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France : What is New in the Foundation of a New Anticapitalist Party?

Wednesday 10 December 2008, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 21 November 2008).

A first version of the article was written in English for the South-African magazine *Amandla !* and has been posted on several website, including *International Viewpoint Online*.

A second version of this article has been written in French. We are presenting here the translation of this second, expanded, version.

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In June 2007, the French Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire or LCR) launched an appeal for the constitution of a New Anti-Capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste or NPA). In June 2008, one thousand delegates met in Paris to give a national dimension to a process which had started from the bottom. Beginning of November 2008, delegates from some 400 committees gathered again to discuss three documents: programmatic references, political orientation, statutes and functioning of the NPA. Around 10,000 activists are presently engaged in the founding process of the NPA – three times more than the total membership of the LCR – however we shouldn't put too much faith in round figures. There are undoubtedly many people who have shown an interest in the NPA but it is too soon to know how many of them will get involved in a lasting way and how many committees function well enough to integrate them. It is also likely that there will be a new wave of people joining *after* the founding conference.

The political impact of the NPA process is quite important. In a number of places, this new political party in constitution is already *de facto* replacing the LCR and is very active. On November 6, 2008 it held its first public rally in Paris with more than 2,000 participants. On November 15 there were 1500 at a public meeting in Montpellier, in the south of France. These are big numbers, sometimes bigger than the meetings during the LCR presidential campaign in 2007. Of course, the process is not moving forward at the same speed everywhere and is slower in some regions.

The procedure that has been decided is that on January 29, 2009, the congress of the LCR will decide its dissolution. The founding congress of the NPA will be held in the following days, January 30-February 1, 2009.

So far, so good. What is striking is how fast this overall process proceeds. It obviously answers a political need. This need, this opportunity, has been felt for some time already, but in the last ten years all previous attempts to build a qualitatively broader anti-capitalist party in France have failed. To overcome these failures, the LCR decided to try something new – so new it had never even

envisaged it before. What then is “new” in the process of constitution of the New Anti-Capitalist Party?

After all other scenarios failed...

Because of the key role played by the LCR in the launching of the NPA, it maybe useful to look back on how this organisation envisaged in the past the building of a socially broadly rooted revolutionary party. I speak here from the experience of my “fading away” generation (the May 68 one), which is no longer “in command” in the LCR or the NPA, but which historical legacy has to be taken into account precisely to analyse what is “new”.

I’ll present our past “visions” it in a very brief, simplified and schematic way. My generation created new, dynamic, radical organisations in the 1960s – but, in France, we remained small: starting with few hundreds members, the new organisations peaked at 5,000 or 10,000 maximum. In the late 60s-early 70s, we thought we had no choice because key class confrontations were to come soon: the new revolutionary party had to be built quickly, in the heat of the crisis, through intense activism. In the mid-1970s, we had to admit that the pace of History would be much slower than expected. We therefore had to rethink the building of mass-based revolutionary party as a long-term process (a mental revolution for our generation).

The LCR never thought this party would simply be the result of its own quantitative growth. It had to be the outcome of a much broader process of “recomposition”, restructuration, of the left and labour movement. We envisaged three main scenarios:

1. First schema: the radicalisation of whole sections, of wings, of existing mass working class parties (SP and CP). We can maybe say that this schema took shape in Italy with the creation of the Party of the Communist Refoundation in reaction to the shift to the right of the PCI, which has replaced a not very solid social-democracy. But it was not the case in France. The main split from the SP (around Jean-Pierre Chevènement) became “left-nationalist” and declined, becoming irrelevant. The long lasting crisis of the CP never gave birth to anything that looked like what happened in Italy.

Our “old left” proved incapable of rejuvenating, even in part. The recent departure from the SP of Jean-Luc Mélenchon has only confirmed this. We envisaged the formation of a new *mass* workers’ party, moving radically to the left. Mélenchon has left the SP with fewer members than the LCR on the programme of a “republican left”. He has founded the “Parti de Gauche” (Left Party) which from the outset is aiming to be in government – an ambition that is impossible without an alliance with the SP.

2. Second schema: the launching of a new radical working class party by trade unions with the participation of existing revolutionary groups. That is the “Brazilian schema” – the original foundation of the PT – or, more recently, the South Korean process: the KCTU trade union centre has backed the creation of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) – although there has been a split this year with the formation of the New Progressive Party. In both cases, the TU movement was still “young”, having reorganized itself after a period of military dictatorship. In France, the main TU centres (CGT, CFDT, FO) show no such dynamism.

Let us think for a moment about these first two scenarios. They were “ambitious” and implied broad splits within the workers’ movement, of which the tiny far left could not be the (only) driving force. They weren’t far-fetched hypotheses as is shown by the fact that they happened in certain countries. The fact that the PT has become social-liberal should not make us forget what it was (a big class-

struggle party) and the significance of its creation in 1980. In the same way, the failure of Rifondazione in the Prodi government should not make us forget that in its time it made possible a broad “recomposition” of the Italian left with the participation of the far left. But such examples are very rare, they are the exception and not the rule. (I will not deal here with what are or will become the parties coming out of the old Eastern European regimes I do not know enough about them.)

3. Third schema: two or three significant political groups call together for the building of a new party. This happened in Portugal (Left Bloc) or Denmark (Red-Green Alliance). It was the simplest and the most “credible” of all scenarios – being a lot more modest than the previous ones. But it was never even tried in France, although the political opening has existed for a long time as was shown by the electoral score of the LO candidate Arlette Laguiller in 1995 and the extraordinary joint score (10%) of Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot in 2002.

There is a first reason for this French failure: the LCR is the only far left organisation originating directly from the radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s that wanted such a scenario. The two other main “survivors” of that period (Lutte Ouvrière – LO – and the Lambertist current) are quite simply not interested in such a perspective. (The other currents from the “classical far left” are much smaller.)

An important political opening existed nevertheless after the victory in 2005 of the “no” in the referendum on the draft European (neoliberal, anti-democratic and militaristic) Constitution. A powerful aspiration for political unity in the “left of the left” was then expressed – but failed after two years of intense negotiations involving the local committees and a range of currents going from the CP to the LCR.

The failure of the unitary process which followed the “No” victory provoked a lot of bitterness and harsh polemics between components of this two year process on who bore the responsibility for its ultimate failure. But rather than looking for culprits, it is better to reflect on why the *three* above mentioned scenarios have *always* failed in France in spite of decades of successive attempts. In, again, a very schematic way, I would like to underline the following factors:

The “**old**” **political and TU labour movement** no longer has the potential to rejuvenate the radical left. As far as the political parties are concerned, the social roots of the SP have changed and its “social-liberal” orientation expresses the depth of its integration into the bourgeois society. As for the CP, it has never truly addressed the issue of its Stalinist past and now finds itself electorally and institutionally hostage of the SP: for years now it is in crisis – and it is unfortunately a “crisis without dynamism”... The three main TU confederations (CGT, CFDT, FO) are too bureaucratized.

This does not mean that individuals (even many) or local activist teams from the “old” labour movement will not join the NPA or another radical left party – indeed, quite a number are and will! But it means that, unlike what we hoped in the 1970s-1980s, it will not be enough to “recompose” (“re-structure”) the traditional labour movement. It has to be remoulded in a broader way -- which is something that is much more complex!

A “**new**” **trade-union and social movement** has emerged in the last fifteen to twenty years with the birth of the SUD and Solidaires unions, of the FSU trade-union federation for teachers, the associations of the unemployed, homeless, undocumented workers and others, the different components of the global justice movement. Although it is to varying degrees they have a much more promising radical potential. Today many of their activists are sympathetic to the call for the NPA, indeed are joining. In 2005-2007, some members of their leaderships did engage in the attempts to build political unity in the “left of the left” (in general in opposition to the LCR). This showed a positive desire to overcome the gap between the obvious evolution of the social movement and the

immobility of the French political scene. The stagnation and then the failure of the negotiations put a stop to this involvement.

More broadly, the relationship between social movements and political parties remains in France very uneasy. The independence of TU and mass organisations is today a very “sensitive” issue – this is for some bad reasons (“movementist illusions”), but mostly for good reasons given past experiences of instrumentalisation and manipulation.

To overcome this blockage, to ensure that there is a reciprocal dynamic in the future, it is the responsibility of radical parties like the NPA to show in practice – and in a consistent way – their usefulness and their readiness to respect the independence and internal democracy of the social movement.

It is difficult to describe what the French **“left of the left”** is made of, because few of its components are politically well delineated. The CP is by far its biggest component but is in deep crisis. The LCR is by far the biggest component of the “far left” involved in unity processes. Then there are smaller political organisations, informal networks, local teams, individual activists or “personalities”... the whole constituting a “milieu”, broader than a coalition of parties.

Why, in 2005-2006, did attempts to build unity around common electoral candidatures fail? Why did the aspiration to unity end in fragmentation? There are many reasons for this. But there is one major political issue that has to be kept in mind to understand what happened: the relationships with the Socialist Party, electoral alliances and governmental participation.

The question of alliances with social-liberalism or the centre left is a key issue in a number of countries where governmental participation has been or will be a concrete choice for the radical left: Brazil, West-Bengal, Italy, Germany, Portugal, The Netherlands... In France, the electoral system is very undemocratic: to have any chance of being elected to the Parliament, one needs the backing of the SP (on the left) – which is not given for free. Weakened as it is, the CP needs even more to negotiate an agreement with the SP to save its electoral positions. Those who want to ally with the CP have to accept this. They are thus de facto accepting the perspective of an electoral alliance with the SP, even if sometimes they refuse to admit it.

The LCR – as well as other components of the far left – reject this perspective. The LCR considers that in the current relationship of forces any governmental participation will end up by a thorough compromise with social liberalism and managing the capitalist order (see the disastrous balance sheet of the PRC’s participation in the Prodi government in Italy). The LCR’s perspective is that we have to build the broadest united front of social resistance to the Sarkozy presidency. But at a strictly party level, the priority is to strengthen a radical pole that is able to embody a left alternative to social liberalism and to the right – which implies total independence from the SP.

The question of electoral alliances and the SP has thus been – and remains – a major political line of demarcation.

In late 2006, the LCR seemed very isolated within the “left of the left”. In early 2007, for the presidential election, Marie-George Buffet stood for the CP, Dominique Voynet for the Greens, Olivier Besancenot for the LCR and José Bové for some other components of the “left of the left”. Besancenot’s campaign was politically very dynamic and he got more than 4% of the votes. There was no such dynamic in Buffet’s campaign and she got less than 2% (a historically low figure for the CP!). The failure of Voynet’s campaign was obvious (1.5%) as it was for Bové’s campaign who, despite his own personal notoriety, got only just more than 1%, thus coming bottom of the class.

After two years of intense debates on orientation, the presidential election was a real political test for the “left of the left”. It gave new responsibilities to the LCR.

The new responsibilities of the LCR

With the success of its political initiative and electoral campaign, the LCR found itself at the centre stage of the “left of the left”. The question was thus: what to do of this success? The LCR had the responsibility to take an initiative quickly, if the existing momentum was not to be lost (as had happened in the past).

In mid-2007, even after the political test of the elections, there was no possibility of reaching an agreement with other significant organisations for launching a new anti-capitalist party. With no “top-bottom” unity call possible, the LCR decided to impulse a “bottom-top” process. Everyone ready to participate in the creation of such a party was invited to join local committees for the NPA. The network of committees would constitute the foundation of the new party.

It was clear that there was an open political space for a radical party qualitatively broader than the LCR to emerge. This was in part shown by the extraordinary popularity of Olivier Besancenot. Olivier is a very good candidate and spokesperson. This is not mainly a “media” but a political phenomenon. As a postman who gets paid and goes on strike, he is not seen as a professional politician but as a “co-worker” (“one of us”). He is young, and the youth can also identify with him. Last but not the least, he is politically very consistent: when at 27 years old he first ran in a presidential campaign (in 2002), he was totally unknown but already a member of the political bureau of the LCR. In a TV forum, he usually politically smashes professional politicians and members of the government. People love it!

One reason for which the LCR has been able to take the initiative of launching the NPA is often overlooked. Its leadership has been renewed. Today, all the historical “figures” of the LCR have left the political bureau (but remain active!), and the national leadership is now mostly composed of cadres in their 30s or 40s. This seems not to be the case for most other organisations. It is a very important issue because of the radical change of political generation that has occurred since the 1990s.

On the one hand, the LCR has been able to renew its membership and cadre network. On the other, it remains an organisation shaped by its origins – the 1960s-1970s experience. So it both can and must impulse the creation of a new party, expressing the political experience of the present generation.

The NPA as a NEW party

For the LCR, the aim is not only to build a bigger, stronger party. It is to help the creation of a truly new one. There has been a radical change of period, with the disintegration of USSR and with capitalist globalisation. And there has been a radical shift in generation: present activists do not have the same references, the same collective experience and the same background of historical experiences than the “1968” ones.

The combination of the two radical changes (period and generation) has deep consequences in the way politics and activism are lived.

Of course, it is important to keep alive the political experience of the past decades, the many lessons

of the past century (imperialism, Stalinism...). How then to build a new party without losing our past? By passing the legacy of the LCR on to a new party. By bringing also into this new party the best of other revolutionary traditions of the past century – from various Marxist or libertarian traditions, from feminist, eco-socialist and global justice movements, etc. By “giving” to the new party the social roots of trained mass cadres, while broadening its social implantation to new areas and sectors so that it represents popular society as a whole, by assimilating the radicality of the fightback by workers and others to capitalist globalisation, and wave of resistances in popular suburbs, among migrants, the struggles against discrimination... And also by allowing the new party to speak the political language of the present generation.

The will to build with others a broader anti-capitalist party is not new for the LCR, it has had this goal for several decades! What is new is the decision to impulse a “bottom-top” process AND to fully integrate the change of period and generation in the vision of the new party (this second point being perhaps the most important).

Unfortunately, the LCR is presently the only “big” (everything is relative) component of the “left of the left” engaged in the NPA process. The other political groups involved are much smaller. The danger then was that the LCR would remain “the party within the party” after the foundation of the NPA. To avoid that, drastic decisions were taken. LCR members are usually in a minority in the steering bodies of the de facto existing NPA. And the LCR should dissolve itself the days before the founding congress of the NPA.

The NPA has to become a political and social melting pot, to shape its own identity. It is presently easy to reach political agreements within the NPA process. Once the question of relations with the SP agreed, there is nothing as divisive today as the “nature of USSR” (to take an example) was for the “left of the left” in the 1970s. But there is less theoretical education than in the past and there are not many answers to strategic questions (how to disarm the bourgeoisie?). The NPA will have to consolidate its programmatic foundations through its own experience. It will take time. The road ahead is unknown.

The main difficulty the NPA has come up against is the question of its name! This is not a small question. In the 1960s-70s there were words that incarnated a sort of “common political capital” with all the “left of the left” identified: the word was “communist” in France or “socialist” in Belgium. It was the same for the word “proletariat” or “workers”. This is not the case today. All these words have been polluted. No collective experience has yet reconstituted “identifiers” that are shared by all (or almost). That is what is reflected by the indecision on the name.

The decision to dissolve the LCR is of course a risky one. But it would be even more risky not to take this risk. We have to seize the present opportunity: to miss it would probably be very costly for the whole “left of the left”. The NPA must not be seen as – and must not be – an “enlarged LCR”, but a qualitatively newer party.

The process is well engaged. Thousands of people who have never been a member of a party before are getting involved. Many coming from the CP or other organisations are joining too, as well as grassroots activists. If the launching of the NPA at the end of January 2009 is a success, some political forces from the “left of the left” which are presently not ready to unite with the LCR may change their mind.

But it may be better to wait for the end of January 2009 and the founding congress of the NPA to evaluate the long way we’ll have come – and the long way still ahead.