

# The radical left in Europe and the NPA in France: a debate

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**Alex Callinicos' article appears, in France, in 'Critique Communiste' alongside a reply by François Sabado, a central leader of the Fourth International. We are reproducing below both of them.**

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## Contents

- [Where is the radical left](#)
- [Alex Callinicos](#)
- [The primacy of politics](#)
- [What kind of party?](#)
- [The role of revolutionaries](#)
- [François Sabado: The NPA, a](#)
- [Anti-capitalist party or \(...\)](#)
- [What kind of revolutionary](#)
- [Is it necessary to organize](#)

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## Where is the radical left going? Diverging paths

### Alex Callinicos

In the past couple of years the fortunes of the radical left have diverged sharply. The most important case on the negative side was provided by the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in Italy.... Fortunately, there are more positive experiences. The most exciting of these has been the initiative taken by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire to launch a New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA).

In the past couple of years the fortunes of the radical left have diverged sharply. The most important case on the negative side was provided by the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. The party of Genoa and Florence moved from 2004 onwards sharply to the right and joined the centre-left coalition government of Romano Prodi that held office briefly in 2006-8. PRC deputies and

senators voted for Prodi's neoliberal economic programme and for the participation of Italian troops in the occupation of Afghanistan and in the United Nations 'peace-keeping' mission to Lebanon. They were punished in the general elections of April 2008 with the loss of all their parliamentary seats.

The radical left also suffered reverses elsewhere. In Britain first the Scottish Socialist Party and then Respect split: when the rival fragments ran against each other, both sides predictably suffered electoral eclipse. In the Danish general election of November 2007, the Red-Green Alliance lost two of the six seats it had previously held.

Fortunately, there are more positive experiences. The most exciting of these has been the initiative taken by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire to launch a New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). In Germany, Die Linke, officially constituted as a party in June 2007 and the result of a convergence between dissident social democrats in western Germany and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the heir of the old East German ruling party, continues to make electoral inroads into the base of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

And even in Italy, the country that has seen the most catastrophic collapse of the radical left, the trend isn't uniformly negative. In reaction to electoral eclipse, the PRC national congress, when it met in July 2008, moved left. Bertinotti and his allies were defeated by a coalition of left-wing currents led by Paolo Ferrero. The delegates, elected by meetings attended by 40,000 members, voted for a document calling for 'a shift to the left' and declaring an end to 'organic collaboration [with the centre-left Democratic Party] in governing the country'.

### **The primacy of politics**

Nevertheless, the sense of participating in a general forward movement that prevailed a few years ago has been replaced by a marked divergence. What has caused this shift? To answer this question we need to understand the driving forces behind the rise of the radical left, particularly in Europe. Two main objective coordinates were involved. First, the emergence of mass resistance to neoliberalism and war, starting with the French public sector strikes of 1995 but gaining momentum after Seattle. Secondly, the experience of social liberalism – social-democratic governments, brought to office all over Europe in the second half of the 1990s by popular opposition to neoliberalism, proceeded to implement neoliberal policies, and in some cases – New Labour under Tony Blair in Britain and the Red/Green coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder in Germany – to go further than their conservative predecessors had dared.

The rightward shift of mainstream social democracy opened up a space to its left. Furthermore, the revival of resistance created a pressure to fill this space. Various political formations, of very diverse origins and history collectively took on the role of trying to fill it. Generally they didn't do so on an explicitly revolutionary programme. In some cases this reflected a tactical decision by far left organizations to attract allies and a broader audience, but as often it was a consequence of the fact that many of the leaders of the new formations were themselves reformists, often seeking to restore a more 'authentic' social democracy that, as they saw it, had been corrupted by the likes of Blair and Schröder.

The emergence of this radical left marked an extremely important, and positive development. It represented an opportunity to remake the left on a much more principled basis than had prevailed in the heyday of the social-democratic and Stalinist parties. But this, while a step forward, generated its own problems. The political field has its specific logic, which subjects to its hazards and contingencies all those who try to grapple with it.

After an initial period of forward movement, bounded roughly by the years 1998 and 2005 the various radical left formations were confronted with the question of how to continue in an environment that was somewhat less favourable – for example, because the tide of mass opposition to the war in Iraq was receding. A similar problem confronted the altermondialiste movement, which has failed to address it effectively and hence undergone a significant decline.

The response of the radical left formations was, of course, conditioned by the politics prevailing in them. This proved in the case of two key figures – Fausto Bertinotti in Italy and George Galloway in England – to be a reformism that began to shift rightwards. Bertinotti reacted to the decline of the Social Forums that had spread throughout Italy after Genoa and driven the mobilizations for Florence and the anti-war protests by turning back towards the centre-left, with the disastrous consequences already noted.

In the case of Galloway and the circle around him, the decline of the anti-war movement from the peak it achieved in 2003 combined with pessimism about the capacity of organized workers to mount effective resistance to the attacks mounted by New Labour and the bosses to generate the conclusion that the way forward for Respect lay in sustaining alliances with local Muslim notables who could deliver votes. But this reasoning – and the split that it produced in Respect – was overlain by a growing reconciliation between Galloway himself and New Labour. This was reflected first in his support for Ken Livingstone's unsuccessful re-election campaign for Mayor of London in May 2008 and then in his rallying to the aid of Gordon Brown's beleaguered government during the Glasgow East by-election that July, when a Blairite candidate was defeated by a massive swing to the Scottish National Party.

Elsewhere the politics has played out better, so far. Amidst general disarray on the French left, the majority in the LCR leadership seized the initiative – running Olivier Besancenot in the first round of the French presidential elections in April 2007 and then capitalizing on his relative success to launch the NPA.

Die Linke is a much more solidly reformist formation than anything envisaged by the LCR. It is, however, defined by the struggle between two tendencies – a right-wing, powerful both numerically and in the apparatus, constituted largely by the ex-leadership of the PDS, and a more left reformist current that is dominated by the ex-SPD trade-union officials clustered around the figure of Oskar Lafontaine, who is pursuing a project of reconstituting German social democracy on a more left-wing basis.

### **What kind of party?**

The recent advances of Die Linke and the LCR show that the objective coordinates responsible for the initial rise of the radical left remain. But the experiences of the PRC and Respect highlight the political dangers faced by these formations. How can these dangers best be addressed? The response of the LCR is particularly interesting. It is influenced by the negative examples of centre-left governments, not only in Italy, but in France itself and in Brazil.

Determination to avoid any repetition of a situation where the radical left could be integrated into a social-liberal coalition government shaped the attitude of the LCR majority towards the attempt to make the collectives that had driven the No campaign against the European Constitution in 2005 the launching pad for a unitary 'anti-liberal' candidate in the 2007 presidential campaign. The LCR's scepticism about the project of a unitary anti-liberal candidate led to a negative and sometimes ultimatum attitude towards the collectives, which caused its temporary isolation. But the Ligue was at least partially vindicated by the behaviour of José Bové in the presidential campaign.

It is to ward off this kind of danger that the LCR insists that the new party must be anti-capitalist, and not simply opposed to neoliberalism. It is to be 'a party for the revolutionary transformation of society', but yet not a revolutionary party in the specific sense in which it has been understood in the classical Marxist tradition. In that tradition, particularly as a result of the experiences of the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the early years of the Communist International (1919-24), socialist revolution is assumed to take a particular form, involving mass strikes, the development of dual power counterposing institutions of workers' democracy to the capitalist state, an armed insurrection to resolve this crisis by establishing the dominance of the workers' councils, and, running through all this, the emergence of a mass revolutionary party with majority support in the working class.

On the LCR's view, the NPA should not commit itself to this specific understanding of revolution, but simply to the necessity of 'a rupture with capitalism'. If this notion may seem vague, its political significance lies in what it rules out: more specifically, the Ligue correctly argues, it's not enough to oppose neoliberalism as a set of policies, but capitalism as a system. Failing to draw this distinction can lead participation in centre-left governments in the hope (usually the illusion) that they will produce a more benign mix of policies.

There is much to commend the LCR's conception of the NPA. The political experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows very clearly that, in the advanced capitalist countries, it is impossible to build a mass revolutionary party without breaking the hold of social democracy on the organized working class. In the era of the Russian Revolution it was possible for many European Communist parties to begin to do this by splitting social-democratic parties and winning substantial numbers of previously reformist workers directly to the revolutionary programme of the Communist International. October 1917 exercised an enormous attractive power on everyone around the world who wanted to fight the bosses and imperialism.

Alas, thanks to the experience of Stalinism, the opposite is true today. Social liberalism is repelling many working-class people today, but, in the first instance, what they seek is a more genuine version of the reformism that their traditional parties once promised them. Therefore, if the formations of the radical left are to be habitable to these refugees from social democracy, their programmes have not to foreclose the debate between reform and revolution by simply incorporating the distinctive strategic conceptions developed by revolutionary Marxists.

All the same, navigating between the Scylla of opportunism and the Charybdis of sectarianism is never easy. On the one hand, drawing the dividing line between anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism isn't necessarily straightforward. Given that, as the LCR would put it, anti-capitalism has 'incomplete strategic delimitations' - i.e. it leaves open how the 'rupture with capitalism' would be achieved, there is plenty of room for debate about what concrete steps are necessary. There are perfectly respectable left-reformist strategies for achieving a break with capitalism that presumably would have a right to a hearing in these debates. But these strategies merge in with proposals that seek to target neoliberalism rather than capitalism itself.

On the other hand, while the LCR are entirely right to oppose as a matter of principle participation in a centre-left government, they can't assume that everyone attracted to the NPA will share this attitude. On the contrary, many of them may want to see Besancenot in government. 18 per cent in a poll in August 2008 said the PS should come to an understanding with him.

## **The role of revolutionaries**

The underlying problem at work here is that it is the breach in reformism that has given the radical left its opening: how then does it try to draw in people from a reformist background while avoiding the betrayals of reformism – betrayals recapitulated in a highly concentrated way by Bertinotti's trajectory? The LCR's solution to the problem seems to be to install a kind of programmatic security lock – commitment to anti-capitalism and opposition to centre-left governments. But this is unlikely to work; the more successful the NPA, the more it is likely to come under reformist pressures and temptations.

When it first became involved in the process of left regroupment at the beginning of the present decade, the Socialist Workers Party came up with its own conception of the nature of the new radical left formations. This was articulated by John Rees when he argued: 'The Socialist Alliance [the precursor to Respect] is thus best seen as a united front of a particular kind applied to the electoral field. It seeks to unite left reformist activists and revolutionaries in a common campaign around a minimum programme.' It is extremely fortunate that we refused to liquidate the SWP, since in that case the crisis in Respect would have led, not just to the temporary electoral eclipse of the radical left in Britain, but to a far deeper fragmentation and weakening of the organized socialist left.

The idea that the NPA should be conceived as a united front of a particular kind has recently been criticized by one of the project's main architects, François Sabado:

There isn't a linear continuity between united front and party, just as 'politics' isn't a simple continuation of the social. There are elements of continuity but also of discontinuity, of specificities, linked precisely to political struggle ... It is from this point of view that it is incorrect to consider the new party as a kind of united front. There is then a tendency to under-estimate the necessary delimitations, to consider the NPA as merely an alliance or a unitary framework – even of a particular kind – and therefore to underestimate its own construction as a framework or a mediation for building the revolutionary leaderships of tomorrow. There is the risk that if we consider the NPA as a kind of united front of making it wage only united front battles. For example, we don't make the unity of action of the entire workers' and social movement conditional on an agreement on the question of the government; but is this a reason for the NPA to relativize a struggle over the question of government? No, we don't think so. The NPA makes the question of government – refusal to participate in governments of class-collaboration – a delimitation of its political fight. That shows, self-evidently on this issue, that the NPA isn't a kind of united front. Our aim to construct it as a confluence of experiences and activists doesn't mean that we must give up seeing this party as one of the decisive links of a global political alternative and of an accumulation of class-struggle and even revolutionary cadres for future crises.

Sabado is right in two important respects. First, successfully building the radical left today is a step towards, not away from, the construction of mass revolutionary parties. Secondly, the fact that radical left formations intervene in the political field shapes their character. Even if their organizational structure is that of a coalition, as that of Respect was, they need to define their global political identity by means of a programme, and function in many ways like a conventional political party, particularly when engaging in electoral activity.

But what the formula of a united front of a particular kind captures is the political heterogeneity that is characteristic of the contemporary radical left. This is more than a matter of the specific history of individual formations: the particular form taken by the crisis of social democracy today has created the conditions for a convergence among elements from the reformist and revolutionary lefts in

opposition to social liberalism. The fact that this political convergence is only partial, and in particular doesn't abolish the choice between reform and revolution, demands organizational structures that, if not explicitly those of a coalition, give the different currents space to breathe and to co-exist. But it also helps to explain the programmatic basis that Sabado seeks to give the NPA, which is essentially against social liberalism rather than against reformism altogether.

It's very important not to take fright at the political ambiguities that inherent in the contemporary radical left. Any revolutionary worth his or her salt should throw themselves enthusiastically into building these formations. But this doesn't alter the fact that these ambiguities can lead to a repetition of the kind of disasters to have overtaken the PRC and Respect. More positively, if the NPA is really to see what Sabado calls 'an accumulation of class-struggle and even revolutionary cadres for future crises', then this isn't going to happen automatically. It will require a considerable effort to train the new activists won to the NPA and its like in the revolutionary Marxist tradition. But who is going to undertake this task? Some political education can occur within the framework of the party itself. But this can only be within well-defined limits; otherwise the revolutionaries in the NPA can justifiably be accused of violating the political openness of the party and seeking to exploit its structures to put over their own distinctive politics.

It is right to build the radical left on a broad and open basis, but within the resulting formations revolutionary socialists should organize and fight for their own politics. Both parts of this sentence deserve their proper emphasis. It is a mistake to try to define the boundaries of radical left parties too narrowly. But, while building on a broad and open basis, revolutionary socialists should maintain their own political and organizational identity. The precise form this may take will naturally vary - sometimes an independent organization participating in a coalition, as the SWP did within the Socialist Alliance and Respect, sometimes a current in a larger organization. A revolutionary socialist identity within the broader radical left is necessary not for reasons of narrow sectarian loyalty but because the theory and politics of revolutionary Marxism matter.

They matter because they provide an understanding of the logic of capitalism as a system and because they recapitulate the accumulated revolutionary experiences of the past two centuries. Of course, the relevance of such a tradition to the present isn't something that can be taken for granted. On the contrary, it has to be shown in practice, and this always involves a process of selection, interpretation, and creative development of the tradition. But, because of the importance of practice, revolutionaries must retain the capacity to take their own initiatives. In other words, they should maintain their identity within the broader radical left not as a theoretical debating club but, whatever the circumstances, as an interventionist organization.

Of course, the presence of organized revolutionaries can be a source of tension within a radical left formation. They can be targeted and denounced by the right within the party. This can be a particular issue if the revolutionaries have a relatively substantial weight, as the SWP did within Respect and as the former LCR will in the NPA. The far-left elements who broke away with Galloway have sought to justify their actions by accusing the SWP of seeking to dominate Respect. This was the opposite of our intention: we would have been very happy to have been a relatively smaller force within a much larger radical left coalition.

The problem was that despite the enormous political upheaval surrounding Britain's participation in the invasion of Iraq, Galloway was the only leading Labour figure who was prepared to break with the party over the issue. This meant there was a structural instability built into Respect from the start. The coalition was dominated by two forces - Galloway and the SWP. This was fine so long as they worked together relatively harmonious. But a conflict between a revolutionary organization and a reformist politician was all too likely to develop sooner or later, and, once it happened, there were no other forces powerful enough to contain it.

This structural imbalance is a consequence of the particular form taken by the decline of social democracy today. The social base of reformism shrinks, not thanks to organizational splits, but through a gradual process of attrition. This doesn't alter the fact that there is a space that the radical left can fill, but it will probably take the form of quite a long-term process of electoral interventions and other campaigns that gradually attract voters and activists. And the erosion of the old reformist social base gives the extreme right an opportunity to appeal to working-class people who feel disenfranchised and unrepresented, as is shown very starkly by the ugly racist forces unleashed by the victory of Berlusconi and his allies in Italy. Hence the importance of the case of Die Linke, where a real crack has taken place in the SPD monolith.

This is one reason why it would be unwise to claim that reformism singing its swan-song, as the LCR sometimes implies, as, for example, when it declares: 'Social democracy is completing its mutation. After having explained that socialism can be built step by step within the framework of the institutions of the capitalist state, it henceforth accepts its conversion to capitalism, to neoliberal policies.' This seems to posit a unilinear trend for social-democratic parties to transform themselves into straightforwardly capitalist parties like the Democrats in the United States. As such, it is mistaken.

Reformism can't be identified simply with specific organizations but arises from workers' tendency, as long as they lack confidence in their ability to overturn capitalism, to limit their struggles winning improvements within the framework of the existing system. This tendency finds political expression despite the development of social liberalism.

Understanding this is important for immediate political reasons. The attractive power of reformist politics means there is no programmatic or organizational magic bullet that can exclude its influence from the new formations of the radical left. It is precisely for this reason that revolutionaries need to maintain their identity within these formations. The radical left has to be open to reformists if it is to fulfil its potential, but the examples of Bertinotti and Galloway should serve as a reminder that left reformists can move right as well as left.

This is important to bear in mind in the case of Die Linke. Lafontaine has been a bulwark of the left, but, should he decide the time has come to cut a deal with the SPD, he is quite capable of turning on it brutally. But revolutionaries preserving their political and organizational autonomy shouldn't be seen as a form of sectarian defensiveness. On the contrary, this autonomy should give us the confidence boldly to build the radical left on the broadest and most dynamic basis – but preserving an instrument that will be needed to wage the political battles that any real success will bring.

Alex Callinicos

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## **François Sabado: The NPA, a new experience of building an anti-capitalist party**

### **Reply to Alex Callinicos**

Alex Callinicos's article shows well the changes that have taken place in the radical left in recent months. The characteristics of the situation, and in particular the deepening of the crisis of the capitalist system and the social-liberal evolution of social democracy, confirm that there is a space



“to the left of the reformist left”. This space opens up possibilities for the building of new political formations or for initiatives like that of the Conferences of the anti-capitalist left, a process which requires clarifications.

Certain experiences involve a diversity of currents. Although the political frontiers between these currents do not always appear clearly, on the other hand, in order to go forward, the question of support for or participation in centre-left or social-liberal governments is a fundamental dividing line in the politics of alliances or regroupment.

There are not only “paths that diverge”, but different politics and distinct projects. When Callinicos’s article, “Where is the radical left going?”, evokes “*more positive experiences*” in connection with Die Linke in Germany and the NPA in France, it is in fact a question of two different projects.

In the case of Die Linke, we are dealing with a left reformist party: a party integrated into the institutions of the German State, a party the great majority of whose members come from the ex-PDS - the party of the bureaucracy of the former GDR -, a party which has come out in favour of a common government with the SPD, lastly a party whose project of society comes down to the “return to the Welfare State”. Admittedly, this party also reflects, in the west of Germany, a movement of radicalisation of certain sectors of the social movement, a step forward for the workers’ movement. But revolutionaries should not confuse these processes with the leadership of Die Linke, its reformist policies, its subordination to capitalist institutions, and its objectives of participation in government with the SPD.

The NPA on the other hand presents itself as an anti-capitalist party. A party whose centre of gravity is centred on struggles, on the social movements and not in parliamentary institutions, a party whose founding characteristic is the rejection of any alliance or any participation in government with the centre-left or with social-liberalism, a party which does not stop at anti-liberalism but all of whose politics is directed towards a break with capitalism and the overthrow of the power of the ruling classes.

In all these cases, we are confronted with political formations: there are delimitations, programmes, policies, but they are not the same ones.

### **Anti-capitalist party or united front of a particular kind?**

Also, we cannot share the approach of Callinicos on the characterization of the new formations of the radical left as “a united front of a particular kind”... The SWP’s conceptions were formulated by John Rees, one of their leaders, in the following way: “*The Socialist Alliance [the precursor of Respect] is thus best seen as a united front of a particular kind applied to the electoral field. It seeks to unite left reformist activists and revolutionaries in a common campaign around a minimum programme*”. [1] This conception, originally linked to the British experience, was generalized as “the SWP’s conception of the nature of the new formations of the radical left”. We disagree with this conception.

To use the term “united front” for the building of a party or a political formation really is an innovation.

The united front is a response to the problems that are posed by the united action or the unification of the workers or of the social movement and of their organizations. The united front and the building of a party are two distinct things. An anti-capitalist and/or revolutionary workers’ party - over and above its precise definition - is a delimited political formation, on the basis of a programme



and a comprehensive strategy of conquest of power by and for the workers. An anti-capitalist party cannot be the organic expression of "the whole class". Even though it must seek to constitute "a new representation of the workers", or the convergence of a series of political currents, it will nevertheless not make the other currents of the social movement or even the organizations that are "reformist or of reformist origin" led by bureaucratic apparatuses, disappear. The question of the united front remains posed.

Why should we not regard anti-capitalist parties as frameworks of the united front? Because if that were the case, it would amount to regarding these parties as a simple alliance or unitary framework - even of a particular kind - and thus to underestimating building them as a framework or a mediation necessary for the emergence of the revolutionary leaderships of tomorrow. To consider the NPA as a united front framework would amount to "toning down" its political positions to make them compatible with the realization of this united front. For example, we do not make the unity of action of the workers' and social movement conditional on an agreement on the question of government. Is that a reason for the NPA to give up or even relativise a battle on the question of government? No, we do not think so. The NPA made the question of government - the refusal to participate in governments of class collaboration - a decisive delimitation of its political combat. This example obviously demonstrates, but we could also evoke other examples, that the NPA is not a united front framework. We want to build it as a coming together of experiences, activists and currents but especially as a party. To regard it as a "united front of a particular kind" amounts to underestimating the battles that are necessary in order to build a political alternative. This conception of "a united front of a particular kind around a minimum programme" led the leadership of the SWP to reproach the leadership of the LCR with having "*a negative and sometimes ultimattist attitude towards the collectives*", when the LCR was putting at the centre of its political battle the refusal to take part in a government with the leadership of the Socialist Party (PS). With hindsight, does the leadership of the SWP still think that these reproaches were well-founded?

And today, when Jean Luc Mélenchon, one of the organizers of the socialist left, leaves the PS, while maintaining the continuity of his reformist conceptions, his positions on participation in or support for the Mitterrand and Jospin governments, and declaring that he wants to build a French "Die Linke", what should be the attitude of revolutionaries? To support him and join in his proposals and projects for alliances with the French Communist Party, which maintains the perspective of governing tomorrow... with the PS, or to take into account his break with the PS, have a positive approach to unity of action with his current, but not confuse the building of an anti-capitalist left with the building of a left reformist party... Once again, yes to unity of action - as we engaged in at the time of the No campaign in the referendum on Europe - and to debate, but knowing that the differences on the relationship to representative institutions and the attitudes concerning the question of government separate the electoral alternatives and the projects of building parties. The building of a French Die Linke, in relation to the history of the revolutionary movement and to what has been accumulated by the NPA, would constitute a retreat for the building of an anti-capitalist alternative. Whereas a whole sector influenced by the anti-capitalist left has taken its distance from the leaderships of the traditional left, to constitute a new left reformist force would represent a step back for the workers' movement. We would once again involve all this sector in "reformist manoeuvres". Conceptions of the type of the "united front of a particular kind" could then disarm us in defining a clear policy vis-à-vis this type of current.

This conception, which underestimates the strategic range of the differences on the questions of government and representative institutions, throws light on some of your international positions. It can thus explain, in the policy of the comrades of the IST in Germany, a relativisation of the critique of the policies of the leadership of Die Linke on the question of participation in governments with the SPD.

In the same way, we can also note the indulgence of the comrades towards the new leadership of bloc Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. At the last congress of Rifondazione, a “left” reaction by its members put the partisans of Bertinotti in a minority. However the policy followed by the new leadership is in continuity with the historical positions of Rifondazione Comunista, and continues to endorse the policy of alliances with the Democratic Party in all the regional executives governed by the centre-left.

Lastly, didn't this conception of “a united front of a particular kind around a minimum programme” contribute to disarming the leadership of the SWP vis-à-vis Galloway, for whom Respect had to “[sustain] alliances with local Muslim notables who could deliver votes”?

To consider an anti-capitalist party as a united front framework can also lead to sectarian deviations... If the united front is realised, even in a particular form, might we not be tempted to make everything go through the channel of the party, precisely underestimating the real battles for unity of action? Because the anti-capitalist party must combine the party activities of a party and an orientation of unitary action... because we have not forgotten, contrary to what Callinicos suggests, that reformism continues to exist, that the movement of the workers has divisions, differentiations, and that it is necessary to intervene to draw it together, to unify the workers and their organizations.

Once again, the united front, in all its varieties, is one thing. Another thing is the building of a political alternative, which is the choice of the NPA.

### **What kind of revolutionary party?**

Alex Callinicos tries to catch us out by explaining to us that, although the NPA is an anti-capitalist party, it is “not a revolutionary party in the specific sense in which it has been understood in the classical Marxist tradition”. We can discuss the classical Marxist tradition, extremely rich in its diversity.

Depending on the history, the degree of strategic clarification, on principles and organizational tactics, without forgetting the various interpretations of this or that revolutionary current, there are several models. It is true that the NPA is not the replica of the revolutionary organizations of the period after May '68. Anti-capitalist parties like the NPA do not start from general historical or ideological definitions. Their starting point is “a common understanding of events and tasks” on the questions that are key for intervening in the class struggle. Not a sum of tactical questions, but the key political questions, like the question of a programme for political intervention around an orientation of class unity and independence.

In this movement, there is a place and even a necessity for other histories, other references coming from the most varied origins.

Does that make it a party without a history, a programme and delimitations? No. It has a history, a continuity: that of class struggles, the best of the socialist, communist, libertarian and revolutionary Marxist traditions. It situates itself in the revolutionary traditions of the contemporary world, basing itself, more precisely, on the long chain of French revolutions from 1793 to May '68, via the days of 1848, the Paris Commune and the general strike of 1936.

The NPA is also a type of party which tries to answer the needs of a new historical period - which opened at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - and to the need to refound a socialist programme faced with the combined historical crisis of capitalism and of the environment of the planet.

Faced with such challenges, the NPA affirms itself as a revolutionary party rather in the sense given by Ernest Mandel in the following lines.

*"What is a revolution?"*

A revolution is the radical overthrow, in a short time, of economic structures and (or) political power, by the tumultuous action of broad masses. It is also the abrupt transformation of the mass of the people from a more or less passive object into a decisive actor of political life.

A revolution breaks out when these masses decide to put an end to conditions of existence that seem to them unbearable. It thus always expresses a grave crisis of a given society. This crisis has its roots in a crisis of the structures of domination. But it also expresses a loss of legitimacy of governments, a loss of patience, on the part of broad popular sectors.

Revolutions are, in the end, inevitable – the real locomotives of historical progress – precisely because domination by a class cannot be eliminated by the road of reforms. Reforms can at the most soften it, not suppress it. Slavery was not abolished by reforms. The absolutist monarchy of the ancien regime was not abolished by reforms. Revolutions were necessary in order to eliminate them."

*"Why are we revolutionaries today?"*

Ernest Mandel, *La Gauche* January 10, 1989.

It is true that this definition is more general than the strategic, even politico-military hypotheses which provided the framework for the debates of the 1970s, which were at that time illuminated by the revolutionary crises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Anti-capitalist parties like the NPA are "revolutionary", in the sense that they want to put an end to capitalism – "the radical overthrow of economic and political structures (thus state structures) of power" – and the building of a socialist society implies revolutions where those below drive out those above, and "take the power to change the world".

They have a strategic programme and delimitations, but these are not completed. Let us recall that Lenin, including against part of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, changed or substantially modified his strategic framework in April 1917, in the middle of a revolutionary crisis. He went from the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants" to the need for a socialist revolution and the power of the workers' councils... Certainly, Lenin had consolidated over the years a party based on the objective of a radical overthrow of Tsarism, on the refusal of any alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie, and on the independence of the forces of the working-class allied with the peasantry. And this preparatory phase was decisive. But many questions were decided in the very course of the revolutionary process.

Many things have changed compared to the period after May '68, and more generally compared to a whole historical period marked by the driving power of the Russian Revolution. It is more than thirty years since the advanced capitalist countries experienced revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations. The examples that we can use are based on the revolutions of the past. But, once again, we do not know what the revolutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be like. The new generations will learn much from experience and many questions remain open.

What we can and must do is to solidly base the parties that we build on a series of "strong" references, drawn from the experience and the intervention of recent years, which constitute a programmatic and strategic foundation. Let us recall them: an anti-capitalist transitional programme

which combines immediate demands and transitional demands, a redistribution of wealth, the challenging of capitalist property, social appropriation of the economy, class unity and independence, a break with the economy and the central institutions of the capitalist state, the rejection of any policy of class collaboration, the taking into account of the ecosocialist perspective, the revolutionary transformation of society...

Recent debates have led us to make more precise our conceptions of violence. We have reaffirmed that "it was not the revolutions that were violent but the counter-revolutions", as in Spain in 1936 or in Chile in 1973, that the use of violence aimed at protecting a revolutionary process against violence from the ruling classes.

So in what respect does this new party constitute a change with regard to the LCR? It must be a party that is broader than the LCR. A party which does not incorporate the entire history of Trotskyism and which has the ambition of making possible new revolutionary syntheses. A party which is not reduced to the unity of revolutionaries. A party which dialogues with millions of workers and young people. A party which translates its fundamental programmatic references into popular explanations, agitation and formulas. From this point of view, the campaigns of Olivier Besancenot constitute a formidable starting point. A party which is capable of conducting wide-ranging debates on the fundamental questions which affect society: the crisis of capitalism, global warming, bio-ethics, etc. A party of activists and adherents which makes it possible to integrate thousands of young people and workers with their social and political experience, preserving their links with the backgrounds they come from. A pluralist party which brings together a whole series of anti-capitalist currents. We do not want a second LCR or an enlarged and broader version of the LCR. To make a success of the gamble we are taking, this party must represent a new political reality, follow in the tradition of the revolutionary movement, and contribute to inventing the revolutions and the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To avoid reformist temptations, really build an anti-capitalist party!

In spite of these delimitations, Callinicos remains sceptical: "The LCR's solution to the problem seems to be to install a kind of programmatic security-lock - commitment to anti-capitalism and opposition to centre-left governments. But this is unlikely to work: the more successful the NPA, the more it is likely to come under reformist pressures and temptations".

Why such fatalism? Why would the development of the NPA automatically lead to reformist temptations? It is necessary from this point of view to make the difference between a "spontaneous trade-unionism" [2], to take up a formula of Lenin, and reformism as a political project and organisation, and even an apparatus... And this "spontaneous trade-unionism", although it can constitute an environment that is favourable to reformist ideas, can also, faced with the increasing alignment of the reformist apparatuses on capitalist politics, move towards radical anti-capitalist, even revolutionary, positions, especially when the capitalist system is entering a phase where it is reaching its historical limits. It is logical, if we build a popular, pluralist, broad, open party, that this party will come under all sorts of pressures. If it did not, that would be abnormal. But why should these pressures be expressed in crystallized reformist positions? There is and there can be a tension between the anti-capitalist character of the new party and the fact that workers, young people, even a series of personalities, join the new party quite simply because they seek a real left party, starting in particular from the interventions of Olivier Besancenot.

These new members can indeed be combative but full of illusions. This is the case with every mass party, even one that is in a minority.

That is when it will be necessary to discuss and educate. That implies even more giving a "strong" content to the political responses of the NPA and carefully maintaining the radical character and the

independence of the party.

In the same way, if these parties want to play a part in the reorganization of the social movements, they must be pluralist. Many sensibilities must find their place in their ranks, including “consistent reformist” activists and currents, but that does not automatically mean that the problem is posed in terms of struggles between the revolutionary current and crystallized reformist currents which would have to be fought. The key question is that all the currents and activists of the NPA, over and above their positions on “reform and revolution”, put “the class struggle” at the centre and subordinate their positions in representative institutions to struggles and social movements. Of course, we cannot exclude the hypothesis of a confrontation between reformists and revolutionaries. But it is not very probable, with the present political delimitations of the NPA, that bureaucratic reformist currents will join or crystallize... In a first historical phase of building the party, the role of revolutionaries is to do everything they can so that the process of constitution of the party really does give birth to a new political reality. That implies that revolutionaries avoid projecting the debates of the former revolutionary organization into the new party. As soon as the NPA has taken off, there will of course be discussions, differentiations, currents. Perhaps certain debates will correspond to cleavages between revolutionary perspectives and more or less consistent reformism. But even in these cases, the debate will not take the form of a political battle opposing a bureaucratic reformist bloc to the revolutionaries. Things will be more mixed, depending on the experience of the new party itself.

### **Is it necessary to organize, in a separate way, a revolutionary current in the NPA?**

There too, there is no model. In many anti-capitalist parties, there are one or more revolutionary currents, when these parties are in fact fronts or federations of currents. This is the case of the militants of the Fourth International in Brazil, in the framework of the “Enlace” current. Without organizing themselves as political currents related to the national political life of these parties, certain sections of the Fourth International can be organized in ideological associations or sensibilities. This is for example the case of the ASR within the Left Bloc in Portugal, and of the SAP within the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark. We can also find this type of current in other broader organizations or parties. This schema does not work for the NPA.

First of all for fundamental reasons, namely the anti-capitalist and revolutionary “in the broad sense” character of the NPA, and the general identity of views between the positions of the LCR and those of the NPA. There are and there will of course be political differences between the LCR and the NPA, a greater heterogeneity and a great diversity of positions within the NPA, but the political bases under discussion for the founding congress of the new party already show political convergences between the ex-LCR and the future NPA.

Also, even though the NPA already constitutes another reality than the LCR, even though it is the possible crucible of an anti-capitalist pluralism, it is not justified today to build a separate revolutionary current in the NPA.

There is also a specific relation between the ex-LCR and the NPA. The ex-LCR represents the only national organization taking part in the constitution of the NPA. There are other currents, like the Fraction of Lutte Ouvriere, the Gauche revolutionnaire, communist activists, libertarians, but there are not, unfortunately, at this stage, organizations of a weight equivalent to that of the LCR.

If that had been the case, the problem would be posed in different terms.

In the present relationship of forces, the separate organization of the ex-LCR in the NPA would block the process of building the new party. It would install a system of Russian dolls which would only create mistrust and dysfunctions.

Lastly, the NPA does not start from nothing. It results from a whole experience of members of the ex-LCR, but also of thousands of others who have forged an opinion in a battle to defend a line of independence with respect to social liberalism and reformism.

There is thus a militant synergy within the NPA, where revolutionary positions intersect with other political positions coming from other origins, other histories, other experiences. Only new political tests will lead to new alignments within the NPA, not former political attachments...

It is an unprecedented gamble in the history of the revolutionary workers' movement, but the game is worth the candle.

We will advance as we walk...

**François Sabado**

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] [John Rees, "Anti-capitalism, reformism and socialism", *International Socialism*, second series, number 90 (2001), p. 32.

[2] A formula of Lenin's evoking the spontaneous trade-union reaction or feeling of workers to defend their conditions of work and existence and their demands