New broad parties: the French experience (from the LCR to the NPA)

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This text, of which the first parts were discussed collectively, in particular with the comrades of the Anticapitalist Left (GA) who are members of the IC, represents the majority view of the comrades of the NPA who are members of the International Committee.

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In June 2007, in France, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) launched an appeal for the creation of a New Anticapitalist Party (NPA). The LCR disbanded in late January 2009 and the NPA was founded on 2-3 February 2009.

An idea with a long history

The idea of building a new political force and “going beyond” the LCR was not itself new. From the beginning of the 1990s, the collapse of the USSR and the regimes in Eastern Europe, combined with neoliberal capitalist globalization, closed one historical cycle and opened a new one. “New era, new programme, new party”: this triptych would constitute the framework for reflection on the new historical period. “Capitalist globalization" and neoliberal counter-reforms, the transformations of the working class linked to new technologies and the necessary mutations of the workers’ movement, the social-liberal evolution of social democracy and the irreversible decline of the Communist parties reconfigured the political landscape.

The balance of power remains unfavourable to the working class. But the "anti-liberal revolt” of the winter of 1995, followed by the movements of 2003, 2004 and 2005 reflected social resistance to neoliberal capitalism. The class struggle is still there, at both national and international level.

On the political level, the conjunction of these social resistances, of the rightward evolution of social democracy and of the weakening of the Communist parties opens up a space for a new political force

to the left of the traditional leaderships of the workers' movement, and it does so throughout Europe.

The LCR, of course, hesitated over these new forms of organization, their characterizations, their delimitation, their dynamics. But the question was posed, on both the international and national levels. Moreover, since 1992, every national congress of the League reaffirmed the necessity of "bringing together anticapitalists" to build "a new political force".

First of all, an electoral success

So the new historical period demanded a reorganization of the workers' movement and of the revolutionary Left, but there lacked a catalyst. This was, in France, the success of Olivier Besancenot and the LCR in the 2002 presidential election and again in that of 2007, which made it possible for the LCR to move from the project to its implementation. Because the real novelty of the 2000s on the landscape of the French Left, was the message carried by the spokesperson for the LCR, a young worker formed by trade union struggles and those of the global justice movement: in the presidential elections of 2002 and 2007, a million people voted for this candidate. Such success, in relation to the 3,000 activists of the LCR, encouraged us to try and regroup a part of this electorate.

We then had to confirm the project, occupy the space, impregnate it with an anti-capitalist content, and build a new party.

Because although Olivier Besancenot managed to crystallize a mass social and political phenomenon of millions of workers and youth who identified with his political and media interventions, this was not enough. The construction of a project was essential.

And first of all, with a clear delimitation in relation to the social-liberal Left. This is what was at stake in all the discussions around a unitary candidacy of the anti-liberal Left in 2007 after the victory of the "no" against the European treaty in 2005. Beyond the formulas, the central question was: do we or do we not agree to take part in putting together governmental or parliamentary alliances with the Socialist Party (PS)? The Communist Party (PCF), José Bové and other anti-liberal forces responded positively. The LCR replied in the negative.

And this was not a small matter. These differences relate to different approaches concerning the relationship with the central institutions of the capitalist state. Because although the anticapitalists can work in these institutions, we do not think that the transformation of society comes from there. It depends on the eruption of the mass movement onto the social and political stage.

2007: the LCR takes on its responsibilities

Thanks to the success of its political orientation and its campaign, the LCR became the focus of the "left of the Left". The question was: what to do with this success? The League had the responsibility of quickly taking an initiative, so that the dynamic that had been initiated was not lost. The urgent need for a new party also corresponded to the logic of the situation: the victory of Sarkozy, the PS moving closer to the centre-right and the persistence of resistance.

The LCR therefore took on its responsibilities and decided to build a new political instrument, while being aware of the difficulties involved. The first of these difficulties was due to the context, clearly defensive: movements of resistance and struggles, which were sometimes of considerable scope,

ended in defeats. The second was the absence of significant partners at the national level. Some people responded to our proposal with silence or declined to take part for fear that it was a simple operation of renovation of the League. The LCR decided to promote a “bottom-up” process. Anyone who wished to participate in the creation of such a party was invited to join a local committee for the NPA. The network of committees would be the foundations of the new party.

Everywhere, these committees were initiated by activists of the LCR, by militants who did not come from the League, everywhere at different rhythms; committees were formed, bringing together trade-union, associative and political activists.

What type of party?

From the beginning the NPA presented itself as an anti-capitalist party. A party whose centre of gravity revolved around struggles, social movements and not institutions, a party whose founding characteristic was the rejection of any alliance with or any participation in government with the centre-left and social liberalism, a party that did not stop at anti-liberalism but whose entire policy was oriented towards a break from capitalism, the overthrow of the power of the ruling classes, and against the Right and the far Right.

Anticapitalist parties, the NPA, do not start from general historical or ideological definitions. Their starting point is “a common understanding of events and tasks” on the key issues of intervention in the class struggle. Not a sum of tactical questions, but key political questions such as a programme for political intervention on an orientation of unity and independence of the working class. In this movement, there is a place and even a need for other histories, other references, from the most varied origins.

Does that make it a party without a history, without a programme and without delimitations? No. It has a history, a continuity: that of the class struggle, the best of the Socialist, Communist, libertarian, revolutionary Marxist traditions.

The NPA is also a type of party that attempts to respond to the needs of a new historical period – which opened at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century - as well as to the needs and the urgency of refounding a socialist programme, faced with the combined historical crisis of capitalism and of the survival of the planet.

So, in what way does this new party represent a change in relation to the LCR? From the outset we wanted a party broader than the LCR. A party which did not take on board the entire history of Trotskyism and which had the ambition of making possible new revolutionary syntheses. A party that was not reduced to unity of revolutionaries. A party that conducted a dialogue with millions of workers and young people. A party that that expressed its fundamental programmatic references in explanations, agitation and popular formulas. A party that could conduct broad discussions and influence, along with others, the fundamental questions facing society: the crisis of capitalism, new feminist questions, climate change, bio-ethics, the protection and the development of common assets (water, air, forests, energy…). A party of activists and members, able to integrate thousands of young people, women and workers, with their social and political experiences, (preserving their) close links with their communities of origin. A pluralistic party that brought together a whole series of anti-capitalist currents.

We did not want an LCR or an enlarged LCR. To succeed in our aim, this party had to represent a new political reality, to situate itself in the tradition of the revolutionary movement, and to contribute to inventing the revolutions and the socialism of the 21st century.

The NPA was founded on February 6- 8, 2009, 18 months after the launch of the constituent process that made it possible to have a real coming together of new and old activists, with a dynamic of political development. This congress brought together more than 600 delegates, representing more than 9,500 founding members. It made it possible to adopt founding principles, statutes and an orientation. From the foundation of the NPA, hundreds of committees were created in many places where the LCR did not exist.

From crisis to refoundation?

When we founded the NPA, we knew that the building of a broad anticapitalist party was not simple. Four years later, despite the current difficulties, our determination to create the NPA was and remains correct.

The difficulties of the NPA are of several levels:

Since the establishment of our party, the offensives of capital against workers, against all the exploited and oppressed have been unceasing. The bourgeoisie practices shock tactics, constantly accumulating attacks on all fronts, so as to exhaust any will to respond. The social movement concentrated on the defence of pensions, but it failed. The battles against sackings have been only rarely won, the setbacks over democratic rights, particularly for young people and foreigners, are accumulating…. As in many European countries, unemployment, extreme precariousness, poverty, particularly for youth and women, are reaching such levels that they impose individual reflexes of survival. In these circumstances, it can be difficult to build massive currents of young people and/or workers who show by their actions the effectiveness of collective struggle. Despite this, some sectors of the workers' movement, of the social movement, maintain a high level of consciousness and mobilization, as we have seen in the pickets during the battle over pensions, in networks such as RESF, or today against sackings…

The creation of the Left Party (PG) and the Left Front has changed the conjunctural political context, by giving in some sectors of society the illusion that this Left could influence the policy of the PS in the institutions and enable the PCF to delay its decline. From this point of view the PG and the Left Front are situated in the framework of the strategic orientation which has been that of the French Communist Party for more than 50 years, but in a particular historical situation, where the brutality of austerity plans is such that it makes difficult support or direct participation of the CPs in social-liberal governments. However, the CPs continue to seek regroupments anchored in the institutions, which are most often associated, once they have elected representatives, with the regional, departmental and municipal majorities, along with the PS and the Greens. The success of the Mélenchon campaign does not change the nature of the Left Front: an anti-liberal reformist electoral coalition whose political project is the construction of a left majority including the PS, but in which it would have sufficient, "majority" weight.

This campaign does not change the nature of the Left Front: it has not become the framework for building an anti-capitalist political force independent of the PS, as the comrades of the GA who joined it in July 2012 believe. The Left Front is dominated by an agreement between the apparatuses of the PCF and Mélenchon's party. The dynamic of the presidential election campaign was not reflected in the construction of a new political movement. The small organizations which are members of the Left Front, many of which come from the NPA, have no influence in this front. The dominant policy is left reformism, in other words a gradual transformation within capitalist institutions, and as Mélenchon said, this means "a revolution through the ballot box." The Left Front refuses the social-liberal austerity policies, which creates the conditions for joint action, but at the

same time, its leaders refuse to commit to the building of a left opposition to the Hollande government. They situate their policy in the framework of the parliamentary majority, on which they want to exert pressure. The control exerted by party apparatuses and the strategic and political disagreements that separate us from the Left Front have led us to refuse to enter it. We believe that we can act more and thus influence their militant rank-and-file by building an independent NPA.

Our own mistakes

– At the founding congress we engaged in an extraordinary debate on the founding principles of the NPA, but they have been neglected since then. Yet it is around these founding principles that we could have solidified the party. What gives meaning to the joint action of thousands of activists is the understanding that they are all actors in a common project of emancipation, that despite their immediate, sometimes important differences, they are all members of a party that has the same objectives. We need to continue the discussions, the political education. Not only have we not continued to work in depth around these founding principles, but when the debate was engaged two years later on another very important text, “Our answers to the crisis”, it was not possible to re-engage the dynamic of open collective debate; the logic of tendencies, to which we will return, proved to be more important than the politicization in depth of the party.

– Immediately after the creation of the NPA we engaged in a succession of debates over election tactics which were particularly ineffective and destructive. Of course it was necessary to respond to the electoral situations that presented themselves, but from a point of view that was tactical and only tactical. However, we were rather triumphalist, some of us even believing that there was no longer much space between the NPA and the PS. As a result, when the Left Front emerged with the Mélenchon-PCF agreement, we were destabilized, incapable of having a policy, and we oscillated between adaptation and sectarianism

We then experienced real moments of doubt, of risks of isolation and internal tensions: some activists were tempted by the movement and by the convergence which was taking place with and around the Left Front, (including among those who were active in the unions and in various social movements) and others were tempted to fall back on the party.

– We had no structured debate on the conception of how a party of thousands of activists seeking to become a mass party should function. Many of the departures before the split of the GA were linked to this main problem: why am I in a party, what is it, what is the function of meetings, what do I get from them, how does being in this party change the way I live, the way I am relevant and effective in changing my environment, etc… all issues that are crucial to give meaning to being in the NPA.

To conclude

Our crisis is, as Pierre Rousset says, a crisis of foundation. The initial momentum demonstrated the possibility of going beyond what the LCR was; our mistakes and our current situation should not divert us from this objective. The social and political situation does not at present map out a simple and direct road for the creation of a mass party. The most likely hypothesis is that this party can only be the result of successive stages, of leaps. It is not at the first major difficulty, it is not because we are retreating, that we should lose sight of this objective!

The project of a party for the revolutionary transformation of society, broad and open, is obviously still relevant. It is a necessity for the period; the crisis and its three dimensions, social, economic and

ecological only make more urgent the building of a party whose centre of gravity is the class struggle and whose positions in the institutions are subordinate to this class struggle, taking advantage of a broad audience, with the aim of overthrowing capitalism. A party that does not go in for incantatory self-assertion but is in phase with the real struggles and the demands of the population.

In the aftermath of the second congress of the NPA, the state of mind of the 2,500 activists is the desire to overcome the crisis of our party, of which the departure of the comrades of the Anticapitalist Left was the high point. By an anticapitalist and unitary orientation, for the building of a left opposition to this social-liberal government, the activists want the NPA to regain entirely its useful role in the political struggle. A new stage is beginning...

Sandra Demarcq

P.S.

* Translation IVP. http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2987