the future be legally punished. The threat is all the more serious in that, by writing the state of emergency into law, Macron is handing vast repressive powers to the state.

But Mélenchon is not warning workers of threats to democratic rights posed by war and the state of emergency. In fact, he has at various times backed these policies. The Left Front, of which he was a leading figure, voted for the initial imposition of the state of emergency in the National Assembly in November 2015. And Mélenchon insists in his blog post that France must "take responsibility for its decisions" and finance the wars launched by Hollande and the conservatives, as demanded by former armed forces chief of staff General Pierre de Villiers as he resigned this month.

Far from attacking Macron's anti-democratic policy, Mélenchon here is trying to stir up nationalist hatreds against Macron because he took responsibility in France's name for the round-up, presenting a false and provocative argument. Like Le Pen, he claims that speaking of France's responsibility for the round-up entails denouncing each French person, for all time, as an anti-Semitic criminal. He lashes out, "It is not in the power of Mister Macron to assign to all French people the identity of an executioner that does not belong to them."

This is a false and absurd interpretation of the statement that France bears responsibility for the round-up. Of course, many French people, far from being "executioners," hid Jews during the Occupation. And the emergence later on, in 1943-1944, of the Resistance as a mass movement based above all in the working class is testimony to the opposition that the Nazis, the Vichy regime and the deportations provoked.

But France does indeed bear responsibility for the Vél d'Hiv round-up, and not only because of the role of French state officialdom at the time. The support the collaborationist Vichy regime obtained from considerable layers of the population, as well as from political movements and leaders, many of whom continued to exercise enormous influence well after the end of World War II, remains a burning political issue.

If the Vichy regime could rule France, it was not only due to the aid it received from Nazi occupying forces. It is above all because it could rely on political movements, including the *Action française*—the petty-bourgeois, anti-Semitic movement led by Charles Maurras—who had broad influence in French media and society. The two successive heads of Vichy's General Commissariat for Jewish Questions (CGQJ), Xavier Vallat and Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, both were linked to it.

And the man who would found the PS after the May-June 1968 general strike, dominate what passed for a half-century as the French “left,” and become Mélenchon's mentor, François Mitterrand, started out in politics at Vichy. He knew René Bousquet, the collaborationist regime's chief of police, who led the Vél d'Hiv round-up. Mitterrand recycled himself towards social democracy after World War II, out of opportunism and rabid anti-communism, to cover up his past. But scandals erupted over this past during his presidency and ultimately it emerged that Mitterrand and Bousquet had still preserved a secret friendship into the 1980s.

To deny France's responsibility for the round-ups, and to hide the close link between the organizers of the round-up and his own career, Mélenchon downplays the significance of the collaboration, mixing cynicism with falsification of history. He does not dare deny the role of Vichy's political leadership and security forces in the round-up. But he speaks of it superficially, as if it had no relationship to French responsibility or, indeed, to current politics.

He writes, “Indeed, no one can deny that there were Frenchmen who were personally responsible for the crime, as was the case, for instance, of the police who carried out the round-up without expressing any protests or acts of resistance, but also of the authorities at all levels who made themselves complicit, either actively, or by their silence, or because they had given up any attempt to oppose it in any way at all.”

Mélenchon repeats with minor modifications the sophistries advanced by Mitterrand and Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the main bourgeois factions of the Resistance, to claim that Vichy France was not France. De Gaulle, for instance, crudely claimed that “France resisted.”

“France is nothing other than its Republic,” declares Mélenchon today. “At that time, the Republic had been abolished by the National Revolution of Marshal Pétain. In this vision of history, France, at that time, was in London with General de Gaulle and was everywhere that French people were fighting the Nazi occupiers ... I warn you: refusing to recognize the Republican foundations of our country's identity exposes those who trouble or violate it to powerful and irreversible retaliations coming from the deepest common sentiments of the French people.”

This is a falsification of history. The National Revolution did not abolish the Republic in 1940. The Republic dissolved itself by a vote of the National Assembly, elected on 3 May 1936 but gathered on 10 July 1940 in Vichy, to grant emergency powers to Marshal Philippe Pétain. In their majority, the Assembly's social democratic and bourgeois Radical deputies—that is, the anti-communist members of the French Popular Front—voted for Pétain.

The word “republic” ceased to appear in official state documents, and the state under Pétain arranged with the Nazi occupying forces that it could carry out its policy of “National Revolution.” A key element of the National Revolution was the persecution, and ultimately the deportation, of Jews to death camps carried out by the CGQJ, the police, and later on, by the fascist *Milice*.

After such enormous crimes, only the nationalist and counterrevolutionary policy of the Stalinist parties and of the Soviet

bureaucracy was able to save the capitalist regime in Western Europe, by blocking revolutionary struggles of workers in France and across Europe during the Liberation. They prevented the trial and sentencing of the vast majority of collaborationists who had helped organize the Holocaust in France. Vichy officials like Bousquet and Mitterrand were allowed to go on to prominent careers in business and politics.

These events constituted a historic vindication of the struggle for world socialist revolution led by Leon Trotsky, the leader of the October 1917 revolution and revolutionary Marxist opponent of Stalinism and the Popular Front. His struggle to found the Fourth International was based on an orientation to the international working class and the struggle to establish its political independence from the bourgeoisie, the Soviet bureaucracy, and petty-bourgeois and nationalist influences. His work represents the revolutionary alternative to the crimes of Stalinism in the 20th century.

Who are, one might ask, the Frenchmen who according to Mélenchon feel violated in the depths of their being by the truth about the role of the state and of political anti-Semitism in the Holocaust? There are, of course, the leaders of the far right, that is to say, those who defend the political legacy of the collaborationists. But there are also those who, like Mélenchon, initially took an interest in Trotskyism, due to disillusionment with the counterrevolutionary role of the French Communist Party (PCF) in the Algerian war and the May-June 1968 general strike, before capitulating to the Socialist Party (PS) and Mitterrand.

Mélenchon initially joined the *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI) of Pierre Lambert, as the OCI was breaking with Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), in 1971. The OCI had developed the false and demoralized position that revisionism had destroyed Trotskyism and the ICFI, which had to be reconstructed by a broad regroupment of petty-bourgeois forces. Its nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective was to form a Union of the Left with the PS and PCF to take power within the borders of France via the ballot box.

At present, it is widely recognized that this perspective, the foundation of the capitalist regime in France for nearly a half century, is bankrupt. The PCF collapsed, discredited by its collaboration with anti-worker PS governments and by the Stalinist bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. Now, the PS is disintegrating after Hollande's reactionary and unpopular presidency, but only after setting up a counterrevolutionary offensive led by its former economy minister, Macron.

The working class, on the other hand, is passing through the first stages of an international radicalization. Millions of workers and youth in the United States voted in the Democratic Party primary for a candidate, Bernie Sanders, who claimed to be “socialist.” Similarly, 20 percent of voters in France voted for Mélenchon to express opposition to Trump's missile strikes on Syria and the EU's austerity and anti-immigrant policy. Mélenchon is not, however, reacting by trying to develop a revolutionary perspective for the working class in Europe.

As he tries to mobilize the old PS-linked networks of NGOs, the petty-bourgeois parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party, and the trade union bureaucracies, Mélenchon is appealing directly to the far-right and partially taking over its conceptions. His goal is not to win to a struggle for socialism workers who have given up on the PS and the PCF and who are voting FN out of disgust and despair—a perspective advanced only by the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste*. Instead, he is trying to channel social opposition behind a nationalist and reactionary perspective.

The most serious warnings must be made about the evolution of Mélenchon and the central LFI leadership. Already in 2014, Mélenchon adopted populist positions in his book, *The Era of the People*, demanding that people “get beyond” socialist revolution and the working class. At the time, he was already developing a friendship with the right-wing

political strategist and admirer of Maurras, Patrick Buisson, attending the ceremony where Buisson received the Legion of Honor. He also shook hands with Marine Le Pen at the European Parliament in front of the TV cameras.

Mélenchon's denial of France's role in the deportation marks a further stage, however, in his political degeneration. He represents a certain type of “left” nationalist demagogy that already has a long and reactionary history in France. Jacques Doriot—who went, based on the rejection of Marxism, from the Communist Party to fascism and the foundation of the French Popular Party (PPF)—is only one particularly notorious example. A nationalist stench is wafting up from the leader of Unsubmissive France.

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