

Alex Callinicos reacts to the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA, France)

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The latest issue of *International Socialism*, a quarterly journal of the Socialist Workers Party in Great Britain, contains Alex Callinicos's Revolutionary paths: a reply to Panos Garganas and François Sabado.

In the previous issue, Sabado-a member of the NPA in France-had made a number of points in an article about party-building that I am fundamentally in agreement with, especially this:

"So in what respect does the new party constitute a change compared to the LCR? It must be a party that is broader than the LCR; a party that does not incorporate the entire history of Trotskyism and that has the ambition of making possible new revolutionary syntheses; a party that is not reduced to the unity of revolutionaries; a party in dialogue with millions of workers and young people; a party that 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. It must also be a party that is capable of conducting wide-ranging debates on the fundamental questions which affect society: the crisis of capitalism, global warming, bioethics, 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 that 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, the new party must represent a new political reality, following in the tradition of the revolutionary movement and contributing to inventing the revolutions and the socialism of the 21st century."

Panos Garganas is a leader of the Socialist Workers Party in Greece, a member of the international state capitalist tendency that the British SWP effectively leads. His article summarized the kind of opposition mounted by the state capitalists toward the NPA initiative, which I would liken to a neurotic's fear of a loss of control-or worse, General Jack D. Ripper's feelings about fluoride in "Doctor Strangelove", the fluoride in this case being non-revolutionary ideology:

"The mistake that the LCR may make is if they liquidate their organisation once these conditions are met. Even within such a "sharper" radical left it is necessary to maintain revolutionary organisation as a source of education and political initiatives that pushes the rest of the left forward. Indeed a dissolution of the LCR would be a huge concession to the false pluralism that flattens all traditions within the radical left to the same level. The idea that the disputes between left reformists, anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists or Stalinists all belong to the past and that the radical left can make a fresh start by wiping out these "ideological" differences and moving on with current political debates has more to do with liberalism than Marxism. The Italian left has paid a huge price because such ideas predominated in Rifondazione. We should urge the comrades of the LCR not to go for a repeat."

Perhaps better insulated from non-revolutionary germs than the French Trotskyists, Garganas offers

up an approach that sounds suspiciously like the one that they have taken:

"Throughout the 35 years since the collapse of the Greek Junta the left to the left of these parliamentary parties has existed as a milieu that was powerful enough to attract not one but two mass breakaways from the youth organisations of reformism: the Eurocommunist youth broke en masse to the left in 1979 and the CP youth did the same in 1989, forming the NAR. It is within this context that SEK, our revolutionary socialist organisation, has been trying to regroup the radical left in a way that avoids the twin dangers we are discussing."

"In 2007 SEK joined the United Anti-capitalist Left (Enantia) along with four other organisations, including the Greek sister organisation of LCR. Now Enantia is in the process of discussions over a united intervention with the left alliance, Mera, which is led by NAR. The coming months may see a new anti-capitalist left emerge not only in France but in Greece too."

I wish Garganas and his comrades well, but would only urge them to avoid the mistakes made by the British SWP in Respect, mistakes that reflect "vanguardist" thinking although it is doubtful that they understand that this has been a problem. Callinicos's article continues along the same anxious trajectory set out by his comrade Garganas.

What is obvious from the outset is Callinicos's tendency to think in terms of categories, a habit no doubt associated with decades spent in the academy. He lays out a kind of political taxonomy:

"The most important point to emerge from the discussion is that the general term "radical left formations" encapsulates two quite different types of organisation, even though they are both a product of the radicalisation of the past decade. There are those cases where the level of class struggle and the political traditions of the left make it possible for revolutionary Marxists to unite with others who regard themselves as revolutionaries in new, bigger formations. So far the only example where this has come to fruition is the NPA, whose founding principles, as we shall see below, are in a broad sense revolutionary. Then there are other cases in which the most important break is by forces that reject social liberalism but have not broken with overt reformism-Die Linke in Germany, the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) in Italy under both its old and its new leadership, Synaspismos in Greece and some elements in the Left Bloc in Portugal."

So you get the sense from reading this that there is a kind of evolutionary process, with groups like the British SWP at the top of the totem pole being the most advanced. At the bottom of the totem pole is out and out reformist formations like the SP's and the CP's. Then you have groups in the middle with traits inherited from the top and the bottom. Die Linke and Rifondazione are closer to the bottom, while the NPA is closer to the top insofar as its founding principles are in a "broad sense" revolutionary, as opposed to being revolutionary in a presumably "narrow sense" like the SWP. As a veteran revolutionary, I'd go with broad any day of the week since I have seen narrow lead to ruin over and over again.

You can see how obsessed Callinicos remains with "impurity", despite the magnanimous tip of the hat to the NPA, by this:

*"It remains the case, however, that these parties [NPA] will still have to grapple with the problem of reformism. One of the main lessons of the history of the workers' movement is that the development of the class struggle, by drawing new layers of workers into class-conscious activity, will tend to expand the base of reformist politics, since seeking to change the existing system seems, initially at least, an **attractive halfway house** between passive acquiescence in the status quo and outright revolution."*

Don't you love that bit about a halfway house? It suggests that impure, middle-of-the-totem pole formations like the NPA are also in some sense like the institutionalized living arrangements for junkies, prisoners, or the mentally retarded while they become accustomed to living in normal society. And by calling it "attractive", you can see all the enlightened attempts to make such institutions palatable, like potted plants, shag rugs and travel posters on the wall. Lovely.

To illustrate his point, Callinicos takes his reader through a tour of revolutionary history spanning continents and centuries:

"Thus if we consider the great revolutionary experiences of the past century, the Russian working class, after the overthrow of Tsarism, gravitated first to the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, not the Bolsheviks. In Germany, thanks to the ingrained experience of reformism and the relative weakness of the far left, it was the Social Democrats and the Independent Socialists who were the first main beneficiaries of the revolution of November 1918. Nor are these experiences confined to the imperialist countries. Consider how the Brazilian Workers Party, which Sabado's comrades in the Fourth International helped to build in the belief that it was a non-reformist organisation, has become, under the Lula presidency, a pillar of social liberalism."

While it would take far too much time and space to fully refute the faulty logic and poor grasp of the facts in the assertions above, we can state first of all that there was not much difference politically between the Bolsheviks and their rivals in the early days of the Russian Revolution, as evidenced by Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin's opposition to the April Theses. In fact, if Lenin had died in a train wreck en route to the Finland Station, it is doubtful whether there would have been an October revolution. This does not even address the question of the relevance of 1917 to politics in West Europe today, in which there is no massive working-class movement poised to take state power. As we used to say in the American SWP, revolutionary politics is a bit like pregnancy. If you don't know whether you are in the 3rd month or the 9th month, you will likely end up with an abortion. The American SWP sadly confirmed this through their own praxis since the 1980s until now.

But more importantly, even if you have absorbed the "lessons of history" and the need for a revolutionary party, what assurances do you have that such a party must be built on the basis of the British SWP, which implicitly defines itself as an alternative to the "halfway houses" of what really amounts to what Trotsky called "centrism".

Although the term "centrism" is never mentioned, as far as I know, in Callinicos and company's polemics, there is a strong sense that they are acting as if they were Leon Trotsky trying to straighten out the POUM, or other organizations associated with what was once called the Second and a Half International. The assumption has always been that a rock-solid, germ-resistant program can form the foundation of a revolutionary party-in the case of the British SWP amounting to a proper grasp of state capitalist theory. My conclusion, however, is that the search for such a prophylactic program leads to sect-formation, not revolutions. All credit is due to the NPA for finally dumping this methodology.

Callinicos also-rather unwisely in my estimation-continues to defend the "united front" electoral perspective that led to the disaster in Respect:

"But a radical left party is like a united front of the classical kind in that it brings together politically heterogeneous forces. This is partly a consequence of the relatively open character of such parties' programmes, which generally finesse the alternatives of reform or revolution (though this not true of the NPA). More profoundly, however, it reflects the character of a period in which it is possible to draw people from a reformist background into parties of the radical left where revolutionaries play an important role. The programmatic openness (what Sabado would call the "incomplete strategic

delimitation") of these parties reflects the recognition that it would be a mistake to make membership conditional on breaking with reformism. This stance is correct, but the price is a degree of political heterogeneity."

Callinicos continues to miss the point. United fronts were conceived by Lenin and Trotsky as temporary partnerships between Communists and non-Communist workers parties to participate in actions around specific goals, such as strike support, opposing fascist violence, etc. It was never conceived as a party-building initiative. Most importantly for the case of Respect, it is meaningless to describe the goals of non-SWP members (except for self-avowed Marxists such as Andy Newman *et al*) as "reformist", especially when it comes to the rank-and-file Muslim member. Reformism is an ideology that is associated with a rather hardened, if not calcified, veteran of the socialist movement.

For example, Max Shachtman and Jay Lovestone in the early 1960s were reformists. But a Muslim cabdriver or shopkeeper who joins Respect on the basis that the party is standing up to Islamophobia, war and social injustice is not a "reformist" even if he is unlikely to have ever read the Communist Manifesto, or having read it, agree with its main tenets. The British SWP should have tried to figure out a way to work in a milieu where such people are in the majority, but with their Manichean divisions between "revolutionary" and "reformist", I doubt that this would have been possible even with generous amounts of time spent in sensitivity training.

P.S.

* From Louis Proyect website:

<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2...>