



France: Lutte Ouvrière deaf to call for anticapitalist party

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The annual fair, hosted by French far left group, Lutte Ouvrière (LO), took place in blazing sunshine this year. But unfortunately for the organisers, the main topic of discussion amongst the visitors was the proposal of their long-term rival, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), for a new anticapitalist party. The various factions and organisations were, reports Jeremy Dewar, judging each other and being judged on the basis of their response to one question: "What do you propose to do about the LCR's call for a new party?"

For many years in the 1980s and 1990s, LO's annual fair, set in the welcoming countryside of Presles, near Paris, was a unique attraction in the calendar of the European far left. However, since the turn of the century, LO's sectarian refusal to participate within the anticapitalist movement - lamely labelling it "petit-bourgeois" - diminished the fete's importance. Why come to Presles, when there were huge gatherings, like the one hosted by José Bové in Millau, European Social Forums and regular summit sieges.

Lutte Ouvrière's decline

Over the past three years, LO's isolation has intensified. It failed to join in the "No of the Left" campaign, which organised hundreds of local committees to throw out the neoliberal draft European constitution; it dismissed the revolt of the racially oppressed youth in the suburbs (banlieues) against the police as "counter-productive"; in the massive struggles in the high schools (lycées) and public sector workplaces of the past few years, it is the LCR and its presidential candidate, Olivier Besancenot, that has come to personify the militant wing of the movement, not LO or its perennial electoral figurehead, Arlette Laguiller. Indeed, far from being neck and neck, as was the case in previous contests, Besancenot took more than three times as many votes as Laguiller in last year's poll.

LO's decline - in influence, if not numbers - has been mirrored by the shrinkage of the cité politique at the fair. Instead of four forums, there are now just two. Its old site has been transformed into an apolitical medieval village - with not a peasants' revolt in sight.

We have written elsewhere about the LCR's new party initiative. LO's response has been both sectarian and opportunist. It characterises the LCR's call as liquidationist - which it is in the sense that it proposes both to dissolve the Ligue next January, and to offer no revolutionary programme for the new organisation. But LO uses this as a justification for its refusal to enter the committees to build the new party and argue for a different outcome.

Unfortunately, this sits rather awkwardly with its own past record. Between 1999 and 2004, the two organisations stood several times on joint slates and even proposed in their material the formation of a new party. Their own emergency programme was a woefully inadequate list of reforms, like a O300 a month pay rise for all, with no indication of how these could be won. It posed no warning about the limits of bourgeois democracy, no call for a government based on workers' democratic organisations of struggle, and no strategic goal of smashing the police and armed units of the capitalist state.

Even worse, despite LO's long-held characterisation of the Socialists (PS) and Communists (PCF) as simply "bourgeois parties", its leadership shocked LO members in March when it entered into an electoral pact with them not to stand against each other in their respective strongholds. Surely, if the PS and PCF were open bosses' parties (which of course

they are not), this would be an unprincipled manoeuvre, which could only end up with LO tacitly urging its would-be supporters in some areas to vote for a capitalist party.

When LO's long-standing internal opposition, Fraction l'Étincelle, openly criticised the pact, it was suspended. The Fraction, however, was not at all excluded from the fair, having a large stand in the fete proper, a privilege reserved for Union Communiste Internationaliste sections and LO branches, and attracting around 150 militants to its forums, one of which was billed as "What perspectives for the movement?" but, in fact, focused on the LCR's new party call.

LO's faction in two minds

Despite its criticisms of the LCR's opportunist refusal to put forward its own programme for the new party, the faction called on the LO majority to respond positively to the initiative. Essentially, it wants LO and the LCR to fuse via the new party, i.e. to revive the call for a new, unified "Trotskyist" party that the two organisations have tentatively proposed but never acted upon during and after election campaigns since 1999.

The basis for this unity, the faction claims, is already there; the emergency programmes (programmes d'urgence) that they put forward in various elections are very close to each other's, and should form the basis for the new party's manifesto.

This received a double rebuff. The LCR representative ruffled everyone's feathers by starkly claiming that they were not interested in debates or political discussions, but rather organising new members of the party to hand out leaflets and stick up posters. Meanwhile, the speaker for the LO majority stuck to the line that this was a liquidationist move by the LCR (true), and therefore the only principled response was to abstain (false).

I had the opportunity to talk to some of the faction's members more informally. This revealed a certain amount of confusion, even divergence. Some were more dismissive of the new party initiative, believing it would not get off the ground, despite, at the same time, saying that they had entered the local committees, for example in Nantes, and were meeting with some success, agitating for the new party among the high school students (lyceen/nes), who had recently been on strike.

Other leading members of Fraction l'Étincelle gave another perspective entirely, emphasising that they continued to operate as a faction, and had, since the suspension, launched a new factory bulletin, which they intended to continue, if they were allowed to resume their role as loyal oppositionists inside LO.

So, maybe the faction has "one foot in each camp" (LO and LCR's new party), as one of their militants described it. Nevertheless, what is clear is that their perspective remains one of regroupment of the far left, plus the old LO "workerist" disdain for anything much more than factory bulletins and electoral campaigns.

While they baulk at the fullness of the LCR's opportunism regarding programme (i.e. boycotting its own positions, and tailing those others that would like to join), the faction has a wooden and sterile alternative: unity on a programme, which was totally inadequate at the time, i.e. it was not a transitional programme, but is now silent on the major issues of the day: war, economic slowdown, Sarkozy's governmental offensive and the movement against it, European treaty, climate change and the environment, uprising of the banlieues.

Having said that, the faction's membership appeared to be (relatively) young and vibrant - certainly in marked contrast to LO's composition overall. There may be some truth to their claim that there is a large middle ground, which the faction could take with them in a split.

La famille Trotskiste

Other members of France's large "Trotskyist family" were also engaged in the LCR's committees for the new anticapitalist party.

The Gauche Révolutionnaire (Committee for a Workers International section) was quite critical of the new anticapitalist party because it was launched on a liquidationist basis (albeit still far more principled than the Socialist Party's in Britain!) Its militants were participating in the local committees, however. A member I spoke to thought it would go nowhere, but revealed that it had attracted some workers and youth in Montreuil, Toulouse and Marseilles. All these areas have a good record of quite militant struggle, so the criticism speaks more in favour of the new party's chances of success!

The groupe Communiste Révolutionnaire Internationaliste, which is a small, but very active split from the tradition of Pierre Lambert, was also involved. While the member I spoke to described their work as "entryism", he seemed far more serious about the tactic, describing how the CRI was trying to build the new party with a view to doing exemplary work in one or two areas.

Noticeably absent were the Socialist Workers Party's co-thinkers in France. The comrades had dissolved their independent organisation, Socialisme par en bas, in order to form a tendency inside the LCR. They then proceeded to line up with the right wing majority, and argue against Besancenot standing for president, preferring to support the spoiler candidate, farmer Jose Bove. Unsurprisingly with this disastrous right wing record, backed if not dictated by London, the comrades failed to even get enough support to maintain its tendency at the LCR's conference in January: another sorry tale of International Socialist Tendency secretary Alex Callinicos' (mis)leadership.

A revolutionary party of the militant vanguard

The problem here is that neither the LO faction, Gauche Révolutionnaire, nor the CRI really seem to fully grasp the potential of the LCR's initiative: that the new party could both a) gather together the most politically advanced layers, which have been and continue to lead the struggle against neoliberalism and Nicolas Sarkozy's government, and b) do so on the basis of a thrashing out in debate a revolutionary transitional programme. In short, it is not a question of either a party comprised of the existing far left, or a reformist party of the movement; but rather a question of struggle for a revolutionary party within the movement.

In France there is a large and diverse vanguard of workers, racial minorities and youth, the most militant and best organised in the whole of Europe. But it has no organic political expression. As several militants told me during the fete, Olivier Besancenot is an enormously popular figure among these class fighters, especially the youth, but the LCR seems too slow and inept at organising them. Now the opportunist leaders of the LCR hope to do this by abandoning Trotskyism and the transitional programme.

Of course, the LCR's project could fail because it does not set out to rally the mass vanguard to it, whilst engaging in the crucial battles with Sarkozy and offering an alternative leadership to the treacherous union leaders and the Communist and Socialist politicians. Indeed in the recent strikes by sans papiers undocumented migrant workers, the CGT leaders signed a rotten compromise deal behind the activists' backs, prompting the sans papiers to occupy the union hall (bourse du travail). Though the LCR energetically supported the campaign, where was its criticism and warning of the union bureaucracy, where was its independent, alternative strategy? As always, the LCR fell short of putting one forward.

Furthermore, the LCR could carry on with the traditional bifurcation between trade unionism and politics and, where the struggle in the workplaces and the streets in the preserve of the unions and the political struggle must centre on electioneering (the Charte d'Amiens). A new party that does not challenge this division, and see itself as the strategist of a unified class struggle, a struggle for political power, is ultimately doomed to fail.

Another possibility is that the call simply ends up with a slightly enlarged LCR - but, because the LCR will in the process drop much of its revolutionary "baggage", on an even less radical basis. But again, this must be decided in battle - against the LCR leadership and the reformist bureaucrats.

The third possible outcome is that the experience of the high level of class struggle in France, plus the objective need

for revolutionary measures, will generate a majority for a revolutionary programme within the new party. But this is why those to the left of the LCR should intervene and fight for a focused action programme, starting from today's specific struggles against Sarkozy, but then showing how these could turn into a struggle for working class power.

They should ensure that such a programme is discussed as widely as possible, not only in the meetings to discuss the new party but in the committees and coordinations that arise in strikes in the factories and offices, in the organisations of the school and university students, and among the sans papiers migrant workers.

It is to this outcome that the comrades of the L5I in France will dedicate themselves in the coming months.

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