

France: New Anti-Capitalist Party congress wrestles with challenge of the Left Front

Friday 22 February 2013, by [NICHOLS Dick](#) (Date first published: 15 February 2013).

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February 15, 2013 - Links international Journal of Socialist Renewal — The four years since the founding of France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) have been a roller coaster rise and fall for the organisation, which was created in 2009 on the initiative of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), the former French section of the Trotskyist Fourth International.

The party's rapid early growth seemed to confirm the premise on which it was founded — tens of thousands of France's workers and young people wanted to get active against capitalism's crises and crimes, but were wary of existing left organisations and looking for a new sort of political home.

However, after the NPA membership peaked at just under 10,000 (the LCR membership had rarely exceeded 2500), it soon went into decline. By its second congress, held on February 1-3 in the working-class Paris suburb of St Denis, NPA membership was being put at between 2000 and 2500.

The NPA's 1.15% vote in 2012's presidential poll also saw its state electoral funding collapse compared to the 2002 and 2007 LCR presidential campaigns in which popular candidate Olivier Besancenot won more than 4%. LCR and NPA leader Alain Krivine told the February 1 *Libération*, "The state of our finances is pretty catastrophic."

To add to the pain, in mid-2012 around 600-800 former NPA members, organised in the Anti-Capitalist Left (GA) current, left the NPA and joined the Left Front (Front de Gauche, FdG) after their call for the NPA to enter that alliance was rejected at its July 2012 conference.

At that point GA became the third grouping sucked out of the NPA by the gravitational pull of the Left Front, which had begun in late 2008 as a coalition between the Left Party (Parti de Gauche, PG) and the Communist Party of France (PCF) for the 2009 European election. In the May 2012 presidential poll the Left Front's leading personality, former Socialist Party (SP) left tendency leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, won 11.1% (nearly 4 million votes) on a program of a "citizens' revolution" against neoliberal capitalism.

Diagnoses

The NPA pre-congress discussion and congress debate was haunted by these developments and by the spectre of the rising Left Front, now involving nine left organisations. What had gone wrong? The four party platforms (named W, X, Y and Z) seeking support from congress delegates put forward different diagnoses and treatments.

Platform Y, which won 31.9% support in the pre-congress vote in the NPA's branches, noted that "the NPA was formed on the assumption that there was nothing substantial between itself and the SP, and that as a result it could by itself embody the alternative to the social-liberalism. But at the very same time, the political landscape changed substantially with the appearance of the PG and the Left Front."

However, that didn't mean the NPA was doomed to crisis by the very appearance of a new rival. "The NPA should have had its centre of gravity in struggles ... but the opposite happened: under the political pressure of the Left Front the core concerns of the leadership and of our debates were focused on electoral-political alliances."

The result, according to platform Y, was that a false argument grew that social victories would not be possible in the absence of a credible political alternative to the social liberalism of President François Hollande and the Socialist Party government. Advocated by GA, this argument led to its desertion to the Left Front and "a renunciation of what should have been an essential aspect of our program but which we sometimes had a tendency to forget: there will be no electoral short cut to the liberation of the workers."

A second result was the neglect of "the priorities decided by the founding congress (workplaces, youth, working-class neighbourhoods). In general issues of party building have been totally neglected by successive national leaderships. Many comrades' feeling of alienation is largely due to this problem: below, concrete activist work done as best as can be managed; on high, 'leaders' discussing in a vacuum, orienting nothing and not helping the intervention."

In the opening congress session that covered the balance sheet of the NPA's last two years, the presenter for majority Platform X (which had won 51% support in the pre-congress branch vote) acknowledged that the departure of GA had been "a serious blow that has left our leadership weakened".

However, the underlying cause of the NPA's problems had been objective, the decline in the level of social struggle, and not everything, moreover, had been black: the party had pulled together for candidate Phillipe Poutou's presidential election campaign and it had reached its finance campaign target.

What was undeniable despite all difficulties was that the NPA needed to exist, because "the Left Front doesn't organise opposition to the government" and because of a number of Left Front positions, such as only opposing "stock-exchange sackings" (sackings done by companies still making profits and paying shareholder dividends), not sackings in general.

Its main component, the PCF, continued to support the French military intervention in Mali, collaborated with the SP in local and regional governments, and was wedded to nuclear energy.

Platforms X and Y were agreed on how to characterise the Left Front. Their joint text read: "We are seeing the emergence of a new anti-neoliberal reformist movement. This phenomenon, which has appeared in other countries in Europe, is criss-crossed with contradictions. The grassroots look for

an alternative to the government and to austerity, while the policy of the leadership is largely determined by positions held in the trade union apparatuses and by the thousands elected to positions in the institutions.”

Differences within the Left Front were described as ranging from “the leadership of the PCF which refuses to clearly take a stand in opposition to the government, passing through the PG and Mélenchon, who come out against the state budget but decline confrontation with the employers and government, through to minority currents who support the building of a Left Front-based social and political front against government policy.”

NPA ‘unborn’

Platform Z (9% support in the branch vote) described the Left Front still more harshly as a roadblock to struggle (“the leaders of the Left Front play the same role as their union alter egos”) and as a point of support to the SP government.

The Left Front hardly featured in the thinking of Platform W (8.2% branch support): for it the key problem was that the NPA had “still to be founded”. It had failed to live up to its initial appeal because its political culture continued to be dominated by the regime of permanent tendency and “professional leadership” inherited from the LCR.

Calling for end to the culture of “posing debates from on high”, where the platforms divide up the entire speaking time and decide speakers, Platform W said: “It is high time to really take seriously the heterogeneity of the activists who joined the NPA and their differing attitudes to activism, with the goal of equipping ourselves with the capacity to think out how to structure the pace of activism in such a way that everyone feels involved.”

Platform W added: “It is high time to really take seriously the willingness to ‘do politics differently’ of all those who responded to the [original] appeal of the NPA.”

At the opening of the congress Platform W proposed a change in the agenda to allow more workshops at the expense of plenary debate between the platforms, but lost.

All four platforms agreed on one thing — that the place of the NPA was outside the Left Front. However, the opposite diagnosis was still present at the congress in the form of greetings from GA (which continues to have some members in the NPA).

The GA greetings said that the Left Front’s “taking distance from the SP/Greens in power and affirmation of its opposition to all austerity policies have been confirmed at national and European levels. Moreover, we judge that this trend will strengthen further as social liberal policy is increasingly applied. In the context of the balance of forces of which we are aware and which you analyse in your texts, the regroupment of all forces pushing for independence from the SP is a necessity.”

The GA greetings added: “We are not unaware of the obstacles and differences within the Left Front, which is why we have also worked for the regroupment of the anti-capitalist and eco-socialist forces inside it. We consider that our inherited shared principles — of class struggle, anti-capitalism and the conviction that the solution cannot only be at the level of institutions — are preserved within the Left Front.”

As for the NPA’s own line, “unfortunately, it seems that you have not only ruled out that specific

option, but even the possibility of such a front in the future. It must be hoped that this doesn't mean a choice of systematic, long-term political isolation, comparable to that of [far left coalition] Antarsya in Greece, very distant from the needs of the day."

Treatments

Platforms X and Y drew different practical conclusions from their shared description of the Left Front.

Platform Y, prioritising a turn to building the NPA in the workplace and the social movements, envisaged an engagement "with the components parts of the Left Front, pointing to the contradictions in their politics". Anything else would "leave the impression that we could envisage building a 'political alternative' with the Left Front and that that would be the basis for again bringing hope to our social camp."

By contrast, Platform X said that "the urgent issue today is that of building a left opposition to the government that [also] fights the right and the extreme right who are trying to lead popular dissatisfaction astray all the better to stifle it. We address all organisations of the workers' movement who are not taking part in the government so as to be able to act together in this direction, posing the question of the political alternative needed to get out of the crisis, an anti-austerity government that cannot emerge from parliamentary agreements above and beyond power relations imposed through struggles."

Platform X did not rule out possible alliances with the Left Front, but instead outlined what an "anti-austerity government" would have to undertake, covering an "anti-capitalist tax system", expropriation of the banks in order to put credit issuance in public hands, "socialisation of the big industrial groups", a ban on all sackings, a citizen's debt audit with a view to refusing debt repayment, and an emergency plan to end France's nuclear energy dependence.

Platform Z called for the "openly revolutionary refounding" of the NPA, while Platform W advanced a three-point project of making the party "an inclusive space", allowing the networking of different struggles and "working out together of our sketch of a future world".

Decisions

The final sessions of the congress were closed to observers, but its results, including the assessments of the four platforms, have been published on the NPA website. According to this report, Platform X's perspective won with 55.9% support and a number of statute changes and organisational decisions were adopted that limit time in elected positions, provide for a national meeting of campaign committees and allow regional observers to attend national leadership meetings.

A resolution on increasing the NPA's feminist orientation and a plan for building the party in the next period, developed jointly by delegates from platforms W and X, were overwhelmingly adopted.

The platforms made the following assessment of the congress:

Platform W: "We hope it marks a halt to our internal crisis and the chance for a new start: the taking of ownership of the party by its whole membership and the chance to turn outwards."

Platform X: "The aspiration for convergence was broadly voiced but it ran up against factional attitudes and also against political misunderstandings and disagreements that will now have to be overcome in practice."

Platform Y: "The slight majority did not draw the lessons of the causes of the NPA's crisis. It readopted the policy of a permanent social and political front with the Left Front supported in its day by GA:"

Platform Z: "The outgoing leadership has won a slight majority on the basis of a text that prepares the conditions for a worsening of the crisis... The formulae that [Platform X] proposes opens the way to a 'left government' with the reformists and anti-neoliberals in the framework of the institutions of capitalism."

The issues thrown up at this NPA congress, which ended without an agreed communiqué, were never going to be settled by the congress itself. They regard the most basic question of the pathway to power for the social majority in the advanced capitalist countries, including the social mobilisations, forms of political organisation, policy of alliances and kind of government needed to drive the process forward.

The fact that delegates for different platforms drew on the example of the Greek radical left party Syriza to back contradictory positions was eloquent as to the issues that remain unresolved in the NPA.

Meanwhile, the Left Front has not been idle. On January 21 its coordinating committee unanimously adopted a plan to strengthen the front as a campaigning organisation, to be followed by January 23 rally in Metz to launch its 2013 "Alternative to Austerity" campaign.

The NPA's difficult wrestle with its orientation towards the Left Front seems bound to continue.

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3227>