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Le Pen-Bardella: The Far Right Playing Both Sides

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With less than a year to go before France's presidential election, far-right candidate Marine Le Pen seems almost certain to reach the run-off. Her party's fortunes have continued to rise in recent years thanks to its leaders' ability to rally working-class voters while securing support from business elites. Tensions between these two bases remain, but they are unlikely to come to a head before the vote.

Marine Le Pen is no stranger to strategic ambiguity. She has existed in this state for the past year, promoting Jordan Bardella as a potential presidential candidate for the Rassemblement National (RN) in 2027, but not ruling out running herself if the courts decided to reduce her sentence for embezzlement of public funds.

In July, her sentence was reduced to three years in prison, two suspended, one under house arrest. Her ineligibility for public office was cut to 15 months. Because she had already served this since the first verdict, her path to the presidency reopened, and she immediately threw her hat back into the ring.

Le Pen has already launched an appeal against the new sentence too, at the Cour de Cassation, France's supreme court. Depending on when this judgement is delivered, she may have to face an ignominious end to the election campaign, spending the last few days wearing an electronic ankle tag and under curfew. If she is lucky, however, the sluggish timeline of French justice may spare her a verdict until after the second round, by which point she hopes to have presidential immunity.

Candidate, or perhaps not. Ankle tag, or perhaps not. The uncertainty of the French justice system is not where the ambiguity ends either: Le Pen's bid for the Élysée Palace rests on her ability to maintain unity between different fractions of her base that have competing interests.

A short-lived social turn

When Le Pen achieved her first major breakthrough, advancing to the second round of the presidential election in 2017, she did so off the back of a "social turn". Advised by Florian Philippot, then vice-president of the Front National (now RN), she ran on a platform of retirement at 60, scrapping the 2016 labour reform which restricted workers' rights, fighting against tax evasion, and maintaining the 35-hour work week and the wealth tax, amid a host of other statist measures.

> *Ten years on, […] Le Pen has dropped her social commitments as opportunistically as she initially picked them up.*

During the campaign, she attacked Le Siècle, an elite cross-partisan social club that she described as a secret meeting point of the oligarchy. She borrowed the slogans of populist left-winger Jean-Luc

Mélenchon to appeal to his voters in the second round, calling them to "*dégagez-les*" ("throw them out"), a direct echo of his call to "*dégagez-les tous*" ("throw them all out"). She even quoted the Socialist leader of the early 20th century, Jean-Jaurès, but it was to no avail. She had spent the 2017 campaign talking up the benefits of euro-exit and Frexit, which business and 70 per cent of the French public strongly opposed. At the last minute, she tried to backpedal but failed to convince the electorate. Her campaign ended with a bruising debate against Emmanuel Macron in which she appeared not to understand her own economic policies.

Ten years on, little remains of that Marine Le Pen. As part of the de-demonisation strategy of rendering the RN palatable, she has dropped her social commitments as opportunistically as she initially picked them up.

Unlike in the US or the UK, companies in France cannot donate to political campaigns, and donations from private citizens are capped at 7,500 euros. Industry thus doesn't intervene as directly in the democratic process as the cryptocurrency and fossil fuels interests backing Donald Trump and Nigel Farage. Similarly, because of the RN's ties to historical fascism, business has previously been wary of being seen to associate with the party, to the point that the Front National couldn't even access French bank loans.

Nonetheless, since 2024, when the Rassemblement National became the largest individual party in both the European Parliament and the French National Assembly, the RN and big business have gradually moved closer. This has been in no small part thanks to Jordan Bardella, the young gun who would have replaced Le Pen if the courts had rejected her appeal. Bardella, who is just 30 years old and currently dating an aristocrat, believes the RN needs to expand beyond its working-class and struggling petit-bourgeois base into the affluent classes. He sees austerity as a core part of the RN's project: in 2024, he proclaimed the need for "order in the streets and order in the public accounts".

Party of capital

Two additional factors have enabled the RN to become a standard party of capital: support from oligarchs, and an attempt by centrists to paint the Left as the real extremists, letting the RN off the hook.

Media moguls Vincent Bolloré and Pierre Édouard Stérin relentlessly platform the party and talk up its preferred themes in the media (although they also boost other right-wing forces, like Éric Zemmour's party Reconquête, various other Catholic reactionaries, and what remains of the Sarkozyist right). François Durvye, a former hedge fund manager for Stérin and a special advisor to Bardella, was tasked with establishing relationships with the business elite. Durvye recently quit the party, but in a parting shot, he claimed he was unable to reconcile himself to Le Pen's insufficiently neoliberal positions. In reality, reporting in *Libération and Mediapart* suggests that his departure was largely an ego-driven firing by Le Pen, who made clear that his days were numbered after he had unsubtly expressed his dissatisfaction to various RN bigwigs that she – and not Bardella – was running for president. This was not an ideological purge. Bardella, and his other economically liberal advisors like Ambroise de Rancourt, remain part of Le Pen's campaign team. On 29 August, the party announced that, if it gained power, it would enshrine a "golden rule" of keeping the deficit below 3 per cent in the constitution.

Durvye and Bardella's strenuous efforts to sign up to the agenda of the *patronat* – France's business establishment – appear to be working. In 2011, Laurence Parisot, then head of the business lobby MEDEF, denounced Le Pen, accusing her of sitting squarely within the far-right tradition. By 2025, Bardella was a guest at the MEDEF summer university, keen to demonstrate that the party was

abandoning any statist economic policies it may have previously favoured. In 2026, he was invited back for a working lunch, which he later described as "courteous". The rapprochement extends to Le Pen herself: In April, she dined with influential corporate leaders including France's richest man, Bernard Arnault, the owner of luxury goods firm LVMH, who backed Macron in 2017 and 2022 and is a personal friend of Vincent Bolloré.

The institutions representing business interests are taking the RN seriously because the polls currently show Le Pen/Bardella making it into the second round in all scenarios, and likely beating their opponent in the runoff. Business leaders feel they have to suss out the potential next party of government. They also fear the alternative: though centrist candidates seem to stand a better chance of making it to the second round, some polling scenarios show the RN candidate facing off against Mélenchon, who is himself running for the fourth time.

The centrist parties have already supplied the arguments for business to back the far right, treating Mélenchon and his party La France Insoumise ("France Unbowed", LFI) as an equivalent "extreme" to the RN, while also slowly turning the framework of demonisation away from the RN and onto LFI. In 2024, the newspaper Libération revealed secret dinners between Édouard Philippe, the likely candidate of the Macron camp, and Marine Le Pen. At one of these dinners, Philippe reportedly said that he wanted the next election to be between his camp and the far right; an election of "project against project, without moral critique", according to the revelations. Last year, Bruno Retailleau, head of the right-wing Les Républicains party and former interior minister under Macron, called for a united "republican front" including the RN against LFI. Most of the attacks from the Macron camp on the RN have thus far concentrated on the party's economic irresponsibility, based often on the promises they made during their brief social turn.

In this context, business has little work to do to abandon republicanism and justify a swing behind the RN. In the 2026 Toulouse municipal election, local industrial leaders threatened to cancel investments or to pull their businesses from the city if LFI candidate François Piquemal beat Macronist Jean-Luc Moudenc. Business and industrial leaders are primed to take this one step further and come out against LFI in future LFI-RN runoffs. As Bernard Cohen, the head of a lobby group representing the interests of small- and medium-sized businesses put it recently: "whether they are small, medium or large, what the bosses like generally is financial and economic stability […] economic danger for the bosses comes not from the Left of government, but a certain section of the Left; by which they mean LFI".

For their part, the unions, or at least the more radical ones, have started to push back against the bosses creeping toward the RN. In August, Sophie Binet, the leader of the CGT, denounced MEDEF in an interview with *Le Monde* for helping roll out the red carpet to the far right. She argued that the party's economic position was irrelevant and that business leaders should be thinking about the RN's programme regarding women, LGBT rights, climate change, the constitution, and the independence of the judiciary, rather than any economic reforms that the bosses might favour.

The standard position across the unions is that the far right is a unique and dangerous threat to the republic, to which any other political force is preferable. The Nouveau Front Populaire (New Popular Front; a broad left-wing electoral alliance in France) was endorsed in 2024 because it was a rare instance of left unity. In other words, the unions wouldn't burn any bridges by backing it. In 2024, the leaderships of various unions condemned media outlets and politicians trying to invoke a false equivalence between LFI and the far right, but they prefer to remain relatively politically neutral, not least because the leadership of LFI and union leaders have butted heads over strategy many times.

Kicking the can

The RN's move closer to its roots on the economy poses problems for the coalition that it is trying to build over the long term. The party has no meaningful answer to how it reconciles the interests of its working-class and petit-bourgeois voters with those of the oligarchs that now back it.

For example, the RN has been keen to position itself as the party of French agriculture, and has allied closely with small farmers who smile in selfies with Bardella. These traditionalist farmers are the kinds of people who oppose the over-financialisation of agriculture and the mass purchase of land by agri-giants like Otium, owned by Pierre Edouard Stérin, one of the oligarchs instrumental in smoothing the party's path to power. When iron and steel colossus ArcelorMittal entered crisis due to global overcapacity, the company closed two sites and said it would cut a further 600 jobs. The RN attacked Macron incessantly, but when LFI proposed a vote on nationalising the firm, it abstained, fearing it would alienate business.

The party has also opposed wealth taxes as well as taxes on private jets. It promises a better life for workers through horizontal redistribution away from immigrants, welfare cheats, the recipients of overseas development aid, and a very optimistic assessment of government waste. It also proposes cutting France's contributions to the EU, which could ultimately result in reduced subsidies for its agricultural base. In the RN's 2026 counter-budget, the party put forward proposals for deeper austerity than the Macronist government, arguing for 36 billion euros in savings compared to prime minister Sébastien Lecornu's 30 billion. In short, the RN is back to the ultra-racist Reaganism that defined the party under Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father.

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To obviate the conflict between the interests the RN is trying to represent, Marine Le Pen defaults to unity through nationalism. She talks in the language of the people and presents the struggle as a national one against a cosmopolitan establishment. As political scientist Théo Bourgeron has observed, Le Pen kicks down the road the difficult spending tradeoffs that will arise when not enough government waste is found to cover what remains of the party's social commitments.

Where there is a genuine tension in the strategy is Le Pen's disagreement with Bardella (and previously Durvye) over pensions. Bardella used the period when he was the likely presidential candidate to argue against Le Pen's position on the subject. Fearful of alienating the party's older working-class base, she wants to roll back Macron's pension reforms and revert the retirement age to 62. Bardella, by contrast, wants to keep the reform and is even considering scrapping a rule that allows people to retire at 67 on full pension, aiming to replace it instead with a minimum of 42 years of contribution, or the option to take a smaller pension. While it does open the party up to accusations of abandoning its base, even this tension could work in the RN's benefit. Candidate once more, Le Pen can set the line in favour of the lower pension age, while Bardella privately reassures his newfound friends in MEDEF that he will do his utmost to lobby for a higher one when in power.

Maintaining the coalition

For the moment, this tension seems unlikely to pose too many problems for the RN. The far right does not have a monopoly on the working class, most of whom choose abstention, and many of whom vote for left-wing parties. It is true, however, that the voters they do have, including those among the working class, are unlikely to be fazed by the imprecision on economic questions and the cosiness with big business. Félicien Faury's *Des électeurs ordinaires* ("Ordinary Voters"), a study of the RN electorate, has demonstrated the importance of race and identity to the far-right vote. He has amassed ample evidence that RN voters tend to feel that the distributional conflicts in society are almost entirely between natives and immigrants, not between social classes, and that they generally share the low-tax impulses of the *Grand Patrons* – France's most influential corporate bosses.

The contradictions of the RN aren't likely to be confronted on the ground or in the media. Although LFI speaks in the language of class conflict and is committed to highlighting RN hypocrisy, Mélenchon's strategy is to assemble a "New France" of public sector workers, educated young people, and the urban, often racialised working class. This means that they will spend limited time and resources during the campaign in the working-class areas where the far right is strongest, because their strategy is not premised on converting far-right voters, but on building an alternative coalition by activating abstentionists to reach the second round.

There is a certain logic to Mélenchon's gamble. Abstentionists are sociologically closer to left-wing voters, and have values that more closely resemble those of the left bloc than those of the centre or the far right. The French presidential election accounts only for raw numbers, not the geographic distribution of voters, so there is a lot to be gained for a Left concentrated primarily on winning votes in densely populated urban areas.

Polling hypotheticals show Mélenchon, currently the only left candidate with a plausible shot of making it to the second round, being destroyed by both Le Pen and Bardella in a runoff. To this, the Insoumis retort that polls always underestimate Mélenchon and overrate Le Pen. They argue that the extra votes from the abstentionists they hope to activate can be combined with the same dynamic that made the New Popular Front, a broad left-wing electoral alliance, win the legislative elections in 2024 (albeit without a majority), when enough centrist voters chose to block the far right.

Mélenchon's candidacy remains a long shot, though his campaign is progressing well. The far right's unity is currently being held in place by proximity to power. Commonalities are emphasised and differences dissolved by the possibility that Marine Le Pen might soon be in the Élysée. If Mélenchon wins, the factions will compete to establish the post-Le Pen orientation of the far-right bloc. If she (or a candidate of post-Macronism) wins, then the reverse occurs: the Left will be scrambled, and the succession battle will play out among the interest groups and political tendencies to the left of Macron. For now, the far right's contradictions are likely to remain unresolved.



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