

Crisis, revolt and the left in Europe

Tuesday 3 April 2012, by [DE JONG Alex](#), [LATHAM Chris](#), [NICHOLS Dick](#), [RAO Nathan](#) (Date first published: 9 March 2012).

Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal — The following presentation is a slightly edited and updated version of a talk given on January 20, 2012, to the eighth national conference of the Australian Socialist Alliance, held in Sydney. The slides mentioned refer to the PowerPoint presentation above, which accompanied the talk. Dick Nichols works in the European office of the Socialist Alliance and *Green Left Weekly*, based in Barcelona.

Contents

- [The left and the crisis \(...\)](#)
- [Debates over government \(...\)](#)
- [Some conclusions and issues](#)
- [Comments](#)

Thank you, comrades, for the invitation to speak—what a pleasure it is to see old faces, and new ones, too! The class struggle may be more advanced in Europe, but I sorely miss what we have created in the Socialist Alliance, as should become clear later in this talk.

My aim is to sketch the present phase of the class struggle in Europe, assess the gains of our side along with the challenges it faces, and hopefully help us all think about what this might mean for Socialist Alliance and the socialist movement in Australia. But the opinions expressed are my own, of course, not the Socialist Alliance's: so feel free to disagree vigorously!

For me the critical questions are:

- (1) How much has the economic crisis destabilised capitalist politics, capitalist hegemony if you like?
- (2) How much, specifically, has it produced a political crisis for the social democracy (the Labor parties in Britain and Ireland)—big business's back-up party of neo-liberal austerity?
- (3) And, most importantly, how much has the left been able to capitalise on that crisis and grow and consolidate its influence to the left of the social democracy, so as to be able to drive the struggle forward?

Who's winning and who's losing? Sarkozy, Merkel and the European Central Bank's Mario Draghi, these mediaeval doctors who react to the sickness of the patient they have bled white by repeating the same treatment? Or the rising social resistance that their policies—and those of their national counterparts across Europe—have stirred, from UK to Greece, from Spain to Romania?

What are the challenges for the left in this new wave of struggle? How well is it meeting them?

But some points of caution and clarification before starting:

First, by "left" I mean all forces that reject in practice the neoliberal consensus and the policies enforced by the European Union and European Central Bank—backed up by the International

Monetary Fund (the “troika”). That definition excludes the commonly accepted designation of the French, Spanish, Greek, and Portuguese Socialist Parties, or Scandinavian Social Democratic parties as “left”. It also includes parties who oppose austerity, but don’t have consistently left policies on other issues (like the Dutch Socialist Party on NATO, for example).

Second, within this left I don’t make a distinction between the “revolutionary” and “reformist” left. No doubt some currents within the left as I’ve defined it will fail decisive tests of struggle, but which these turn out to be won’t be completely determined by how they or their political rivals presently describe them. I don’t want in the least to underestimate the importance of peoples’ and parties’ present self-description, but all political actors evolve under the blows of the struggle and future destinations are not always determined by today’s labels.

Third, I shan’t talk much about the Greens. In Europe, with some exceptions, the Greens are not consistently anti-austerity, let alone anti-capitalist. Most oscillate wildly, tugged back and forth by the contending class forces, while the longest-established, like the German Greens are referred to by millions of their compatriots as “neoliberals on bicycles”. Of course, this is not to say that environmental crisis is felt to be unimportant—look at the impact of the anti-nuclear movement in Germany—but its political expression is not so monopolised by the Greens as in Australia. Nor are Green formations irrelevant—it’s just that without pressure from the left they always slide back into the “cartel of neoliberal parties”, as Die Linke leader Oscar Lafontaine puts it.

Fourth, the talk is called “... in Europe”. But Europe is politically and socially huge, and we could easily spend a couple of hours describing the crisis, the revolt and the left in any single major European power—in all of which the degree of crisis, the degree of revolt and the impact on the left has been quite varied, and increasingly so. This talk will focus on the countries where the crisis, the revolt and the advance of the left are most marked, but noting that these three phenomena do not necessarily march in lockstep. For example, if opinion polls are to be trusted, the left has advanced most in Holland, which maintains its AAA rating even as the Socialist Party is running at 20%, while in crisis-stricken, junk-bond, Portugal support for the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, BE) has fallen to 2.5%.

Fifth, I will say very little about the economic crisis in Europe.

For our purposes we need to hold in mind that the vast bulk of debt in Europe is private—or private debt recently socialised by the state—and that the status of the Eurozone as a monetary union means that the peripheral countries have lost control of monetary and exchange rate policy.

The burden of “adjustment” goes through the real wage and reductions in the budget deficit. This has led to a broad debate, on left and right, as to whether it’s worth these economies, including France, staying in the euro.

The central challenge for the left is how to get powerful enough to start to impose its own solutions to the debt crisis, instead of staying stuck as a spectator at the vicious bunfight between the various sections of capital over who pays—which combination of creditors, debtors, bankers, industrialists or states.

We can take this up in discussion.

Finally, a lot of the presentation will be about Spain, not just because that’s where I’ve been living, but because it has, with the exception of Greece, been the source of the biggest rebellion against austerity in the advanced capitalist world—the 15M explosion which at its highest point to date saw over 80 town and city squares occupied across the country and which mobilised anything between 500,000 and a million people in June 19 marches against the Euro Pact and the austerity policies of

the former Spanish government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

To what degree has that revolt destabilised capitalist rule—in Spain and in Europe more broadly? To get some kind of handle on the issue it's useful to recall Frederic Engels analysis of the class struggle as being fought on three fronts—the economic (the working class struggle around wages and conditions), the political (the fight for political representation for working people) and the ideological (the “battle of ideas” against the capitalist world-outlook).

Over a century of capitalism later, we have to add two more fronts to Engels' three—the front of struggle for social and democratic rights, and, most importantly, the battle to save our planet.

Today, a little more than half-a-year after 15M exploded onto the streets of Spain, we can begin to measure its impact on these fronts of struggle in Europe. The 15M outburst helps us locate where exactly the battlelines are now drawn—after decades of defeat and retreat. Indeed, the pleasure of participating in this new upsurge outside organised labour is modified by what it also confirms about the ground lost by labour to capital over the past 30-35 years.

We should also think about how close we are to a revolutionary situation in any European state: a state where the upper classes cannot rule in the old way and the ruled cannot live in the old way—just cannot take it any more.

The revolt in Spain

Why Spain? I've tried to analyse the emergence of 15M in various PowerPoint presentations, and in a short video. Here I'd like to share with you some basic analytical points, drawn from conversations in Spain and from the exploding literature on the movement. These seem to me to be the key points to insist on as we gain more perspective with the passing of time:

While inspired by the mass revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, 15M was a specifically Spanish phenomenon—its mass and energy were due to deep-seated malaises in Spanish society.

Spain is the only European country where right-wing dictatorship was not overthrown, but negotiated away. The right, including the fascist right, retained greater institutional presence than anywhere else; the constitution entrenched a ban on the right of self-determination by the national minorities; the judiciary is stacked with reactionary judges (who have succeeded in bringing campaigning magistrate Balthasar Garzon to trial); the “political class”, especially in the irrelevant Senate, has turned the state into an endless source of juicy freebies; and the voting system has created a deck stacked against the smaller, nationwide, parties (a system designed to protect two-party stability initially from the PCE and later the United Left).

On top of this, both mainstream parties—and the mainstream nationalist parties in Catalunya and the Basque Country—have practised shameless boondoggling and vote-buying, including shiny airports at which no planes have landed and Very Fast Train lines with an average daily patronage of 13. All this was funded by the tax incomes from the building bubble, which imploded in 2008.

As if all this were not enough, the Spanish economy has increasingly been based on construction and tourism, sectors where casual, part-time and unionised work has exploded. During the boom this work expanded rapidly, as hundreds of thousands of young people left school early to get onto the apparently endless gravy train. Since the bubble burst, 1.4 million have lost their jobs in construction alone. Those hundreds of thousands were left without a job or much of an education and rapidly the talk became that of a lost generation.

Government tenderness towards the Spanish finance sector turned anger and discontent into

incandescent rage.

The Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government was elected in 2004 on a program of renewal and hope after eight years of Popular Party (PP) rule, and on an upsurge of voter participation caused by the Madrid terrorist bombings, which the Aznar government tried to pin on Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA). That shift, sustained in 2008, took votes away from the United Left (IU) as the “useful vote” tide set in, and was based on the feeling that the Zapatero PSOE government was progressive.

This was not entirely mistaken, given its introduction of marriage equality and abortion rights in the face of ferocious Catholic Church hierarchy resistance.

However, when the economic crisis struck the PSOE adopted austerity policies practically indistinguishable from the right. The anger with a “left” government bailing out bankers like Banco Santander boss Emilio Botín—Spain’s greatest tax dodger—infuriated people and led to deep disillusionment and despair among traditional PSOE supporters.

While 15M was the product of the failure of the mainstream organisations of the working class movement, the form of its emergence—with mass occupations of public spaces and vast peaceful demonstrations—meant the systemic issue, capitalism as the root cause of the crisis, was posed in an unprecedented way.

If the two main Spanish trade union federations had had the faintest sketch of a proposal against youth unemployment, and a plan to mobilise young people in defence of their rights, 15M needn’t have arisen, or not in the form that it did. But to even suggest that as a hypothesis would sound bizarre to Spanish ears—these very bureaucratic, state-funded operations never showed any interest in the unemployed, and during the 2000-2007 Spanish building bubble, were exclusively focussed on winning wage gains for members in jobs.

Also, what little faith they had in struggle has now been lost under the impact of five million unemployed. For their part, the main parties of the left, ICV and IU, didn’t see their role as trying to mobilise resistance or to “instruct” the social movements, but at most reflect it in parliament. Along with denouncing capitalism 15M quickly developed a whole set of concrete demands.

In Europe the myth was rapidly propagated that the indignado movement was just pure protest, that it had no proposals, or that, if it did, had not the remotest way of getting them implemented. This was the content of a much-quoted “wise” article by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, backed by the apparent indignado “supporter Slavoj Žižek, with his argument that the worst thing the movement could do was to develop concrete demands, as these could only undermine its flaming spirit of system rejection.

Yet in Spain, specially in the main centres Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Sevilla, the 15M assemblies and working groups meetings thrashed out this issue in practice. Given the mass participation of people yearning for solutions, those who felt the movement shouldn’t make demands but just “build itself” rapidly lost out. A set of demands soon emerged that looked to meet the problems that had generated the movement in the first place
15M and the left

With this initial explosion, the movement made a big leap forward on the ideological front. Capitalism had to be discussed—even in the papers read by its most committed supporters.

15M and later Occupy! gave rise to the “the protestor” as Time’s person of the year, a stream of “Karl Marx was right” articles—most notably by economist Nouriel Roubini—as well as the present

Financial Times series, "Capitalism in Crisis".

In Spain, another gain has been the powering up of the social movements, especially those against housing evictions and health and education cuts.

At the same time, inevitably, with this new upsurge come the old debates, or rather, all the old discussions of our movement became new again. The discussion of left strategy has moved to centre stage, and it amounts to one question: how best to drive forward against the enemy? Inevitably, that is, the discussion came to focus on the most important front of struggle—politics.

All imaginable positions were put forward, as various forces tried to cast 15M in their own image. "Occupy the squares" was for some the cell of the liberated, decommodified society, with mass assembly decision-making as the cells of the new state, reviving the Castilian communes of the C13-14—"outdoor Soviets" in the words of one wiseacre.

For some in Barcelona 15M was the new army of the poor, to be unleashed against the symbols of oppression.

These debates, and in particular those arising from the June 15 clash outside the Catalan parliament, intensified discussion as to what 15M "really is", a discussion that the overwhelming victory of the Popular Party in the November 20 Spanish national election and the extension of 15M to a global October 15 have only intensified.

Already before that poll it had become necessary to specify that 15M was a "civic platform" and that would not be taking any position on the election—against shysters who were setting up 15M and Read Democracy Now "parties", but also against the specific currents within 15M who were advocating abstention, spoiling the ballot, or a vote for this or that political force, including the new "Empty Seats" party set up to capture the mood of hatred of the "political class".

The question then became—how was the political left to relate to 15M, especially as the demands emerging from the movement were clearly to the left?

In Spain, and especially in Catalonia, the relationship between 15M and the "old left" has been fraught. We have witnessed sections of 15M harassing party and union-led demonstrations against the changes to the constitution entrenching a legal maximum to the public sector budget deficit, attempts to proscribe party members from 15M, booing of IU national coordinator Cayo Lara at anti-eviction pickets. A pretty popular slogan is "El pueblo unido funciona sin partido" ("The people united functions without a party").

However, an initial breakthrough came with union and party support to the June 19 demonstrations, which expanded mass participation at least fourfold compared to 15M, and also through the growing connections between "old" anti-Francoist social movement structures—like the Barcelona federation of neighbourhood associations—as 15M moved out into the barrios.

An important moment was a speech by IU MP Gaspar Llamazares in the state of the nation debate in parliament, in which he welcomed the indignado movement as "good news" because "in the words of Camus, the humiliated have decided to no longer accept their humiliation". This was followed by the formal presentation of 15M demands to parliament by left deputies.

Before this Llamazares had stated that the "old left" and 15M "were condemned to understand each other".

Then came the IU program for the November 20 elections, developed not by IU full-timers and

sympathetic academic experts, but through 500 social convergence meetings, attended by over 15,000 people.

That approach bore fruit in the November 20 poll, where IU won 11 seats (it would have won 25 under proportional representation), including 15M leader and radical economist Alberto Garzon (in Malaga).

Garzon's election campaign brought a breath of fresh air into IU.

A more recent sign of rapprochement was the refusal of ICV parliamentarians to turn up as witnesses to the trial of 15M activists facing various charges related to the June 15 melee outside the Catalan parliament.

Having to engage with 15M has also begun to challenge IU. Its parliamentarians are pledged to "represent the street" in parliament, and a debate is breaking out about how IU as an organisation should relate to the new situation and overcome old baggage.

The issue of left unity is also sharply posed, as attempts to build an "anti-capitalist left" as an expression of 15M, as well as a new green party, Equo, failed at the November 20 poll.

The left and the crisis of social democracy

The immediate result of November 20 has been to devastate Spanish social democracy. Those media forces who have been putting the boot into Zapatero over the past three years are now worrying that they may have done too good a job. Now the job is to resuscitate the PSOE as "the alternative party of government", and prevent its being outflanked by left and left nationalist forces.

The key determinant will be the intelligence with which IU plays its strengthened hand. Here the challenge is to break with the bad habits of a lifetime—either acting as a fifth wheel on PSOE administrations, or making anti-PSOE alliances with the PP.

The challenge here—not just in Spain, but wherever social democracy provides, either alone or with junior partners, the "alternative party of government"—is to convince millions that There Is An Alternative—that the Thatcherite TINA is false. The 15M 25-point "what we want" is, unsurprisingly, the heart of that alternative, even if still incomplete and still enjoying only minority support.

It is not a program for socialism—that term doesn't appear—but it is a program that cannot be realised without "making increasingly despotic inroads" into capitalist power, as Marx and Engels put it in the Communist Manifesto, and which, if implemented by a left government would require mass support and popular organisation—people's power, if you like—to be implemented.

By the same token, any attempt to implement the program "coldly", as if it were just another program of government, in the hope that the financial, economic and institutional powers-that-be will respect the people's will as expressed at the ballot box, would be doomed to failure.

Done in such conditions, a left government would be forced into retreat, disappointing its own supporters and doomed to electoral defeat (the fate of French Popular Front government of 1936-38 comes to mind).

Yet the rise of 15M has exposed the unprecedented vulnerability of the social democracy in government, because the space for difference from the directly conservative parties is tinier than ever, while people's understanding that an alternative is possible is growing.

In a very different country, Denmark, where the social democracy has been in government for four months, it is now in free fall, with the lowest approval rating (22.2%) since its foundation.

However, apart from the screaming nosedive of PASOK in Greece, we see this most dramatically in the crisis of the PSOE. It is torn between a wing that wants to vindicate the record of the Zapatero government, with the argument that the hard measures that it took will be seen in the fullness of time to have prevented Spain following Ireland, Greece and Portugal into bankruptcy, bailout and even more draconian Brussels-imposed austerity.

Another wing, acutely aware of that the party is becoming a complete shell (200,000 members lost since 2000), is calling vaguely for “renewal” and “reconstruction”. But will the “renewalists” commit to any of those embarrassingly concrete 15M demands? At most they mutter about changing the electoral system along German lines and reintroducing a few taxes on wealth, while harping that public health and education are untouchable.

Clearly, the path of advance for IU and the formations allied to it is to call on the social democracy to end its pro-austerity positions, to support the real resistance to these taking place “in the streets”, and to rediscover its old commitments to the welfare state. Done properly, this tactic of being friendly to the ranks and supporters of social democracy is very damaging to its neoliberal leaders, as best exemplified by the astute interventions of Die Linke leader Oscar Lafontaine, former leader and now *bête noire* of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Of course, a key element in the capacity of the left to exploit the unprecedented vulnerability of the social democracy is its ability to clean up its own act, purging its old vices—opportunism, lack of real commitment to democracy, big party arrogance and tailing, sectarianism and propagandism. For me, a year’s experience in Europe has reinforced the conviction that the most important element in advancing the left is finding unity and ways of acting jointly around the issues on which there is agreement.

Moreover, finding such unity is often a precondition of breakthrough to a higher level of mass support, influence and power. Most critically, it will be necessary if the left is ever to have a chance of imposing its answer to the crisis, as opposed to that of this or that fraction of capital.

Unity in action and at election time always draws forth a positive, often inspired response from our potential supporters and audiences.

The good examples from 2011 in Europe were:

The 15M movement itself was an example of unity in action, building itself on discovered points of agreement. Everyone came to 15M assemblies, working groups and commissions as individuals, and consensus was thrashed out through a process of patient, respectful, debate. It broke some old left moulds and created a new culture of decision making.

The broad alliance nature of the IU campaign in the Spanish November 20 poll. In the atmosphere created by 15M many activists called on the United Left to open up its lists to other forces. This bore fruit in Catalunya and Aragon, where the left nationalist Chunta Aragonesista (Aragonist Union) won back a seat by running in alliance with IU.

The vote in the February Irish general election, which saw the United Left Alliance emerge with 5 seats in the Dail.

The adoption by Die Linke—the broadest and most heterogeneous of all European left parties—of its program, the most advanced attempt so far to thrash out a detailed anti-capitalist platform covering

all the German and Europe-wide issues.

However, unfortunately, in Europe in 2011 there was a negative example for every positive one, and where old antagonisms, lines of division and self-conceptions counted for more than grasping the chance to advance unity in struggle.

The most grotesque example comes from the country where unity around a basic platform of rejection of the shocking social crimes contained in “troika” memoranda is most needed—Greece.

As matters stand, after eight general strikes and ongoing social turmoil the Greek struggle teeters on the brink of demoralisation and defeat. One more limited general strike without perspective will not work—the next step that’s objectively required in the Greek class struggle is for an indefinite general strike that would bring the Papademos government of “technocrats” to its knees, opening the way to immediate general elections and a referendum on the troika’s “packages”.

However, for such drastic action to have a chance of success the mass of working people have to see an alternative people’s government on the horizon. Otherwise, what will a new election bring?

This was the major negative factor in May’s Portuguese general election, triggered by the Left Bloc-initiated vote of no confidence in the SP government of Jose Socrates. If the troika rescue plan, supported by the conservative parties and the SP, was to be rejected, what was the alternative? The Left Bloc might talk about a “left government”, but in the absence of an agreement with the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), this was just a very abstract abstraction.

Meanwhile, rejection of the troika package would mean public servants wouldn’t be paid. So people voted for safety, punishing not only the SP but the Left Bloc as well.

2011 was a bad year for the Left Bloc, in which layers after layer of support peeled off. It started with an attempt to find an anti-austerity unity candidate for the presidential elections in February. The Bloc decided not to run its own candidate, and support a “left” socialist, who was not so left that the SP itself had no trouble in also supporting him. The PCP, as usual, ran its own candidate.

Then followed the vote of no-confidence in the SP government, an important decision, but one made by the party’s political commission to avoid it being leaked to the SP by those national leadership members who disagreed with it.

In the elections the disappointed SP supporters who had swung to the Bloc in 2009 deserted it for the SP.

Finally, the International Workers League (LIT) tendency left at the end of the year, at the same time as the Bloc’s poll rating fell to 2.5%.

Back in Greece the main blockage is the virulent Stalinism and sectarianism of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), which sees only one way out of the crisis—enough people have to join it, the reformists and opportunists in Syriza and Left Democracy, which it spends a great deal of time denouncing, have to be marginalised, and sooner or later the KKE’s time will come.

The KKE has given itself the role of world defender of “communist” (i.e., Stalinist) ideological and political purity. Besides believing the fairy tale that the end of the socialist camp was due to Gorbachev’s treachery, this year the KKE has rehabilitated its most Stalinist national secretary and the 1930s line of Trotskyism as crypto-fascism, publicly warned the fraternal but potentially naïve Portuguese comrades about talking to the Trotskyite serpents of the Left Bloc, and denounced IU for “agreeing to administer capitalism”. There’s nothing so immune to reason and the evidence of the

facts as a sect that thinks it's time is coming.

What we have in Greece is a revival of totally destructive Third Period Stalinism. As things stand it's not easy to be optimistic about Greece, as a conversation with Green Left Weekly correspondent Afrodity Giannakis would make clear.

Another big disappointment in 2011 has been the implosion of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA, New Anti-Capitalist Party) in France, whose membership has fallen from 9000 to around 2500-3000 in the space of a year.

The decline of the NPA is not only due to its inability to resolve its debate around the Islamic veil, an issue that left fraternal observers to its February congress shaking their heads. It was most importantly due to a failure to relate to the emergence of the Parti de Gauche (Left Party) and Front de Gauche (Left Front, FdG, composed of the PdG, PCF and a split from the NPA).

The emergence of the Front de Gauche was triggered by the split from the SP of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, representing those forces in that party that had joined the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and other forces in the successful No campaign in the referendum over the European constitution, in 2005.

The NPA made it a bottom-line condition that the Front de Gauche rule out any participation in government with the SP, from the fear that this would lead a repetition of the SP-PCF government of the early 1980s, whose Common Program president Mitterand quickly jettisoned, but in which the PCF remained in as a minority with ministers running the usual marginal portfolios.

Clearly, the Front de Gauche, and Mélenchon personally, were never going to agree to such a scheme, especially as he calls for a "revolution through elections", and the alliance that would enforce Front de Gauche policies was seen to involve the SP as a junior partner.

Surely the way to pose this vital question is conditionally—not to rule out an alliance with all or part of the SP because everything would depend on the political basis of the alliance. Following that approach would have increased the political tension on the SP and FdG—can they adopt the irreducible core of an anti-neoliberal program? And what is that core?—and a dialogue opened up with FdG and SP members keen for broader unity.

If the FdG program contained inadmissible positions, these would have been exposed, debated, known to more, and the reasons for any final breakdown in negotiations more broadly understood—making any reluctant NPA-only candidacy more likely to receive greater support.

As it was, the NPA's ultimatum let the FdG off the hook, and strengthened the position of the sectarians within the FdG. The FdG had been pre-emptive in announcing the Mélenchon presidential candidacy without consultations, but the NPA response meant they, the NPA, could more readily be portrayed as the real sectarians.

As matters stand in France, we are now a long way from the 2002 presidential poll, where the far left plus PCF won 14%. If the opinion polls hold, the progressive vote will be redistributed as shown here, and this despite a crisis that will only deepen in 2012.

A similar process took place in Spain, where Fourth Internationalists of the Anti-Capitalist Left (AL), who had left IU in the late 1990s, saw the chance to run an anti-capitalist campaign in the November 20 poll, featuring leading 15M activists like Esther Vivas in Barcelona. The result was only 25,000 votes, despite the backing of high-profile left intellectuals, Spanish and foreign—like Noam Chomsky and Ken Loach.

Basically, the AL comrades weren't interested in the changes 15M's emergence was producing within IU (including its alliance approach) and decided they would try to capture the ground of political representation of 15M. The explanation given for this approach was that IU:

"never realised a minimally critical balance sheet of its participation in governments like those of Catalonia, Asturias, Baleares or of emblematic cities like Sevilla or Gijón, where IU governed with the PSOE until a few months ago, applying social-liberal policies.

"Neither did IU show any real interest in running an election campaign without professional politicians, defending a list made up of its leaders, who have spent decades as MPs living off politics. Nor in carrying out a campaign that was not financed by the banks or in which MPs would rotate halfway through the parliamentary term. In these conditions IA came to the conclusion that there was no real desire on the part of the IU leadership to make a turn to the left, either in words or deeds."

Not a word about the IU program for the elections.

Debates over government alliances

The attitude of the NPA and IA has been rationalised with a new terminology—not of the old "revolutionaries" versus "reformists" but of the "anti-capitalist" versus the "institutional" left. This "distinction" confuses everything. What does "institutional" mean? A willingness to enter government under certain conditions? But off course! Everything depends on the government program.

Probably the worst recent example of left support for a social democratic government was Rifondazione Comunista's participation in the broad anti-Berlusconi front in 2007, which led to its disastrous decline. As a result, in today's "post-party" Italy, the broad left and progressive sentiment that is still strong in that country is drawn to individual politicians rather than parties, such as ex-PRC leader Nichi Vendola, president of the Puglia region and newly elected mayor of Milan, Giuliano Pisapia.

Yet refusal to ever enter government with the socialists or Greens will rightly be seen by working people as fear of taking responsibility.

Take the Netherlands, showing the most advanced position so far reached by the left, where support for the SP stands at 20%.

By contrast with Greece and Portugal, last weekend the Dutch Socialist Party, Green Left and Labor Party began to give a glimpse of what an anti-neoliberal government might look like by holding a huge "Another Holland is Possible" rally. Which force is hegemonic in this nascent alliance I can't say, but if the core agreement makes possible a defence of the welfare state and making the rich and the banks pay for the crisis, why shouldn't such a government be entered into?

This critical issue can become very complicated, and involve "line-ball" decisions. A core reality is that much of the working-class and popular base of the left parties expect them to participate in coalition governments with the social democracy—with a view to implementing reforms as well as possible, and as a counterweight to right-wing pressures on the social democracy itself.

However, the balance sheet for left parties that have tended to participate in such alliances as a semi-permanent junior partner has usually been negative, as can be seen in the decline in support for the Left Party (Sweden), the Socialist Left Party (Norway) and the Left Alliance (Finland).

Given this trend, it was clear to the Danish Red-Green Alliance that it should not be part of the “left” governmental alliance after the September 2011 Danish elections, but decide its position on an issue-by-issue basis while backing the government against no-confidence motions from the right. At the same time it was also seems clear that the Red-Green Alliance has gained from participation in the powerful Copenhagen City Council, where it has been able to help achieve gains in the context of the council’s generally progressive policies, particularly in the area of environment and public transport.

Another case: what will happen to the huge jump in support for the Icelandic Left-Green Movement, which entered as a junior partner with the Labor Party in the government of the country? Iceland refused to accept responsibility for private bank debt, instituted capital controls to prevent further capital flight, and has emerged—albeit damaged and with increased poverty—from the crisis in better shape than any other crisis-stuck European economy.

The same question also hangs over Die Linke, which has participated in government in German states covered by the former German Democratic Republic, but which suffered a reverse in the 2011 Berlin state election, where it had been a junior partner in government with the Social Democratic Party (PDS), suffering from the emergence of the Pirate Party to its left.

Finally, to take a Spanish example, should the left alliance (ICV and United and Alternative Left, IU in Catalonia) have participated in the 2003-10 tripartite Catalan government under the leadership of the Socialist Party and with left-nationalist Republican Left of Catalunya?

It is not easy to give a definitive answer—that did some good things, some bad things and a lot of mediocre things. The temptation is to say that a left party should have supported it against the right in the style of the Danish Red-Green Alliance. However, as matters stand today, ICV-EUiA, because of its consistent opposition to the cuts of the Catalan nationalist Convergence and Union administration, has advanced most in the polls (from 7.4% in the 2010 election to 10% today).

Some conclusions and issues for discussion

Europe today is a battleground between the politics of fear and resignation and the politics of hope and resistance. On the one hand we can see the beginnings of what could be a serious defeat in Greece and Portugal, with the banks and rich bleeding the economy dry, and young people lining up outside the embassies of other countries in their desperation to find work.

The fear of losing what has been gained through years of work—especially workers’ savings—is very deep, and the rulers of the system are manipulating that fear ruthlessly. This forms the basis of TINA, or its present-day version—“this is no time for experiments”.

On the other, 15M shows the enormous potential for reversing the tide of retreat—provided mass revolt can forge strong enough political instruments in time.

The left hasn’t a hope in hell of building a majority for anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist change unless it can convince a majority that it has a practical alternative program based on making capital and the rulers pay for the crisis. As different left forces struggle to develop their national and Europe-wide versions of this program, we keep coming across the same elements—shifting the tax burden onto the rich, defence and expansion of the public sector and public investment, putting finance and banking under public control, defence and expansion of democratic rights, and transparency and accountability in government.

A central element will be a people’s proposal about what to do about the crippling debt burden,

beginning with a civilian audit of the public debt which uncovers the dark secrets of how this has really accumulated.

The coming recession, which has already begun in “peripheral” Europe, will only make this clash more intense. In this situation, politics is on a knife-edge. Further advance for the left is far from guaranteed. Indeed, disillusionment and protest can equally feed the parties of the right and authoritarianism in government, as with the entry of LAOS into the Greek government and the anti-democratic measures of the Hungarian administration.

To turn the tide, ongoing social resistance—exemplified by this massive and successful anti-eviction picket in Madrid—will have to combine with the greater degree of resistance from the union movement and rising conviction among millions of hearts and minds that an alternative is possible and visible on the political horizon.

The huge challenge for the left in Europe is make it appear there.

Dick Nichols

Comments

Sun, 02/05/2012 - 12:12 — Alex de Jong (not verified)

Another Holland?

People where I'm from, the Netherlands, would be amazed to hear it described as the country where the left has reached 'the most advanced position so far'. First, one can't compare the left social-democratic SP to parties like the anticapitalist Portuguese Left Bloc or the Danish RGA. Second, the excellent electoral prospects of the SP are so far not accompanied by a strong rise in social struggles, a precondition to actually a break with neoliberalism. Thirdly, the SP still has relatively weak social roots compared to the Labour Party, especially in the trade-unions. The SP is certainly growing its roots, but the 'left of the left' here is much weaker than in for example any of the Southern European countries described.

To describe the 'Another Holland is possible' alliance as even a glimpse of what an anti-neoliberal government might look like greatly exaggerates its significance. It's a quite shallow alliance that only agrees on very vague and general proposals. It is also in no way solid. Influential parts of the Green Left for example want to stop the rapprochement with the SP, whose anti-neoliberalism they find 'conservative' and instead orient to the liberals. The Labour Party has made a slight left-turn under the pressure of the SP but it still supports the governments austerity measures (and because the current right-wing government is a minority coalition, it wouldn't have lasted this long without this support) and declared that more austerity measures will probably be 'necessary'.

The Another NL agreement certainly doesn't include anything like 'a defence of the welfare state and making the rich and the banks pay for the crisis', on issues like the pension age, the role of the European Union or deregularisation of the labour market, the Labour Party and especially Green Left are in favour of neoliberal policies.

Sun, 02/05/2012 - 13:37 — peter waterman (not verified)

El Pueblo Unido...?

Very informative and thought-provoking. I am just wondering why Dick Nichols should seem to believe that, at least in Spain:

'The discussion of left strategy has moved to centre stage, and it amounts to one question: how best to drive forward against the enemy? Inevitably, that is, the discussion came to focus on the most important front of struggle—politics.'

Whilst this piece represents a devastating critique of the role of the state and of the state-oriented left, of most varieties, he seems concerned to push the currently disarticulated radical-democratic social movements back into some party, some alliance of such, and toward parliament and state. In other words, he seems to believe that 'Representative Democracy Rules OK'.

It would seem to me that what the current revolt is doing is questioning 'politics' - i.e. the reduction of all self-empowerment struggles in society to the question of either influencing or taking over the state. He himself quotes as a popular slogan "El pueblo unido funciona sin partido" (The people united functions without a party) which nicely captures the mood of those who believe that 'the most important front' is socio-cultural - i.e. that it is a matter of extending popular participatory power at every site and level, in a wide range of possible forms, without capital, state, political parties and the de-radicalising effects of these.

This is the really tough one. Our first slogan should surely be 'The Party is Over'. As shown by the comment from the Netherlands, from which I am currently absent. After having lived in that country for over 40 years I have to say that I was more than somewhat surprised at Dick's analysis, and convinced by the Dutch commentator.

Tue, 02/07/2012 - 14:26 — Des Derwin (not verified)

Where to now for the United Left Alliance?

The following was published by two leading non-party members of the United Left Alliance in Ireland on 3rd February.

WHERE TO NOW FOR THE UNITED LEFT ALLIANCE?

Eddie Conlon, United Left Alliance and People Before Profit Alliance Steering Committees

Brendan Young, Independent (non-party member) ULA/PBPA

We offer the following as a contribution to the developing debate about the future of the ULA. As a conference has now been called for April 21 we would hope that a wide ranging debate would take place about the future of the ULA. Members and branches should also submit ideas to the sub-committee that has been established to look at the ULA's structures.

The establishment of the ULA was a big step forward for the left particularly for those of us who have promoted the idea of left unity as the basis for the establishment of a new mass workers party. The ULA must be nurtured and developed and allowed to grow at a pace that maintains the unity that has been established while at the same time creating a forward momentum based on united work, real and respectful internal debate and discussion and an acknowledgement that it will take time for the ULA to move beyond being an alliance to some kind of unitary formation that will form the nucleus of a new party.

There is much frustration at the slow pace of development. It is the case that it could be a little easier but there are reasons why it's not: the ULA is an alliance (maybe even a federation) of founding groups with members who are not members of these groups; levels of struggles have not been as high as we would like them to be and the presence in the Dáil has created a set of problems that we have not had to face before. As a result, as an experienced activist said to one of us in the supermarket recently, the ULA lacks bite.

The tasks facing the ULA are to build a national profile whereby the public see us as the real opposition with a real political alternative and the best organisers; build an active branch structure in all areas where the constituent groups have a presence and beyond ; improve communications and internal debate (internal bulletin, better website and newsletter) creating a real internal life for the ULA. But the real challenge, in our opinion, is the degree of commitment to politically prioritising the ULA; little real joint work; and the existence of a number of campaigns (such as Enough) that are doing what should be done through the ULA.

Until the ULA becomes the main priority for all constituents it will not be built in a serious way. A stark opposition has emerged between the Socialist Party's [Irish section of the CWI]cautious approach based on an assessment that objective conditions are not conducive to significant growth of the ULA and the Socialist Workers Party's [Irish sister organisation of the British SWP]voluntarism which suggests that anything is possible if we just work harder. The latter leads to a constant demand for mobilisation leading to poorly prepared and poorly attended protests. The former is in danger of demoralising people by suggesting that there's not much that can be done.

As a bottom line the emphasis should shift from constituents running their own campaigns when they cannot get agreement in the ULA to agreeing to focus on campaigns where everyone is in agreement. There is evidence that a common approach to the Household Tax campaign may be emerging and also that it is seen by some, particularly the Socialist Party, as a potential turning point in building resistance to austerity. It should not be assumed that the Household Tax campaign will automatically lead to the growth of the ULA unless it contributes to the campaign in a cohesive fashion and seeks to draw the best activists to the ULA rather than to the constituent groups.

The ULA was established on the basis that there was much on which we agree but some issues which divide us. The focus must remain on areas of agreement and developing the programme so that it is more relevant to the crises around us and incorporates more areas where there is agreement. Where we disagree there should be ongoing and open debate. The ULA needs to facilitate more debate and clarification. It might be the case that what there might be even more we agree on than we thought! Differences can only be overcome through debate and discussion. Given the operation of consensus decision making there should be real efforts to reach consensus. Vetos should only be used after a period of discussion. And the content of these discussions should be made open to members so that they are aware of debates taking place in the ULA and are politically educated by the process of debate.

There is now an attempt to resolve differences by those, particularly the SWP, arguing that we need a delegate conference with full decision making powers. This is a mechanism to get around the fact that there is not agreement on perspectives. Because agreement cannot be found through discussion, it is to be imposed via majority vote. It is an organisational solution to a political problem. The ULA is not ready for such a development:

The election of voting branch delegates could lead to a race to have the most delegates; and the dynamic would be to create a leadership structure based upon proportionality of representation / delegates at the conference.

A voting conference, at this stage - where there is no agreement on political perspectives - will lead to polarisation and either paralysis or passive split. The majority will have its positions adopted, so

what will the minority do?

On account of being organised, the SP and SWP will have an organised intervention into the conference – rendering the presentation of the views of independents less likely.

Finally the degree of internal communication is such that there would not be adequate internal debate prior to such a conference.

There is no agreement (the SP and the Tipperary Workers and Unemployed Action Group are opposed) on moving to this kind of decision making; and for the reasons set out above, we agree. We need to work with what we have while building in structures that allow for non-aligned people to organise and have representation within the ULA. From the start we have supported the idea that the non-aligned members should have representation on the Steering Committee, elected only by these members themselves with the same rights to veto as the constituent organisations. It is unfortunate that in recent weeks the People Before Profit Alliance took a position against this. Arguing that all members should elect the non-aligned reps to the Steering Committee is to argue that they should have less rights and autonomy than the constituent groups. Further it sends the wrong message to prospective members and would reinforce the view that the ULA is a tool of the founding organisations. All members attending the conference should however vote to ratify the delegates to the SC – including those delegates independently selected by a meeting of the non-aligned members.

How non-aligned representation is organised and how political differences are managed is a matter for the non-aligned. There is a value in having people in the leadership feeding in the views of the non-aligned even if they are diverse. We should value political pluralism both within the ULA and its constituents. The imposition of lines through democratic centralist methods is not conducive to the kind of debate we need.

The expansion of the SC could be complemented by regular gatherings of branch activists to discuss ongoing work and have political discussions. There are some good ideas here, for example the formation of a ULA Council, which should be explored.

In recent days we have seen significant decisions made by the Steering Committee that hopefully will facilitate the ULA in moving forward:

1. A conference of the ULA is to be held on the 21st of April.
2. The Steering Committee also agreed that individual members of the ULA, comrades who are not members of the founding organisations, should meet separately during the Conference and elect members to represent them on the Steering Committee.
3. The Steering Committee has also agreed to set up a sub-committee – which should also include some individual, as well as members from the constituent groups – with the following terms of reference:
 - A) Recommend interim arrangements for representation of unaligned members on Steering Committee
 - B) Discuss future development of ULA including the development of participative structures
 - C) To consult all members on the above issues
 - D) Report to Steering Committee who will report to conference. The report of the Steering Committee to Conference will include the recommendations of the sub-committee

4. These were the main decisions of the Steering Committee held on Tuesday the 31 of January and clearly will need to be supplemented at the next meetings.

While these decisions do not resolve all issues hopefully they will provided the basis for a more structured debate on where the ULA is going. Hopefully it will encourage more people to join by sending out a message that there is a space in the ULA for those not aligned to the constituent groups. After all the very rationale for the ULA was to provide a mechanism for reaching out beyond the current membership and supporters of the constituents to a new layer of people who want to engage with radical and socialist politics.

3rd February 2012

Fri, 02/17/2012 - 15:44 — Binh (not verified)

great report

This report should be a full-blown article. It's good to see an honest discussion of challenges/opportunities rather than shallow, optimistic reports.

How many people, groups are in ULA? What does the group do at a rank-and-file level? Hold meetings? Direct actions?

Fri, 02/17/2012 - 21:20 — normd

More on the ULA

Hi Binh,

Earlier articles on the ULA can be found at <http://links.org.au/taxonomy/term/519>

Wed, 02/08/2012 - 03:18 — Richard Fidler (not verified)

Question

What is "the 15M explosion"?

Fri, 02/17/2012 - 10:51 — normd

Replies to comments on "Crisis, revolt and the left in Europe"

Dick Nichols replies to various comments on "Crisis, revolt and the left in Europe":

My apologies for the delay in replying to comments so far...I have been out of action with a nasty cold brought on by Siberian conditions presently afflicting Europe.

First, in answer to Richard Fidler: the "15M explosion" was simply shorthand for the ongoing mobilisations of the indignado movement, which have now spread into the neighborhoods and into support for the many campaigns against the neo-liberal offensive of the new Popular Party government and of the Convergence and Union government in Catalonia. For an idea of the vast range of campaigns initiated or supported by 15M go to: <http://www.acampadadebarcelona.org/>, <http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/>, <http://www.acampadavalencia.net/> and <http://sevilla.tomalaplaza.net/>, as well as <http://www.noticias15m.eu/>.

Secondly, in reply to Alex de Jong (I assume that's the Alex de Jong who's editor of *Grenzeloos*, the journal of the Dutch section of the Fourth International). Yes, if we're trying to measure advance on

all fronts of the class struggle it may well be inaccurate to say that the Socialist Party's 20% in Dutch polls represents "the most advanced position so far for the left" in Europe, especially if there has so far been no "strong rise in social struggles".

However, 20% for a party that has opposed neoliberal policy in Holland and in Europe has to mean something. I have recently been trawling through English-language commentary on the Dutch SP—apart from the SP's own English language site at <http://international.sp.nl/--and> came across the following points from the CWI website, in a recent article by Pieter Brans (February 13):

Another factor contributing to the growth of the SP in the polls is the lack of trade union resistance. Last September the tops of the unions concluded a rotten pension deal with the employers and the government, which means that all the investment risks are placed onto the backs of workers. The majority of members of the largest Dutch unions in the public and private sectors opposed the deal but because a number of smaller unions make up the majority of affiliates in the largest Dutch trade union federation, FNV, the deal was pushed through. This led to an irreconcilable conflict between the FNV and the presidents of the largest unions which have around 60% of the federations' membership. 'Conflict mediation' (by an ex-banker and Labour Party politician) was called in and the FNV trade union federation was "dissolved". A plan for a new trade union movement will be drawn up in the next year under the lead of another Labour Party politician, responsible for many welfare cuts. This means that further large scale mobilizations of trade union opposition against the government cuts, like those in Belgium and Britain, are blocked temporarily, workers are looking to the political front. (See <http://www.socialistworld.net/doc/5575>)

If that's true, it's no wonder there has been a turn to the SP. Brans also comments that a lot of the support comes from disappointed Party for Freedom (PVV) supporters, who now see the SP as the only real opposition party. But what is the evidence that people have passed directly from the racist and islamophobic PVV directly to the SP? And if they have, does that mean their Islamophobia wasn't so visceral, or that the SP has been soft on racism? Maybe it means that some people are beginning to wake up to the fact that the problem is not Moslems but Brussels and its national supporters.

Alex calls the SP "left social-democratic". It would be interesting to know what he means by this, because former SP leader Jan Marijnissen's book *Enough! - A socialist bites back*, while stressing the death of the old social democratic reformism made possible by the post-war boom, doesn't in the least project the SP as a replacement social-democratic force, but as a radical, socialist party fighting for and building on the real concerns and campaigns of working people, the poor and welfare recipients.

Or is Alex saying that the SP's practice has become social-democratic?

In a 2010 interview, with the New Left Project (see http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/on_dutch_socialism), Steve McGiffen, who has been associated with the SP since 1999, and continues to work for it as a translator, said on this issue (before the SP dropped seats at the last national election that year):

The longer-term threat is the danger that confronts all left parties which try to engage in parliamentary politics, which in my view you absolutely have to do - and that is the danger that you will become a social democratic party. For me that's less about policies, which are fleeting things which must respond to events, than about organisation. As soon as you begin to prioritise parliamentary work, as soon as you start to wonder if militancy is costing you votes and to care that it might well do so, you are on the rocky road to social democracy.

But what is the evidence of social-democratic degeneration on the part of the SP? In his interview McGiffen mentions none, and also stresses the social and campaigning base of the SP.

However, in a comment on McGiffen's piece (see http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/on_dutch_socialism), Sierp van Wouden claims that the SP "openly propagates racist views", has reconciled itself to the Dutch monarchy, NATO and the European constitution, and is "preferring governing above the streets". How true was and is this?

Certainly, in itself there's nothing wrong in proposing an alliance with the PdA (Labour Party) and Green Left. Indeed, how else is the SP to get a hearing from PdA and Green Left supporters and strengthen the position of those within either party who look to coalition with the SP instead of some re-edition of old and discredited coalition formulas?

How to get beyond 20% support without such a tactic? How else to pose the question of program concretely, and in a way that would inspire workers, pensioners and the unemployed not only to vote, but to fight, for it? Or is the problem really that the SP is no longer consistently anti-neo-liberal in its program and activity, and will compromise on essentials in order to govern?

Certainly, there's not much evidence that the SP is going soft on the PdA in a January 22 comment by SP Member of the European Parliament, Dennis de Jong (entitled "Europhiles in distress", at http://international.sp.nl/bericht/79909/120122-weeklog_dennis_de_jong_e...).

Pieter Brans avoids characterising the SP but mainly worries about its "coalitionist" policies. But, again, doesn't everything depend on the political content of the coalition?

A lot of questions, calling for clear answers.

Thirdly, in reply to Peter Waterman. No genuine socialist would counterpose "self-empowerment struggles" to "representative democracy". However, do we really believe that the formula "extending popular participatory power at every site and level, in a wide range of possible forms, without capital, state, political parties and the de-radicalising effects of these" gives us a useful lead as to how to advance actual struggles and people's consciousness of the need to struggle, and hence strengthen their real power?

This debate rages on in 15M, but as I write the really critical challenge in Spain is to organise people for the battle against a brutal conservative offensive—with the unions if possible, in spite of them, if necessary. Many of the most committed 15M comrades I meet in Barcelona are doing precisely this.

For example, the Catalan government is presently massacring the good public health system here, cutting operating theatres and hospital beds, and trying to drive people into private health (the longer-term drive is to make public health "welfare health" for those who can't afford better).

In the face of divisions among health unions (especially those doctors who have an eye for doing better in the private realm), a number of 15M activists organised a Catalonia-wide health "summit" which drew over 150 health workers to Barcelona on January 28. The discussion at that meeting, while beginning with workshops about the sort of health system participants wanted, had to confront how to build the alliances that would be strong enough to turn back the attacks that will make any kind of decent public health unthinkable.

That reality has led some within 15M (probably a minority) to seek alliances with existing left parties (in Catalonia, Initiative for Catalonia and the United and Alternative Left) and others to pose the need for 15M to facilitate the emergence of or itself become a new party.

That is, as the struggle advances the slogan “el pueblo unido funciona sin partido” increasingly sounds a bit hollow. Yes, it was a good blast against the “political class” in the early days, but the November 20 elections (and the beginning of changes in Izquierda Unida covered in the talk) have meant that the discussion is increasingly becoming about “what sort of party do we need?” and not repeated affirmation that “the party is over”. What’s the way forward at the party-political level: to try to change the existing left, or to start afresh?

Lastly, thanks to Des Derwin for the ULA discussion piece. I am keen to catch up with Irish comrades at the April 21 ULA conference.
reply

Fri, 02/17/2012 - 14:30 — Alex de Jong (not verified)

>Secondly, in reply to Alex de Jong (I assume that's the Alex de Jong who's >editor of Grenzeloos, the journal of the Dutch section of the Fourth >International).

Yes, that is me. It goes without saying the rise of the SP is the best news for the Dutch left in a long time, I'm not suggesting it is irrelevant, but is not correct to say, without further qualification, that in the Netherlands the left has the most advanced position so far. I agree with Brans that a part of the growing support for the SP can be explained by people looking to the political front as a compensation for the lack of combative trade-union movement for example.

>Alex calls the SP “left social-democratic”. It would be interesting to know >what he means by this, because former SP leader Jan Marijnissen's book >Enough! - A socialist bites back, while stressing the death of the old social >democratic reformism made possible by the post-war boom, doesn't in the least >project the SP as a replacement social-democratic force, but as a radical, >socialist party fighting for and building on the real concerns and campaigns >of working people, the poor and welfare recipients.

Left social-democratic is maybe not a very precise term, but it is a fair description of the SP's practice as a party that, unlike the Labour Party or the Green Left, has remained opposed to neoliberalism but sees the main form of struggle and its goal as a more controlled form of capitalism. This is often described as the so-called 'Rhineland model' instead of the 'Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism'. Jan Marijnissen's book is now 14 years old, I'll translate a part of a recent interview with Marijnissen in a Dutch daily: commenting on the question if the Netherlands, considering the rise of the SP will become socialist, he answers:

'I prefer not to use the word 'socialist'.

Interviewer: You even say it as if it is a dirty word....

Marijnissen: 'Yes, I'm not saying 'I'm a socialist', or 'we are socialists', even though that is of course the name of the party'.

Interviewer: Now I'm surprised.

Marijnissen: 'The word is tarnished. The Soviet-Union, Eastern Europe, Cuba, it totally failed there. We are always asked critical questions about that and rightly so. 'SP' is a strong brand, but if one would found the party today, one wouldn't call it that.'

Interviewer: Are you social-democrats?

Marijnissen: 'Social-democrats with a little extra is how I like to put it. Since the nineties the SP has an ideology of its own, without the classical basis of Marx and Engels.'

Interviewer: 'You say, "the word socialism is tarnished, we don't use it anymore". Wouldn't it be better to say: once it is implemented, it turns bad so the idea itself is wrong?'

Marijnissen: 'I think China nowadays is a good example. People there have more and more to eat'

I would not use a term like 'social-democratic degeneration', that is just a blanket dismissal, and the development of the SP is not homogenous. In some ways, the party now is more progressive than it was when it still was 'revolutionary' and Maoist! In my opinion the SP is one of the most useful places for Dutch socialists to be active in. But to be able to make a assesment of what the growth of the SP means, it needs to be clear what kind of party it is. It is fundamentally different from parties that contest capitalism, it has no anti-capitalist program or self-conception as anti-capitalist, it is an anti-neoliberal party with a strongly parlementarian orientation. The SP has formed municipal governments with right-wing parties, sometimes taking part in implementing cuts and it tries to present itself as a party that is able to form coalitions with the right as well. I don't agree with Van Wouden's characterization of the SP but it is true that from its latest election program the party dropped the demands that the Netherlands should become a republic and leave NATO. Saying it 'openly propagates racist views' is a gross mischaraterization, although the party has not been free from Dutch nationalism and it has never been strongly anti-racist (to simplify things a bit, the SP sees racism as the result of bad social-economic conditions and something that can best be fought by improving people's living conditions insteas of organizing specific anti-racist struggles. It has always opposed the formation of specific comitees of migrants in the party for example.)

There is a certain overlap of voters between the SP and Geert Wilders' far-right, how much is difficult to say, some polls put the number at around 10 per cent. A part of the support for Wilders comes from people who are visceral islamophobes and another part from people who are first of all fed up with the political system and are attracted its populist rethoric. Luckily, a part of this second category is shifting now to the SP.

>Certainly, in itself there's nothing wrong in proposing an alliance with the >PvdA (Labour Party) and Green Left.

Certainly not. But again, to make a assesment of such an alliance and where it is now, and most of all, where it can go, one needs to see it for what it is, that is why I pointed out the weaknesses in it. I agree that 'everything depends on the political content of the coalition', that is why it is important to make clear the political content is very vague, very general and is on the ground very often contradicted by the practice of the other parties.

Thu, 02/23/2012 - 07:17 — Nathan Rao (not verified)

Comments on France

Dick Nichols wrote:

"The decline of the NPA is not only due to its inability to resolve its debate around the Islamic veil, an issue that left fraternal observers to its February congress shaking their heads. It was most importantly due to a failure to relate to the emergence of the Parti de Gauche (Left Party) and Front de Gauche (Left Front, FdG, composed of the PdG, PCF and a split from the NPA)."The emergence of the Front de Gauche was triggered by the split from the SP of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, representing those forces in that party that had joined the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and other forces in the successful No campaign in the referendum over the European constitution, in 2005.

"The NPA made it a bottom-line condition that the Front de Gauche rule out any participation in government with the SP, from the fear that this would lead a repetition of the SP-PCF government of the early 1980s, whose Common Program president Mitterand quickly jettisoned, but in which the PCF remained in as a minority with ministers running the usual marginal portfolios."

While I think it was handled badly, I think you blow the matter of the Islamic veil way out of

proportion in terms of the effects it had on the NPA. Opinions on the matter cut across all the different currents in the NPA. And it's worth noting that the Front de Gauche (and former LCRers from the small Gauche Unitaire current who left the NPA at its founding convention to join the Front de Gauche) has a much harder "secular" line on such questions than anyone in the NPA. (Mélenchon himself is even an active member of the Freemasons, known for their hardline approach to anything to do with religion and the Republic.) It seems odd that you would criticize the entire NPA so harshly while letting the Front de Gauche off the hook.

It's also wrong to think misgivings about the SP and its allies in the PCF are solely connected to the governments of the early 1980s (responsible for France's neoliberal turn at the time). You neglect to mention that the SP governed the country in alliance with the PCF and the Greens much more recently, from 1997-2002, and that this government outdid itself with privatizations, deregulation, participation in the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia, and betrayal of undocumented workers and migrants. What's more, the SP and PCF govern together in numerous regions and municipalities across the country and have implemented neoliberal measures in these administrations.

As I have pointed out in other online discussions (for example, see my comments on the piece at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3490>), I think the NPA could have handled its approach to the Front de Gauche differently, but it's important to remember the context back in 2009-2010; and it's wrong to think a different approach to the Front de Gauche and electoral politics generally would have solved the important "structural" problems that the anti-capitalist Left will face for some time to come. I'm not as familiar with the other countries covered in this impressive survey piece, but in general I think it's mistaken to believe that the "correct tactic" in relation to "left-social democratic" (or whatever label one chooses) forces will somehow solve all or most of the revolutionary (or "anti-capitalist") Left's problems in the coming period. And such tactics could just as easily lead us into all sorts of dead ends and disappointments, not to mention cut us off precisely from the sorts of encouraging new mass movements we have seen along the lines of the Indignados in Spain and Occupy in the USA and Canada (where I happen to be).

Fri, 03/02/2012 - 15:32 — normd

Second round of comment on comments on Crisis, revolt in Europe

Posted on behalf of Dick Nichols:

Second round of comment on comments on "Crisis, revolt and the left in Europe"

My apologies again for the delay in replying to comrades' posts. However, political life has been explosively busy here in Spain, and has had to be covered for *Green Left Weekly*.

My apologies, too, for the length of this post—it's just that the issues need thorough working through.

Also, a reminder that these are my personal thoughts.

On the United Left Alliance (Ireland)

Besides its own website (at <http://www.unitedleftalliance.org/>), you can get a feeling for ULA discussions and activity at

<http://revolutionaryprogramme.wordpress.com/2012/02/22/report-on-ula-cork-branch-agm/> and <http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2012/01/24/talking-about-your-ula/#comment-113748>.

Also worth checking are the Irish SWP website (<http://www.swp.ie>) and Irish SP website (<http://www.socialistparty.net>.)

On comments by Alex de Jong

I have to say that Alex's comments mainly provoke more queries from me. Obviously, we in Australia need to become much more acquainted with the SP and the Dutch political situation, but here are the issues I think need clarifying

1. [SP party chairman Jan Marijnssen] sees the main form of struggle and its goal as a more controlled form of capitalism... This is often described as the so-called 'Rhineland model' instead of the 'Anglo-Saxon' model of capitalism.

Leaving aside the reality that the struggle towards socialism will pass through a phase where a left government backed by a mobilised people places increasing controls over capitalist institutions, where does the SP explicitly say that its goal is a "more controlled form of capitalism"? Does it anywhere invoke the "Rhineland model" as what it fights for?

On the English page of its web site the SP doesn't say its goal is "socialism". It chooses this formula: "In the final analysis the SP is a campaigning organisation capable of mobilising thousands - on occasion tens of thousands - of members and sympathisers to pursue its goals of equality, solidarity and human dignity. Campaigns express these principles in concrete ways which improve lives in the here-and-now, while the SP never takes its eyes off the prize of a better society and a better world."

Yet Rood, the SP youth organisation, describes its goal like this: "Rood wants to involve young people in establishing a socialist society in the Netherlands; a society in which we interact with each other in a way that's worthy of a human being, on an equal basis and with understanding."

Is this difference of formulation the "oldies" allowing the young people to "talk left", a real difference, or just two ways of talking about the same (socialist) goal?

Certainly, when a party reaches the point that the SP has in Holland, where alarm bells must be going off in all the centres of power and campaigns of provocation and scare-mongering against the SP in preparation, the most concrete, broadly understandable and defensive formulations are surely the smartest.

In the interview Alex quotes Marijnssen's phrase "social democrats with a little bit extra": the question is the real concrete content of that "little bit extra"—and also of "social democrat". Like Oscar Lafontaine, for example?

Even while disagreeing strongly on this or that assessment we can surely understand why Marijnssen says: "the word [socialism] is tarnished. The Soviet-Union, Eastern Europe, Cuba, it totally failed there. We are always asked critical questions about that and rightly so."

Given the often very negative experiences of social formations that have called themselves "socialist", it's a big, unavoidable, challenge for socialists to communicate as well as they can manage—to their specific national audience with its sentiments and prejudices—what they actually stand for.

Their answer will be molded by national popular traditions, but in general there are two angles of attack. There's either Marijnssen's gambit of wanting to drop the word as impossibly soiled—but I note in passing that he doesn't say he's no longer a socialist—or that of making a clear statement of what your socialist organisation is fighting for, as in the new Die Linke program or our Australian Socialist Alliance summary (at <http://www.socialist-alliance.org/page.php?page=286>):

However, how you answer that question for an organisation of 600-800 members which is as yet no more than an irritating mosquito in the ear of the Australian ruling class, and how you answer it for the Dutch SP, which is being asked to explain what it would do in government, are different kettles

of fish.

They correspond to very different stages in the class struggle and in building an organisation capable of winning the specific fights it faces.

A related debate has emerged in the United Left Alliance in Ireland, with the Irish Socialist Workers Party opposed to giving the organisation an explicitly socialist objective on the grounds that this could exclude those who don't identify as socialist but agree with the ULA platform, and the Irish Socialist Party, which stresses winning people to a socialist understanding of capitalist crisis and a socialist identity.

2. [The SP] is fundamentally different from parties that contest capitalism, it has no anti-capitalist program or self-conception as anti-capitalist, it is an anti-neoliberal party...

I think we have to handle the distinction between an "anti-neoliberal" and "anti-capitalist" party with very great care. The reason is that it's not easy to imagine—in today's crisis-ridden capitalism crushed with excess capacity, very low levels of private investment and massive accumulated debt—how consistent "anti-neoliberal" policy and action can avoid being anti-capitalist.

Take today's concrete challenges in southern Europe. An "anti-neoliberal" policy worthy of the name must as an indispensable minimum:

- a. Carry out a thorough public debt audit , and so prepare the way for a debt restructuring at the expense of capital, domestic and foreign;
- b. Implement a sustained fiscal stimulus based centred on increased infrastructure spending (especially in areas of ecological transformation like renewable energy and sustainable agriculture);
- c. Fund that with increased taxation of the rich and capital, closure of tax havens, Tobin tax etc;
- d. Reregulate the banking sector and create a public bank;
- e. Reverse the dismantling of public services, especially in health and education.

Any anti-neoliberal government that seriously pursued those goals would run slap bang against threats of capital flight, industry closure, real and manufactured hysteria about loss of "our" competitiveness, political mobilisation by the right, intense media hysteria and all the other defensive reactions of a threatened capitalist establishment.

In that case an anti-neoliberal government would have no choice but to mobilise its own base as a counter, in a perspective of intensifying political and social struggle. To win such a struggle a progressive government would have to make ever more inroads into the power and prerogatives of the ruling elite.

The struggle just might reach some resolution in some new edition of "Rhineland capitalism" (with a decent welfare system funded , say, by a Tobin tax and increased royalties on gas, for example, —i.e. "the Norwegian option"), but that is ruled out for many European economies, especially those in southern Europe.

In any case, even that result would be a big improvement—and felt to be so—by the mass of people who have been the victims of 20 years or more of neoliberalism.

3. [T]o be able to make an assessment of what the growth of the SP means, it needs to be clear what kind of party it is.

Maybe it's not so important to call oneself an "anti-capitalist party" with an "anti-capitalist program". Maybe, indeed, if we are trying to relate to masses of people and their basic values—and this is where the SP is now at—we need to say that we are fighting for consistent, (i.e, economic, social and political) democracy, and that we are trying to defend and extend democratic principles in the face of the dictatorship of the markets, those who want to drag us into wars without giving us a say etc etc

This is the approach of the last Dutch parliamentary budget speech session by SP leader Emile Roemers (see http://international.sp.nl/bericht/70525/110921-sp_leader_this_crisis_is_no_natural_disaster_but_can_be_blamed_on_political_failures.html.)

To decide with reasonable confidence "what kind of party [the SP] is" the key questions are surely (a) its policy positions, especially on the issues most important to the mass of people, (b) its action in the class and social struggle, (c) its actual record in any administration in which it has been involved, and (d) the possibility of changing the party through inner-party democracy.

On the monarchy and NATO: maybe these are such entrenched institutions in Dutch politics and society that the best approach is to leave fights around them to later, when you have some victories on other, more urgent, fronts. Then you could make them the subject of referenda at a time that gives you the best chance of getting people to think about them in a more favourable environment.

I don't know if that is the SP position, but it would make sense.

4. ...with a strongly parliamentary orientation.

Does this mean that the SP is parliamentarist, that it sacrifices mass work to vote-winning, or that it takes electoral and parliamentary work seriously, which any left party worth its salt must do?

5. The SP has formed municipal governments with right-wing parties, sometimes taking part in implementing cuts and it tries to present itself as a party that is able to form coalitions with the right as well.

Obviously, one would need to know about this experience in detail, and if such coalitions have provoked debate and re-evaluation in the SP, as they have in Die Linke, in the light of the experience of the rise of the Pirate Party in Berlin.

6. In my opinion the SP is one of the most useful places for Dutch socialists to be active in.

Given all the above, I wonder what the goal of "Dutch socialists" is in the SP and how they see their special role in a way that's different from the work of the mass of the SP membership.

Surely what you are saying, Alex, is that the, even on the most pessimistic prognosis, the SP is not predetermined to pro-capitalist degeneration. Is the main role of "Dutch socialists" then to bring the SP into the camp of the Bloco de Esquerda and Red-Green Alliances as an organisation with "an anti-capitalist program" and a "self-conception as anti-capitalist"?

As I say, more questions, but surely for us the touchstone is what the left party concretely proposes, and how it acts, not its vocabulary. As I see it the "vocab" has to be subordinate to the goal—of helping organise struggle and remove barriers—both real and in people's heads—to struggle, and to win the battle for hearts and minds with whatever language best works.

I am visiting Holland in mid-March, and hope to pursue these questions further with you.

On comments by Nathan Rao

1. It seems odd that you would criticise the entire NPA so harshly while letting the Front de Gauche off the hook.

My purpose wasn't to score the policy of the various left parties in France on the question of the Islamic veil, although it wouldn't at all surprise me to find the Front de Gauche with an evasive policy here—it would be another reflection of the general misapplication of the principle of *laïcité* that you find in France.

The point, probably not made clearly enough, was about how the issue was allowed to dominate the February NPA conference when it was clear that there could be no clear and authoritative resolution with the conference divided 50/50 and with counting of the vote contested.

After hours of acrimony, the obvious approach—to step back and allow things to cool down and have a special discussion—was finally taken. At the time it seemed to me that the debate wasted a lot of time and did a lot of damage. If it didn't do as much damage as it seemed it might, that's good, but hardly a consolation, given the present state of the NPA.

2. It's also wrong to think misgivings about the SP and its allies in the PCF are solely connected to the governments of the early 1980s (responsible for France's neoliberal turn at the time). You neglect to mention that the SP governed the country in alliance with the PCF and the Greens much more recently, from 1997-2002, and that this government outdid itself with privatisations, deregulation, participation in the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia, and betrayal of undocumented workers and migrants. What's more, the SP and PCF govern together in numerous regions and municipalities across the country and have implemented neoliberal measures in these administrations.

I take your point that these experiences weigh more with NPA comrades, but that doesn't address my essential point: should the "anti-capitalist left" (basically, people with a Trotskyist lineage) demand that as basis of participation in alliance with other left forces these rule out an alliance with the social democracy. Yes or no?

In your comment on Jason Stanley's article on the NPA on the US Solidarity web site (see <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3490>) you say:

"[T]he NPA could have negotiated an agreement for the EU elections in March 2009 on relatively favourable terms, given the context (semi-insurrectionary general strike in Guadeloupe and a recent powerful protest movement in France proper; massive popularity of Olivier Besancenot and tremendous momentum for the newly founded NPA) and that no governmental responsibilities would have flowed from getting members in the EU parliament. The minority Gauche Anticapitaliste current ("Anti-Capitalist Left") — formally founded at a conference last November — has identified this as a major tactical error."

Do you agree with that assessment? On the face of it, it looks like the NPA leadership (perhaps intoxicated with thought that were finally going to "do" the PCF?) made a serious sectarian error. It could only have hardened the attitude of PCF and the Parti de Gauche towards the NPA, and may well have encouraged Mélenchon in his declaration of presidential candidacy. (BTW, the FdG also got more votes than the NPA.)

You don't engage with this question of basic conditions for an alliance with the FdG, which seems to me to be the essential issue.

3. I think it's mistaken to believe that the "correct tactic" in relation to "left-social democratic" (or whatever label one chooses) forces will somehow solve all or most of the revolutionary (or "anti-

capitalist”) Left’s problems in the coming period.

The central problem is not the problems of the self-defined “anti-capitalist” or “revolutionary” left (who belongs, by the way?), but that of the morale and capacity to struggle of the working people and the broader popular masses.

The test of tests—surely!—of tactical “correctness” is whether the approach adopted advances the degree of organisation, the morale and the willingness to struggle of people around the issues that are important to them.

In this context, the “anti-capitalist left” had better have some very good reasons for not seeking left unity around the issues on which it agrees with...who? The “institutional left”? “Left social democrats”? “Stalinists”? “Eurocommunists”.

Maybe we had best say “anyone who now wants to fight neoliberalism”.

Neither the past record of potential partners, theoretical differences (Permanent Revolution?), different assessments of actually and previously existing “socialisms”, differences on issues that are not “core” (i.e., essential to making the owners of capital pay for their crisis), are good enough.

Yes “correct tactics” are not a panacea, will not solve all or most of the revolutionary (or “anti-capitalist”) Left’s problems in the coming period, but incorrect—nearly ways sectarian—tactics will make “solution” of those problems impossible.

As far as Europe goes, it seems clear that the challenge for revolutionaries with a Trotskyist background is to get involved in building united mass left formations, to stop dreaming that they can outflank the other forces on the left “when the upsurge comes” (will it, when the mass of people see no alternative government on the horizon?), and to measure the results not by how much they grow as a current, but by the growth, degree of organisation, political relevance and generational renewal of the movement as a whole.

This is not an “interesting” theoretical question. We are entering in southern Europe a period of decisive clashes where neoliberal capitalist barbarism is winning, and where our side is, as yet, too weak and disorganised to turn it back.

Of course, unity in broader formations doesn’t mean organisational liquidation, even less that the development of conscious revolutionary and Marxist cadre isn’t essential, nor that these don’t, in certain circumstances, need to maintain separate organization within a broader current.

It just means active, alert and continuing commitment to as high a level of unity as possible around the issues that are important to our class. It surely doesn’t need stressing that division is demoralising when morale is the critical factor.

What degree of separate organisation self-identified revolutionaries should have within broader formations basically depends on the judgment about how much can and can’t be done within the framework of the common alliance.

That is a large—and very nationally specific—issue. I would just note from our experience in Australia that, once the Rubicon of unity around an initial selection of questions has been crossed, it becomes surprising what other areas loom into view as possible candidates for collaboration. The continuation of that process can sooner or later even put the need for a separate organisation of revolutionaries into doubt.

In Europe, to take the Fourth International organisations, there’s a wide range of postures, from

Luxemburg, where the FI section has ceased to exist and former FI comrades work within the framework of Die Linke (along with CPers and others), through Portugal and Denmark, where the FI sections maintain a separate but reduced existence within the Bloco de Esquerda and Enhedlisten, to Germany, where one FI affiliated group, the Revolutionary Socialist League, describes the Die Linke program as “a better version of social democracy” (see http://www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1004593).

4. And such tactics could just as easily lead us into all sorts of dead ends and disappointments, not to mention cut us off precisely from the sorts of encouraging new mass movements we have seen along the lines of the Indignados in Spain and Occupy in the USA and Canada (where I happen to be).

How, exactly? As pointed out in the talk the 15M (indignado) movement drove the United Left (IU) to redo its election program and the way it develops such a program. A similar process is under way in the Catalan affiliate of IU, the United and Alternative Left (EUiA), in the run-up to its next congress.

In the struggles against health and education cuts and housing evictions, 15M activists work side by side (not always agreeing, of course) with older left activists, more often than not coming from “old” left parties or social organisations set up them (like the Federation of Neighbourhood Associations here).

Frankly, a danger we face in Spain—especially Barcelona— is of ultraleft tantrum-throwing and minority violence by some people who, like everyone, claim to be in 15M. We should definitely “cut ourselves off” from their nonsense, which the right uses to try to discredit the enormously valuable mass movements against austerity that are developing, such as among secondary and university students.

We also had an example of a broader problem of potential ultraleftism in 15M in Madrid at the February 19 mass protests against the government’s draconian new labour law. The Madrid 15M assembly decided to have a “critical bloc” in the march, on the basis of the sad and sorry record (and it is!) of the two main trade union confederations (General Union of Workers (UGT) and Workers Commission (CC.OO.).

I ask myself how well that went down with the militant delegates who still look, often with scepticism, to their traditional leaders of these organisations for the way forward.

Yes, the trade union bureaucrats disappoint, sell out over and over and over again, talk left and act right etc etc, but the only approach that can change that is to be able to put the pressure on them in front of the ranks. For that to happen the ranks (or at least some section of them) have to be prepared to listen to you. Is 15M seriously concerned to make itself, and be seen by workers as, a serious champion of labor, or will its tactics lead to self-isolation?

15M , in all its variety, is going through a complicated period of action against austerity and discussion about political organisation. The issue is not to avoid “cutting ourselves off” from 15M, but to be in it, helping it, and other movements now arising against austerity, to meet the real challenges they face.

Taking left political unity seriously is an indispensable part of that work.

Sat, 03/03/2012 - 02:17 — Alex de Jong (not verified)

again on the SP

Obviously, we in Australia need to become much more acquainted with the SP and the Dutch

political situation.

Yes, that is obvious.

Does it anywhere invoke the “Rhineland model” as what it fights for?

Yes, in statements of leading members, in proposals and in its publications. One example is their brochure that was published after the beginning of the ‘credit crisis’, called ‘Lessons from the creditcrisis’ (which defines the Rhineland model as a system in which ‘the interests of capital are no longer always the guiding principle’) and calls for a ‘Renaissance’ of this goal.

On the English page of its web site the SP doesn’t say its goal is “socialism”. It chooses this formula: “In the final analysis the SP is a campaigning organisation capable of mobilising thousands – on occasion tens of thousands – of members and sympathisers to pursue its goals of equality, solidarity and human dignity. Campaigns express these principles in concrete ways which improve lives in the here-and-now, while the SP never takes its eyes off the prize of a better society and a better world.”

Yet Rood, the SP youth organisation, describes its goal like this: “Rood wants to involve young people in establishing a socialist society in the Netherlands; a society in which we interact with each other in a way that’s worthy of a human being, on an equal basis and with understanding.”

Is this difference of formulation the “oldies” allowing the young people to “talk left”, a real difference, or just two ways of talking about the same (socialist) goal?

It is neither. Rood as an organisation is not more ‘left’ than the SP and doesn’t take positions as Rood that differ from the party. When it was founded, when the SP was already well established, Rood was organized as ‘youth inside the SP’, and explicitly not as an autonomous organisation that, for example, could take a stand that differs from the party. When the SP or Rood talk about socialism, they use the same definition of it. For the SP the core of socialism is ‘human dignity, equality between humans and solidarity between humans’. Very nice, but a bit vague.

Certainly, when a party reaches the point that the SP has in Holland, where alarm bells must be going off in all the centres of power and campaigns of provocation and scare-mongering against the SP in preparation, the most concrete, broadly understandable and defensive formulations are surely the smartest.

This is an example of Dick Nichol’s irritating way of discussing. First, he assumes to know something about a country and a political situation about which he clearly doesn’t know much at all (‘alarm bells must be going off in all the centres of power and campaigns of provocation and scare-mongering against the SP in preparation’). He then posits a banality like ‘the most concrete, broadly understandable and defensive formulations are surely the smartest’ as if anybody (me?) would object to this or has implied to disagree with it. There is a nasty habit in the far left to discuss not what the other person is saying, but what this person is supposed to have ‘really meant’.

I hope we can move beyond that and I’ll try and explain the Netherlands and the SP, which people who know something about it agree is a very peculiar Dutch phenomenon.

About the alarmbells: as always when the SP is doing well in polls, some journals, politicians and publicists start writing pieces and issuing statements about what a horribly ‘unrealistic’ party it is. The nastier ones bring up the SP’s maoist past and try to imply it hasn’t changed much, but talk like this finds little attention because the SP has, it is clear for everybody except the most rabid right-winger to see, changed. To call this ‘alarmbells’ is exaggerated, alarmbells are not called for in the ‘centres of power’, simply because the only way the SP could form a government would be in a coalition with the traditional parties of the centre of powers and it doesn’t have the strength to

impose its own demands on them (because of the absence of social movements and the SP's relatively weak roots in civil society, the lack of a left-wing current in society, a weak and largely inactive trade-union movement in which it has little weight et cetera). People in the Dutch centres of power sleep very comfortably...

There's either Marijnssen's gambit of wanting to drop the word as impossibly soiled —but I note in passing that he doesn't say he's no longer a socialist.

Marijnssen states clearly he doesn't call himself a socialist, maybe in English this could mean that he still is a socialist but just doesn't want to admit it, but in Dutch to say 'I don't call myself a socialist' means 'I'm not a socialist'. (btw, people who are familiar with Marijnssen's abrasive and confrontational style would find it hard to believe he would want to hide something like his own self-conception). But if Nichols wants to use a tortured interpretation of Marijnssen words to think he is 'still a socialist' he is free to do it.

In the interview Alex quotes Marijnssen's phrase "social democrats with a little bit extra": the question is the real concrete content of that "little bit extra"—and also of "social democrat". Like Oscar Lafontaine, for example?

That is possible, the SP considers Die Linke, but not for example the Danish RGA, a kindred party (which is one of the reasons I objected to the way Nichols original piece lumps them together). In the Dutch context and for most people familiar with the history and evolution of the SP the 'little bit extra' refers to the social-democracy of the seventies, as against the 'social-democracy' of social-liberal parties today. SP-leaders sometimes refer to the Dutch Labour Party of the seventies as their example.

2. [The SP] is fundamentally different from parties that contest capitalism, it has no anti-capitalist program or self-conception as anti-capitalist, it is an anti-neoliberal party...

I think we have to handle the distinction between an "anti-neoliberal" and "anti-capitalist" party with very great care. The reason is that it's not easy to imagine—in today's crisis-ridden capitalism crushed with excess capacity, very low levels of private investment and massive accumulated debt—how consistent "anti-neoliberal" policy and action can avoid being anti-capitalist.

I agree - which is why I'm sceptical about how long an anti-neoliberal party like the SP can remain anti-neoliberal once it is in government.

Take today's concrete challenges in southern Europe. An "anti-neoliberal" policy worthy of the name must as an indispensable minimum:

- a. Carry out a thorough public debt audit , and so prepare the way for a debt restructuring at the expense of capital, domestic and foreign;
- b. Implement a sustained fiscal stimulus based centred on increased infrastructure spending (especially in areas of ecological transformation like renewable energy and sustainable agriculture);
- c. Fund that with increased taxation of the rich and capital, closure of tax havens, Tobin tax etc;
- d. Reregulate the banking sector and create a public bank;
- e. Reverse the dismantling of public services, especially in health and education.

D and E are not on the SP's programme (the SP wants to stop further privatisations, not reverse them) and regulating the banks and the creation of a public bank are rejected by the SP.

Any anti-neoliberal government that seriously pursued those goals would run slap bang against threats of capital flight, industry closure, real and manufactured hysteria about loss of “our” competitiveness, political mobilisation by the right, intense media hysteria and all the other defensive reactions of a threatened capitalist establishment.

In that case an anti-neoliberal government would have no choice but to mobilise its own base as a counter, in a perspective of intensifying political and social struggle. To win such a struggle a progressive government would have to make ever more inroads into the power and prerogatives of the ruling elite.

That is not true – such a government can make a different choice: capitulate. it can also refuse to mobilize its base and be defeated right away. Within the current institutional framework, even the kind of Rhineland capitalism Nichols’ describe is out of the question for even a wealth north-European country like the Netherlands because of European Union agreements.

3. [T]o be able to make an assessment of what the growth of the SP means, it needs to be clear what kind of party it is.

Maybe it’s not so important to call oneself an “anti-capitalist party” with an “anti-capitalist program”. Maybe, indeed, if we are trying to relate to masses of people and their basic values —and this is where the SP is now at—we need to say that we are fighting for consistent, (i.e, economic, social and political) democracy, and that we are trying to defend and extend democratic principles in the face of the dictatorship of the markets, those who want to drag us into wars without giving us a say etc etc

This is the approach of the last Dutch parliamentary budget speech session by SP leader Emile Roemers (see http://international.sp.nl/bericht/70525/110921-sp_leader_this_crisis_is...)

This is muddled. I’m not talking what words a party uses but about what kind of party it is, in what framework it thinks, what its goals and proposals are. The ‘basic values’ you describe are the kind of talk that is shared from the European far-left to the Greens, good election and campaign talk but not an analysis of the political situation or a strategy.

4. ...with a strongly parliamentary orientation.

Does this mean that the SP is parliamentarist, that it sacrifices mass work to vote-winning, or that it takes electoral and parliamentary work seriously, which any left party worth its salt must do?

Bluntly: it is the first. The SP’s mass work is primarily there to support parliamentary work, any kind of mass work that offers no/too little parliamentary gains is neglected or not done at all (like anti-racist work). Larger mass campaigns have a heavily propagandist orientation, not reaching out to other left forces and centred around elections and parliamentary proposals.

5. The SP has formed municipal governments with right-wing parties, sometimes taking part in implementing cuts and it tries to present itself as a party that is able to form coalitions with the right as well.

Obviously, one would need to know about this experience in detail, and if such coalitions have provoked debate and re-evaluation in the SP, as they have in Die Linke, in the light of the experience of the rise of the Pirate Party in Berlin.

There is little debate, organized or not, in the SP. Some of the experiences like in the university-city Leiden, where it formed a coalition with the right-wing and christian-democrats, are cause for

internal debate of course. But sadly as of yet we don't see a differentiation of currents or groups in the SP or a re-evaluation of the SP's leadership approach of presenting itself as willing to make coalitions with any other party, without preconditions. This lack is of course connected to the absence of social struggles and the low level of political consciousness in general.

6. In my opinion the SP is one of the most useful places for Dutch socialists to be active in.

Given all the above, I wonder what the goal of "Dutch socialists" is in the SP and how they see their special role in a way that's different from the work of the mass of the SP membership. Surely what you are saying, Alex, is that the, even on the most pessimistic prognosis, the SP is not predetermined to pro-capitalist degeneration. Is the main role of "Dutch socialists" then to bring the SP into the camp of the Bloco de Esquerda and Red-Green Alliances as an organisation with "an anti-capitalist program" and a "self-conception as anti-capitalist"?

No, because that would be impossible. The goal is to be in contact with those people who struggle (the vast majority of whom go to the SP) and to contribute, however modest, to whatever social struggles take place. And to contribute to further crystalization of left-wing views in the party.

This isn't about the vocabulary, but concretely about what a party proposes to do and on which concepts it bases its strategy. When a party is strongly oriented towards parliament, and at the same time there is a lack of movements in which it could project its views and proposals, statements of party-leaders take on an extra meaning.

According to Nichols minimum definition, the SP's proposals are not anti-neoliberal, I disagree. But I agree that in the current context any party that would try to implement an anti-neoliberal policy would need to mobilize its base to resist right-wing attacks. The creation of such a base and the building of a public opinion that would support such a mobilisation have to start before entering government.

I am visiting Holland in mid-March, and hope to pursue these questions further with you.

you're welcome, bring a warm jacket, the Netherlands can be cold that time of year.

Tue, 03/06/2012 - 12:01 — Nathan Rao (not verified)

Some general comments this time

Thanks to Dick Nichols for taking the time to respond at length to comments on this web page.

To begin with, let me say that I have to agree with Alex de Jong when he says that Nichols has an "irritating way of discussing". Nichols has a hectoring tone (demanding "yes or no" answers to complicated questions) and brushes away (as if they were mere details) important features of the situation in France and other countries that honest and experienced socialists are trying to wrestle with. This method does a disservice to the important matters of anti-capitalist strategy that lie at the heart of the original presentation and the exchange that it has prompted on this website.

With this in mind, rather than responding point by point to the comments Nichols makes about France (or providing "yes or no" answers to the questions he raises), I will limit myself to a few broad observations.

Nichols seems to want to make this a debate among people and forces "with a Trotskyist lineage" or "revolutionaries with a Trotskyist background". He sounds like a schoolmaster given lessons to a classroom filled with "Trotskyists", telling them that they've got it all wrong and, really, they should

just smarten up and build “united mass left formations”, which concretely means entering (or making a priority orientation towards) bigger organizations (the Spanish IU, Dutch SP, French FdG, German DL, etc) about which Nichols has particularly favourable (and, one might say, starry-eyed) opinions.

There are two problems with this approach:

1. With respect to the bigger organizations he wants “revolutionaries with a Trotskyist background” to join (or at the very least adopt a priority orientation towards), I would say that Nichols seriously underestimates the subordination of these parties to Social Democracy and, in turn, the historic and fundamental transformation — after a quarter century of neoliberal policies and their direct involvement in these policies — of the character of the parties of Social Democracy themselves. Nichols lists the kinds of measures the “united mass left formations” would take in power (all of which I would heartily endorse), but, leaving aside whether the parties in question would be both willing and able to implement such a program, I think a sober assessment would reveal that none of the parties Nichols describes can hope to come to power on their own, or even as the dog waving the tail of Social Democracy. Nichols appears to resolve this problem by speaking of the “revolutionary” situation (or potentially so) and period of “decisive clashes” we are living through or approaching (while simultaneously ridiculing the rest of us who are apparently waiting for the “upsurge”). Nichols doesn’t spell out the precise sequence of events nor the exact alignment of forces, but we have to assume that the scale and depth of working-class mobilization and political consciousness are and will be so great that they will either propel the IU/SP/FdG/DL/etc into power alone to implement “anti-neoliberal”/“anti-capitalist” measures or even force a governmental alliance of these forces with Social Democracy (with some of us stuck on as a rump somewhere) to do the same. I think such a perspective — even in the realm of pure propaganda, let alone concrete politics — is completely unrealistic and a serious misreading of the state of mass mobilization/consciousness/organization; it also misreads the exact character and trajectory of the IU/SP/FdG/DL/etc, not to mention Social Democracy itself.

As a basis for developing anti-capitalist strategy and organization for the coming period, it’s a dead-end. This is unfortunate, because I do think the broader questions and tactical choices Nichols raises merit serious examination; and Nichols may be shooting himself in the foot by framing his tactical arguments with this overall assessment of the current period. For example, I fully agree with the idea that socialists have to take the matter of party and “institutional” politics seriously. Beyond the importance of engaging seriously, individually and collectively, with honest activists and voters who support the formations Nichols mentions, and who see the importance of electoral and institutional politics, if we are unable to provide at least a sketch of a credible medium-to-long-term plan leading to a government that implements anti-neoliberal/anti-capitalist measures, we will neither be able to build ourselves as a serious political force nor contribute to encouraging mobilization by workers and others around even local never mind broader political and societal questions. (I made similar arguments in a discussion on John Riddell’s blog on the “Workers Government” question: see <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/we-need-to-provide-a-credibl...>)

As for the tactical choices, I am sympathetic to the need to orient towards the forces Nichols mentions. But the approach Nichols takes is a sure-fire recipe for disappointment; for cutting ourselves off from forces whose mobilization and radicalization are taking place at several degrees of separation from, and in some cases against, the types of traditional Left organizations Nichols prioritizes; and even for outright liquidation of the existing small and fragile organizations of the anti-capitalist/revolutionary Left.

I would argue for an orientation to these organizations based on a far more sober assessment of what we could expect to achieve (either for our own groups or for fomenting broader mass

involvement in social and political struggles, two tasks which ideally go hand in hand). And I would indeed (to answer one of Nichols' hectoring "yes or no" questions) place the question of governmental union with Social Democracy front and centre. On the basis of past experience, it's very clear that past governmental alliances with Social Democracy have done precisely the opposite of what Nichols claims. They have demobilized, disorganized, divided and disoriented the "class" (to use as broad a term as possible), not to mention led to serious rollbacks of past gains. Given the response of Social Democracy to the crisis (ie. a further shift to the right and an embrace of the austerity agenda), there's every reason to believe the outcome of such a Social Democracy-led governmental alliance would be even worse than in the past.

The tactic I would apply would be to propose the creation of broad cross-country "coalitions of struggle and programmatic development" against the austerity (cuts/privatization/deregulation/etc) agenda, and prioritize the involvement of the forces Nichols mentions in these coalitions. In the electoral/institutional sphere, I would be against any type of governmental alliance with Social Democracy and in the probable absence of agreement around this for cross-country elections, I would look to see where common slates might be possible on a sub-national (local/regional elections) or supra-national (EU elections) level, based on common work with these forces locally and on the institutional rules of governmental "responsibility" on the level of the EU and elsewhere.

But, I repeat, this is one tactical variant within a broader strategic project of building new anti-capitalist organizations in complete independence from Social Democracy and the myriad organizations in its orbit. I don't place one tactical choice or another on the level of high strategy where Nichols seems to place them. My approach (quite similar, as it happens, to the one taken by the Gauche Anticapitaliste current within the NPA, with which I'm in general though not total agreement, seen from 6000 kilometres away here in Toronto) is one among others. I can fully imagine some anti-capitalists wanting to lean more in the direction of collaboration with the forces Nichols mentions, while others will want to steer much further away from them. That's something that hopefully a common organization of anti-capitalists would have to feel itself through, among all the other complicated things such an organization would have to work out.

Which leads me nicely into the second problem I see with Nichols' approach.

2. I know nothing about Dick Nichols beyond what I have read on this web page. But I get the strong feeling he is waging some kind of rear-guard battle with other "Trotskyists" out there that he has encountered over the years, and may even be wrestling with his own "Trotskyist" demons. I have a very "Trotskyist" background myself and approach these debates with that baggage and understanding of the world. (Heck, I even translated a book on the history and strategic debates of "Trotskyism": see <http://www.iire.org/en/component/content/article/18-notebooks-for-study-...>)

One problem with this is that Nichols wants us to believe that "revolutionaries with a Trotskyist background" represent a small and nearly irrelevant force; while simultaneously investing tremendous time and energy in demonstrating how wrong most of these Trotskyists (and especially those from the dreaded FI) have been in the recent period and, one must assume, the big impact these wrong positions have had on the unfolding of working-class social and political struggles. Surely, you can't have it both ways.

In fact, I can only conclude that Nichols clearly understands the importance and difficulty of what the groups of the Fourth International have been trying to do in the present context. Not because the fate of the working classes and of socialism depend on the FI in any short or medium-term sense, as one could interpret his arguments above to mean. On that score, I can safely give a nod to the argument that the NPA, for one, is a very small organization in the face of the tasks that lie before it; and that working-class gains and setbacks in the present period don't depend very much at all on what the NPA says or does. However, in a longer-term sense I don't think it's far-fetched to say that

the survival and growth of a viable project for social, ecological and democratic transformation in France does depend on what happens to the NPA, or at least to the ideas and forces that lay behind its formation.

The other problem with this focus on “Trotskyists” is that a lot of this has nothing at all to do with “Trotskyism” or forces “with a Trotskyist lineage”. My sense is that Nichols would have preferred that the LCR remain a formation that could be pigeonholed as a rigidly delineated and highly disciplined “Trotskyist” cadre organization ready to make tactical zigzags at the drop of a hat. The problem (if it is indeed a problem) is that if ever it was, in practice it ceased to be such an organization quite a long time ago. It’s probably fair, though, to say that this remained the default understanding of a number of people (both on the outside and the inside) of what the LCR was or aspired to be until its self-dissolution in early 2009.

By dissolving itself, the former LCR made a genuine and I think bold and essential attempt to break out of the mould of the old strategic and organizational “paradigm” of the Trotskyist and even some of the non-Trotskyist far-Left. It’s questionable that the LCR could even be placed in the same category as most of the other (and usually smaller and less rooted and influential) “Trotskyist” groups Nichols may be thinking of. Certainly, as long ago as the early 1990s (in response to both the collapse of the Soviet bloc; but also in view of the specific difficulties the LCR was having in the context for the French Left at the time — dominated by the PS governments of the day, the PS’s clear neoliberal turn, the blows to the PCF’s industrial and urban strongholds and its growing subordination to the PS), the LCR declared the need for a “new party and a new program for the new period”. Trying to frame these debates as ones taking place among “Trotskyists” already didn’t make too much sense then; and 20 years later it makes even less sense if any.

That’s an important point, because even conceptually (let alone in terms of the concrete ability of “Trotskyists” to implement some kind of common line) it changes the starting point for the questions Nichols demands simple “yes or no” answers for.

I think we are at the beginning of a very long period of (re)building a viable and effective strategic and organizational project for those seeking a radical break from capitalism, where (as Nichols says) the past record (or absence of one) and real and imagined theoretical differences take a back seat to (or at least are framed by) questions regarding what this future break with capitalism would look like and what a new strategic/organizational project for getting there might be.

Nichols demands simple “yes or no” answers to what I consider to be complex tactical questions about what orientation to apply toward forces more or less in the orbit of Social Democracy. He complains about the time wasted on the “hijab” question in the NPA, but if there’s one thing that has unfortunately hobbled the NPA much more it has been this tendency to elevate tactical questions about electoral alliances with such forces to strategic and organizational ones (a problem exacerbated by the continuation of the often fractional internal life of the old LCR). Much more time and energy could and should have been spent on figuring out how an anti-capitalist (or “revolutionary” if you wish, but not in the sense of an organization focused on the question of the revolutionary seizure of power in the foreseeable future — which, one should recall, was the basic framework, at least in Western Europe and Latin America, for the far-Left groups on the 1960s and 1970s) organization might actually work in today’s decidedly un-revolutionary context (in Western Europe at least).

How do we balance the difficult and necessary ongoing work of developing the internal functioning of such an organization; tending to the wildly uneven levels of political knowledge and experience — never mind differences in socio-economic or even “ethnic” background — you will necessarily find among people interested in such a project; continuing to develop a project of social/economic/ecological emancipation built upon past advances and incorporating the radical

changes brought on by a quarter century of neoliberal transformation of the workplace, economy, etc etc; all the while building mass movements and participating in electoral and institutional politics?

I would like nothing more than to agree with Nichols when he appears to argue that all or most of these difficult “internal” and “external” tasks can be solved by adopting the “correct” approach to organizations on the left perimeter of Social Democracy. It would really simplify things for revolutionary socialists. But when you take a closer look at this approach, you realize that in fact it solves none of our problems and that it actually could undermine what precious and fragile advances (such as the creation of the NPA) we have made in this direction.

Anyway, I’ve gone on far longer than I planned to. I’d be quite happy to get back into the specifics of the French situation in the next round of comments, but wanted to make more general remarks this time around.

Thanks for providing a forum for this interesting and, I think, important debate.

Fri, 03/09/2012 - 22:37 — Chris Latham (not verified)

On the NPA

I’ve been meaning to comment on this thread for a while, but have not had a chance as I have been busy writing an article that deals with issues but over a longer time frame than either Dick’s report or Jason Stanley’s articles go into. While the most significant point of discussion is the question of the NPA’s orientation to the Left Front (FG), I also want to touch on the question of the “Veil” and its impact on the NPA as I think the question of the “veil” has been a factor that has undermined the ability of the NPA’s membership to be united in action.

Inside or outside the left front

I agree with Nathan that Dick’s contributions over simplify the question of what attitude the NPA should have taken towards the FG. While on one level the question of the NPA’s participation in the FG has been posed several times and the balances of forces and other social factors such as the state of the class struggle in France has changed over this time period. Which factors that needed to be considered over this time period.

I agree with Nathan regarding the NPA also being concerned regarding the participation of the PCF in the 1997-2002 PS government, and at the municipal level. It is also important to note that PS municipal government’s invoked the new essential services laws to end strikes by municipal workers during the 2010 campaign in defence of pensions. By May 2011 the PS had already dropped some of its promises to repeal the changes to the pension laws pushed through by the Fillon government.

The dispute over relationship to the FG at the NPA’s founding congress was on the question of whether to link up with the FG prior to any discussion with the Front regarding relationship with the PS (which was the position of approximately 15% of the delegates – with some 3.5% of the membership departing to form Gauche Unitaire). Or alternatively to enter into a discussion with the Front make a decision as to whether to join based on this. While I agree with Nathan’s is correct to point out that in the European elections the question of government was not posed, I think there were some other factors at play in the NPA majority’s thinking. First the LCR and subsequently had cohered a base of support over the period between the 2002 elections and 2009 based on independence of social liberal left – at the time of the decision the NPA was polling around 10%. Secondly there was probably a concern that once they entered the Front without agreement on independence it would be difficult to exit later on when government was posed – a point I will return

to later.

In assessing the European Election results I think there are a number of things to take into account. The NPA substantially improved on the performance of the LCR/LO ticket in 2004- almost doubling the vote - and was higher than Olivier Besancenot's percentage in the 2007 presidential elections. This compared favourably with the FG only improved on the PCF's vote by around 0.5%. However the NPA's result was not as high as they had hoped for and the NPA unlike the FG fell short of the threshold to elect MEPs. At the time Francois Sabato argued that the lower than expected result reflected the down swing in the mass movement against the austerity between the NPA's founding and the European elections, linked to this would have been the high rate of abstentionism amongst young voters where the NPA had a much higher level of support.

In the 2010 regional elections the NPA was able to negotiate electoral coalitions with the Left Party (PG). These were generally in areas where the PCF ran joint tickets with the PS rather than with the FG. These joint NPA/PG tickets performed as well or better than the FG tickets did.

The 2011 Congress debate occurred within the context of the NPA's electoral fortunes not being as strong as had been hoped, but also following a significant defeat of the anti-pensions movement. By the tail end of that movement, the more conservative union confederations, the PCF and the PS made it clear that the only way to save people's pensions was through parliament. The more radical unions were unable to get agreement in the Intersyndicale to continue mobilisations once the laws were passed - which isolated and ended the defiance of more militant sectors of the movement such as the oil workers. In this situation the debate was essentially between three positions regarding the best way forward to build the party - whether it lay with entry in the FG (a little over a quarter of the delegates); an attempt to continue to build a consistent anti-capitalist electoral pole (the largest minority with a little over 40% of delegates) and third position (again around a quarter of delegates) that argued for a greater orientation to the social movements. There was also a fourth tiny platform that argued to embed the party in the proletariat.

By the time the July conference occurred the situation had changed - the attempt to construct broader support around the NPA's candidate had been unsuccessful. The new balance of forces within the NPA a round three positions. A new narrow majority (50.4%) position that made it clear that their would be an NPA presidential campaign rather than continue at that point to regroup anti-capitalist forces around that position. A large minority (40% of delegates) advocating a greater attempt to engage with the FG that also argued that the majority was retreating from the NPA's original project and was articulating a sectarian position. Finally there was a small platform (5.8% of delegates) which argued that the NPA majority perspective was not revolutionary enough.

The larger minority grouping has now constituted itself as an organisation, Gauche anticapitaliste, that is functioning both inside and outside the NPA. GA is attempting to rally anticapitalist activists to save the NPA project and is pushing for the NPA to participate in the FG to engage with both PG and PCF members who oppose entering into a PS government.

The GA has called on the NPA to abandon their presidential campaign based on its low poll results and arguing the NPA is simply contesting with LO for 1-2% support in the elections. The GA argue that the NPA's campaign is becoming indistinguishable from that of LO. The GA has called for the NPA's March national leadership meeting to discuss and adopt the GA's perspective.

In response to the emergence of the GA, the NPA majority is attempting to accommodate the GA. It is looking to both pursuing its own election campaign in both Presidential and National Assembly elections, and at the same time saying that the GA can pursue the possibility of alliances with the FG for the National Assembly elections where agreement can be reached. As part of this the majority is exploring what resources can be made available to support any joint campaigns.

It's unclear where this discussion will go. It's also difficult to know exactly what the prospects are like inside the FG compared to an electoral campaign outside. It is however possible to make a couple of observations about the character of the positions. I think that there is a real danger that the NPA majority is developing a position that not only is a sell out by the FG leadership, and particularly the PCF, inevitable, but that the crisis experienced by the USFI sections inside both the PRC in Italy and the PT in Brazil is also inevitable. As a consequence they seem to be avoiding question of the possible gains that could be made by leading fight inside the FG for a principled position in the wake of the National Assembly elections. It's also difficult to get a read on exactly how the GA is relating FG and the extent they are turning engagement with the FG into a principle and thus making the NPA majority's concerns justified.

Finally on the question of the NPA's tactical orientation, I want to address what I see as fundamentally problematic with Dick's analysis, that is attempting to judge what is the question of what is correct orientation for the NPA to adopt based solely on the prospects on the electoral front. Particularly the extent to which the NPA or the left in general will hold up following 2007 elections. It may be the case that due to the shifting state of the social movements unlike 2007 the NPA is not going to the elections having had its presidential candidate play a key role in a successful national campaign (i.e. Olivier Besancenot's role in the "no" campaign on the European constitution). It may be possible that the NPA's capacity to effectively build support in the social movements may be better in the long term outside of the FG, but that's something you can't get a clear view of outside of direct intimate experience of the French situation. I think it is significant that NPA has been able to successfully build joint mobilisations with both the Solidaires and the FSU education union around solidarity with the Greek movement against austerity.

On the "veil"

While I agree with Nathan in pointing out that the PG has taken a pretty hardline stance on around the "veil", most of the French left have pretty awful positions based both on supposed advocacy of women's rights and defence of laïcité. I mean this so as not to excuse the problems with the NPA but to give context to those who are not aware. In response to Ilham Moussaid candidacy for the NPA, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, "You can't call yourself a feminist while showing off a sign of submission to the patriarchy." Others examples include:

- In the vote the National Assembly around the law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools, only 36 deputies voted against the law.
- In 2004, Arlette Laguiller the long term spokesperson of LO, marched alongside Nicole Guedj, a secretary of state in the justice ministry, in a march against the Hijab.
- In the vote to ban the Burqa, the PG's two senators voted in favour of the ban, with Agnes Marie La Barre, explaining in an article on the Party's website on September 16 that "nobody is fooled by the xenophobic context in which the law is passed. However our senators felt that the struggle for women's rights requires the passing of the law".

I think that the NPA have been affected by this issue more than other forces on the French. This effect was due to a number of reasons. It was the NPA that had the mass media controversy in response to having a "veiled candidate". It is also important to remember that the LCR had a history of attempting to engage with marginalised émigré communities many of whom come from Muslim backgrounds. This is reflected in the work of LCR/NPA militants such as Catherine Samary in

fighting against the law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols and working for the inclusion of women who wear the hijab into feminist mobilisations and the LCR's public defence and solidarity with youth who rioted across France following the deaths of two boys fleeing police on October 27.

This work meant that that the LCR and subsequently the NPA were able recruit and build networks in these communities. The debate in the NPA, which was sparked by Ilham's candidacy, undoubtedly damaged this work – I can't see how having a public debate about whether believers are welcome in the party could not damage this work irrespective that the outcome was that yes they can be members. In my opinion this component of the debate meant that it was not possible for the NPA to put having at least of the debate the 2011 Congress. Another major impact was that it divided the party, and while it's true that the divisions did not correspond to the divisions around the NPA's electoral and movement perspectives, this division impacted the ability to intervene around other issues. An example of this was the Law banning women from wearing the Burqa and Niqab in public, where the NPA only endorsed a mobilisation against the ban the night prior to the protest. Another important element of divisive character of the debate is that it raised questions of individuals' feminist credentials based on how they choose to express their religion, and implications this has for the rights of women to control their own bodies.

While only a small number of individuals who obviously left the NPA over the issue of Ilham's candidacy. This included Ilham and a group of militants around her, and a second group who left as they were angered by Ilham's candidacy some of whom, like Fabien Engelmann, joined National Front over the issue. It undoubtedly had a negative impact on the NPA's internal unity.

Finally I think that the situation that has confronted the NPA has been extremely complex, and has occurred within a political situation that has become more difficult for political action outside the electoral sphere – which is a major factor that differentiates the NPA from both the PCF and the PG. While I think we should be attempting to learn from the NPA experience I think it is problematic for us to suggest that there are simple answers to the challenges faced by the NPA.
