

# France: NPA split “an epochal change for the revolutionary left”

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**After the implosion of the NPA, François Sabado, former leader of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR/Revolutionary Communist League), who had thought about how to go beyond the LCR in 2009, makes a critical assessment and looks back on the significance of the revolutionary Marxist current.**

The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) split in two at its Fifth Congress, held on December 10. While the future of the tendency inspired by the former militants of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), of which Olivier Besancenot is a part, is uncertain, François Sabado, historical leader of the LCR, who had thought of overcoming the limitations of the LCR with the NPA project in 2009 (he was a member of its leadership until 2015), looks back on this crisis. More generally, he takes stock of this attempt to unite anti-capitalists, and of the parallel trajectory of La France Insoumise, which is also experiencing its own internal turmoil.

**Mathieu Dejean: With the implosion of the NPA at its 5<sup>th</sup> congress, is it the end of the political current born in France in 1966, which continued with the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) and wanted to go beyond itself with the NPA?**

**François Sabado:** It doesn't have to be the end! We have to do everything possible to understand what has happened and appropriately continue with a history that is our own. That being said, this crisis did not come as a complete surprise. The essence of the air -to speak like Chris Marker [director of the documentary *Le fond de l'air est rouge* - M.D.] - is the end of an era, not only for us, but for the entire labour movement of the advanced capitalist countries .

**What does this end of an era consist of?**

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union disintegrated, we took note for the first time of an epochal change. Along with Daniel Bensaid, we drafted a document entitled “To the left of the possible”, in which we formulated the triptych: new era, new programme, new party. So we thought that it was only the end of a cycle, that of stalinism. But we realised that it was not only the end of the stalinist cycle, but also the end of dynamic effect of the October Revolution. If you dig a little deeper, you can even see in certain contemporary trends the end of everything that gave rise to the history of the labour movement in the mid-nineteenth century: parliamentary democracy, the national state, the union and labour political movement, social democracy, communist parties and revolutionary currents: everything is in crisis, it is the end of an era.

**What do you think are the main characteristics of the current political situation?**

On the right, we are witnessing the rise of authoritarian forms of political domination by the ruling classes, of challenges to democracy, of what is called illiberalism, of dictatorial regimes in certain countries. These authoritarian forms correspond to the neoliberal capitalism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and

early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The traditional bourgeois parties are in crisis. The same is happening with the traditional parties of the labour movement, which are affected by this change. All the social conquests and commitments made up to the 1980s are being gradually liquidated by neoliberalism. As for the revolutionary left, it has not appeared as an alternative. Despite all these changes, what remains - and that is why I am a Marxist - is the class struggle. It is the fundamental basis for understanding the world. An open, modified, expanded class struggle, which is not reduced to the struggle for demands within a company, but is related to the new social movements and intersectional struggles. Basically, it is the struggle between the exploited and oppressed and the possessors.

Ecology is added to this fundamental base. My generation was not aware of this problem, but ecology is not a separate issue: we live in a finite world, with no prospects for abundance, and it is not that nature is on one side and the productive forces on the other. We have to rethink everything beginning with the arguments on the questioning of the capitalist market and the defense of ecology which is a claim for survival: both economic and democratic claims. The new revolutionary political perspective must be linked to these two dimensions: ecology and class struggle.

**In an article published in the magazine *Critique Communiste* in 2006, Guillaume Liégard wrote about the LCR: "Our problem is not trivial, we are revolutionaries without revolution and that is new." Is this what makes the task of building a new party so difficult even today?**

Yes of course. The last revolution with a socialist dynamic that we experienced was that of Nicaragua in 1979. There have not been others since then. Instead, my generation experienced a revolutionary boom in the years 1967-68 and even in 1974-75 in Portugal. There was an opportunity for revolutionary perspectives. Of course, the League always had an excessive revolutionary optimism, but this rise took place, with general strike movements, situations of dual power, challenges, open political crises. Unfortunately, it led nowhere.

May 1968 was not the dress rehearsal as Daniel Bensaïd and Henri Weber suggested in their book, *Mai 1968: Une répétition générale*. The creeping Italian May events stayed creeping. Franco's dictatorship did not lead to a socialist revolution in Spain, but to a democratic transition in the late 1970s. Portugal was the country where the political crisis came closest to a revolutionary situation, because the state apparatus was fractured, the army split in two and there was a movement from below. But this whole phase did not lead to substantial victories. Nicaragua today is a drama.

We have to rebuild taking advantage of the best of all the histories and traditions of the labour movement, of the social movements, of the revolutionary movements.

From then on, the international bourgeoisie took the lead with Reagan, Thatcher and liberal counter-reformation. The problem we have is not only that we are "revolutionaries without a revolution", but that the liberal counter-reform has lasted an exceptionally long time. Since the late 1970s, more than fifty years of dismantling of social gains have passed.

When I read the League newspapers [of the time], I get the impression that capitalism is in a permanent crisis. But the capitalist system alternates crisis and recovery, and can recover as long as an anti-capitalist alternative does not triumph. From now on, ecological catastrophes will add to economic and social crises. There are social struggles and resistance, but the big problem is that there is also a substantial crisis of the socialist project. This is the difference with previous periods. There is no continuity [between crisis and revolution]. The revolutionaries have failed to build strong enough alternatives.

**However, contrary to certain factions that have fueled the NPA's break-up, from 1968 the**

**JCR distinguished itself from the extreme left organisations by the fact that it was not dogmatic: there was not even a cult of the Mao's Little Red Book nor an idyllic vision of the proletariat. Is this the reason why this organisation has been, historically and politically, so important in France?**

Absolutely. This double capacity has allowed it to be part of history -that of the left-wing opposition to Stalinism- and, at the same time, to show sensitivity to the new problems of capitalism and social resistance. I have been a militant for almost fifty years, this is my life, and I am part of the history of a revolutionary, critical, and democratic Marxist current. Democratic in the deepest sense: in struggles, in institutions and in the party. That is the lesson we learned from stalinism. But that is not enough, we have to reassert taking advantage of the best of all histories and traditions of the labour movement, social movements and revolutionary movements.

**The stalinism that you experienced from within, collectively, in the Union of Communist Students (UEC) before being expelled in 1965? [\[1\]](#)**

Yes. There was even a statutory provision in the League, according to which members could not be expelled. Only the base cells could do that. It was a legacy of that battle in the UEC: to prevent the Stalinist apparatus from excluding us we based ourselves on the grassroots circles. In order to remove Alain Krivine from the Sorbonne-Lettres circle, the PCF apparatus had to dissolve the Sorbonne-Lettres circle itself. In this matter, the grassroots structures were sovereign. We are deeply attached to this. We assimilated the libertarian aspect of May 68. This is the difference we had with the Maoists, who were led by Pierre Victor (real name Benny Lévy): there were no tendencies in Gauche Proletarienne. [\[2\]](#) The current that is going to be built must make the democratic question a fundamental question.

Along with the international question, this is one of the problems with Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Of course, our democratic functioning was not superior to that of others - our recent setbacks attest to this - but to continue the fight, we must fully internalise this issue.

Class struggle, ecology, democracy and internationalism: all of this is decisive for rethinking the world we see "through the eyes of a Czechoslovakian worker, a Bolivian miner, a Vietnamese peasant and a French worker", as Daniel Bensaïd said at the time. Today we would add with the eyes of the women of these towns in struggle. We have to see the world with all these eyes, what we used to call the dialectic of the sectors of the world revolution. This is complicated nowadays, where nationalist pressure is very strong. We must maintain an internationalist course. On this point, the NPA has remained firm and true to its principles.

**In 2009, when the LCR chose to dissolve to fully participate in the creation of the NPA with anti-capitalist activists from different backgrounds, what was your diagnosis?**

While we were immersed in a long process of the collapse of stalinism, Besancenot's successful electoral campaign broke through. The 2002 campaign had been a huge gamble: we filled the Porte de Versailles fairgrounds, it was dynamic. We told ourselves that the time had come for a new party. But faced with the issues raised by the new era, this conjunctural response of a new party was not enough. We had the wrong perspective. What happened around the Besancenot campaigns in 2002 and 2007 could not constitute the new party, it could only be a segment. But we had to move.

When Besancenot obtained 4.2% in the 2002 presidential elections, thousands of people came around us, but they had doubts and the League stayed at 3,500 militants. We felt that there was a current that went beyond the League, but that did not stay. It had to be crystallised. The first time I raised the issue of a new party, with Olivier Besancenot, Alain Krivine and Samy Johsua, we still

didn't have 500 signatures for the 2007 presidential election. I said, "If we run a good campaign and get a decent result, we'll do it." We did it, we got close to 10,000 endorsements, it was a joyous mess, but it had a real dynamic.

We made the mistake of bridging, of substituting: the important thing was to cohere others around us. For this reason, we did not see Mélenchon's initiative coming.

And even today, when we look back on this recent past, I still think we were right to go beyond the League and to launch the NPA. But we thought that from then on we had to rebuild everything around the NPA. The problem of alliances receded into the background. It was a triumphant course for the NPA. This tendency to want to replace the political forces of the left did not work. That's where the problems started.

**A current within the LCR, that of Christian Picquet and Francis Sitel, then believed that it was necessary to bring together not only anti-capitalists, but also currents that had emerged from the crisis of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party...**

They had a point. But they did not take into account that we were advancing towards a new era and that the traditional apparatuses were entering a crisis, as was later shown. This orientation towards the old traditional apparatuses of the labour movement was a mistake. Our mistake was to attempt to go beyond this, of substitution: the important thing was to bring people around us. For this reason, we did not see Mélenchon's initiative coming. In the 2009 European elections, there was an agreement between the PCF and the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon [created in 2008 - MD] which launched the Left Front. They appeared as supporters of unity, while we had refused to unite. I have my own responsibility in this. The NPA could not be the answer to the idea of a new party. It could only be a partial answer. We lost a lot of militants. We were under pressure from the political offensive of the PCF and Mélenchon. From that moment on, the sects in the NPA acquired inordinate weight.

**For a while, the NPA looked with great interest to the experiences of Podemos and Syriza, which were constituted around 2011: organisations based on social movements, not traditional parties. Would you still take these experiences as an example today?**

We even participated in them. Friends of ours participated in these processes. In Spain, Anticapitalistas was a founding member of Podemos. We also had colleagues in the leadership of Syriza in Greece. Our project was to build a left current in Syriza, a critical force that would have weight in a movement that could potentially govern.

The formula that I defend, and that not everyone shares, is that the beginning of a revolutionary process -not its end- can occur through a left-wing government. At first it may have a parliamentary form. We have to be sensitive to this, and support all steps in the right direction, be it Syriza or Podemos. This is one of the lessons of the debates of the Communist International (CI) in the twenties. The problem then consists of comprehending the top and the bottom, the interior and the exterior of the institutions. What remains of my political training is that in the end I don't see how to escape the confrontation. You cannot go gradually to socialism. I know of no experience in which the ruling classes have voluntarily relinquished power.

I have often discussed this with Mélenchon. The idea of a citizen revolution, which implies winning the maximum number of seats in a national assembly, overlooks the moment when the state apparatus - the police and the army - blocks change and a confrontation occurs. At that moment one cannot be a prisoner of the state. Mélenchon refers to Jaurès, who in turn said that the state is "the place of power relations". The problem is that the state is not neutral. It is socially marked by the

interests of the bourgeoisie and the ruling classes. It is necessary to build a counter-power that represents the popular classes. One of the strategic lessons of the history of revolutions is that revolution does not happen overnight. There is a process of dispute between political forces inside and outside the institutions. The goal is for those below to prevail over those above.

**FRANÇOIS SABADO**

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**P.S.**

• IVP. FRIDAY 6 JANUARY 2023:  
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7941>

Interview with François Sabado by Mathieu Dejean published in Mediapart on 26 December 2022.

Originally published in French on *Médiapart*  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/politique/241222/scission-du-npa-un-changement-d-epoque-pour-la-gauche-revolutionnaire>.

This English translation by David Fagan is from the Spanish of *Viento sur*:  
<https://vientosur.info/escision-en-el-npa-un-cambio-de-epoca-para-la-izquierda-revolucionaria/>

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## Footnotes

[1] The Union des étudiants communistes ( UEC ) is a French student movement closely related to the French Communist Party (PCF) within which individuals who went on to form the LCR worked until their expulsions.

[2] Gauche prolétarienne (Proletarian Left) was a large, influential French Maoist political party which existed from 1968 to 1974. After a split in the Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes (Marxist Leninist Union of Communist Youth), several members, Benny Lévy amongst them formed the new party in October 1968.