

Activist pressure forces truce within Front de Gauche in France

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January 29, 2014 – *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal/Green Left Weekly* — To the an almost audible sigh of relief from its tens of thousands of activists, the two main forces in France's nine-party Left Front (Front de Gauche)—the Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF) and the Left Party (Parti de Gauche) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon—have called a halt to hostilities that were not only undermining its chances in France's March municipal elections but also those of the Party of the European Left (PGE) in the May 25 European poll.

Their dispute has been running since October 2013 [[1](#)], when the Paris membership of the PCF voted by narrow majority to continue their alliance with the social-democratic Socialist Party (PS) for the municipal elections in the Paris region. The PS, party of president François Hollande, governs nationally and its austerity policies have been feeding the growth of the racist and xenophobic National Front of Marine Le Pen.

PCF supporters of maintaining municipal alliances with the PS argue that the municipal councils they run have not been implementing austerity and that breaking these alliances would risk handing councils to the right or far right. PCF national secretary Pierre Laurent campaigned for this position for Paris.

The Left Party has been arguing that the these local alliances undermine the dynamic of creating a credible left opposition to the Socialist Party government: keeping them risks the Left Front being viewed by disillusioned people as just another bunch of politicians concerned about their perks—further boosting the “anti-system” credibility of the National Front.

The PCF left the decision to the vote of its local branches. As a result, in just under half of France's 408 towns with more than 20,000 population (including a major city like Marseille), the PCF will be participating in Left Front tickets. In some cases this decision overruled the opposition of outgoing councillors who wanted to stick with the PS.

In other centres (like Toulouse) PCF-PS tickets will be opposed by tickets made up of other Left Front affiliates, sometimes with the support of the Greens (EELV), the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and/or local activist groups.

This situation has created a very difficult situation within the Left Front itself—what is a Left Front ticket? Is it one in which all affiliates take part or one in which any affiliate takes part? When can the precious Left Front logo (a reminder of Mélenchon's inspiring 2012 presidential election campaign) be used?

The nadir in PCF-Left Party relations was reached at the fourth congress of the Party of the European Left [[2](#)], held on December 13-15, 2013, in Madrid. To the concern of many delegates from other European parties present the Left Party delegation opposed the re-election of Pierre Laurent, PCF national secretary, as PGE president.

Left Party co-president Martine Billard told the congress:

"We consider that the fact that the PGE president supported participation in the same list as the social democrats, scarcely two months before the European election, clouds the message of the PGE's autonomy, and not only in France."

After Laurent was re-elected with more than 75% of the vote, the Left Party delegation announced that it was suspending its PGE membership until after the French municipal poll. This move alarmed the other Left Front affiliates present in Madrid.

Clémentine Autain, spokesperson for Ensemble! (Together!), which groups four of the smaller Left Front affiliates, told the web site Mediapart: "I really don't understand. You gain points within the PCF by staying positive, by convincing people, not by pulling out ... if there's division, everyone will lose. Unity isn't a sufficient condition, but it's a *sine qua non*. These ongoing signs of division upset and demoralise the activists. For their part, they would love to see a photo of Jean-Luc and Pierre all smiles."

A January 17 leadership meeting between the PCF and Left Party produced the desired photo opportunity. Without pretending that the strategic differences between the Left Front's two main organisations had magically vanished it agreed to cool the dispute—given the pressure from Left Front activists and the burning need to gear up for the European election campaign.

The issues where some consensus was achieved were the nature of the Left Front ticket for the European elections, the independence of the PCF from the PS in future elections for France's regions and cantons, and the need to look to re-dynamising the Left Front after the European poll.

A Left Party proposal that the differing strategic approaches of the PCF and Left Party be put to a vote of Left Front members received a more cautious response from the PCF delegation.

After the meeting Mélenchon told France Channel 3:

"We have a strategic difference of opinion, but we need a positive escape route from it: we shan't continue to demand that the PCF pull out of tickets where it is with the [Socialist Party]."

On January 22, the Left Party co-president commented on this blog: "The long—and serious—discussion showed that on a lot of points agreement could be reached with less difficulty than initially imagined by either side." Laurent said: "The crisis is behind us."

The one remaining point of discord, under what circumstances Left Front affiliates can use its logo, will be decided in negotiations between the two leaders. This may still prove a difficult discussion because local PCF organisations (in Toulouse, for example) want to put the Left Front logo on the posters of the PS mayoral campaign.

However, according to Left Party national secretary Éric Coquerel, "It is not imaginable to use the logo of our independent strategic approach to benefit [Socialist Party] election material, all the more now that Hollande is creating a grand alliance of neoliberals." (This was a reference to the French president's proposal in his New Year address that the government and MEDEF, the main French employer organisation, form a pact to revive the stagnant economy.)

At the time of writing one suggestion being aired is that the logo not be used in meetings involving organisations other than Left Front affiliates.

Once again—relating to social democracy

The critically important underlying issue involved here—of how to relate to social-democratic forces in a period when these are losing their traditional support—has also recently split the Left Front's third founding affiliate, the Uniting Left (GU). Its traditional leader, Christian Piquet, has negotiated a position on the PS-PCF ticket in Paris—on the grounds that it would strengthen a potential basis of opposition to PS national austerity, but against the majority opinion of the GU.

The GU has now split three ways—between members who entered Ensemble! late last year and the remainder who are now opposing or supporting Piquet's move onto the PS-PCF ticket in Paris.

As for Ensemble!, two of its municipal candidates for the Left Front tackled the underlying issues generating the PCF-Left Party conflict in a recent statement ("Creating hope, or the responsibility of the Left Front"): "Let's not deceive ourselves: distance from the PS is not the alpha and omega of a winning political strategy. If it were, the far left would have been in power long ago!"

For Ensemble!, finding the winning approach towards the PS depends most of all on preserving and enlarging the "precious unity" of the Left Front itself, transforming it from an alliance of parties into "a real people's front".

After the PCF-Left Party meeting Ensemble! commented: "A positive way out of the difficulties besetting the Left Front is taking shape."

Dick Nichols

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3683>

* Dick Nichols is Green Left Weekly's and Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal's European correspondent, based in Barcelona. A shorter version of this article appeared in Green Left Weekly's January 29, 2014, edition.

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 30282), [France: As National Front support grows, strategy struggle erupts in Left Front](#).

[2] <http://www.european-left.org/4-el-congress>