

François Hollande attacks the working class - French left in disarray

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The French President, François Hollande, is trying to become the Tony Blair or Gerhard Schröder of a country that has always tended to reject attempts to impose the neoliberal 'reform' policies for which these two 'socialist' leaders are famous.

In a major reshuffle of ministers, in which Socialist Party left wingers such as Economy Minister, Arnaud Montebourg, and Education Minister, Benoît Hamon were sacked for refusing to back a major austerity package, a new cabinet under Manuel Valls was sworn in.

Hollande and Valls' policy is France's version of Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010. Presented as the 'Responsibility Pact', it will cut social insurance charges for businesses by €40 billion if they will create 500,000 jobs by 2017, cut taxation, and weaken labour laws. It is also reported that the employers' federation, MEDEF, is working on a plan, to be called France 2020, in collaboration with the more right wing union confederation, the CFDT.

Hollande and his ministers have also decided to add insult to injury.

According to the memoirs of his former partner Valérie Trierweiler, Hollande is an appalling snob, who regularly refers to the poor as 'the toothless ones' (les sans-dents) and 'is very proud of this joke'.

Hollande is the son of a very rich and right wing Normandy doctor.

Emmanuel Macron, Minister of Finance, coming from a high flying post at the Rothschild bank, referred to women workers at Gad, threatened with losing their jobs at an abattoir in Brittany, as 'illiterate'. François Rebsamen, his Minister of Labour, recently expressed his desire to 'reinforce controls on the unemployed to verify that they are really looking for a job' and 'to punish them' if they are not .

France's new prime minister, Manuel Valls, is having a positive love-in with French bosses. Addressing a summer school of the main employers organization (MEDEF) he said, to rapturous applause, 'Ladies and gentlemen, heads of companies, France needs you'. He went on 'it is businesses that create value, generate wealth which should profit everyone', concluding, 'I love business'. No wonder an unnamed boss was quoted as saying of Valls 'he's better than the Right'.

Naturally such expressions of contempt for workers and the poor, and admiration and affection for the capitalists, have not endeared France's Socialist president to the workers of France, his approval ratings hit 13 per cent at the end of August

Such statements reveal not only the chasm between the government and the French working class, but also the disgusting cynicism and sheer recklessness of top Socialist Party officials.

They also reveal an attitude, that the stagnation of economy is due to the working class and making them pay is the only the way forward. The way to solve the question of 3.4 million unemployed is to ?punish? them, cut their benefits and force them to take the worst low paid and insecure jobs, on the British and German models.

Indeed, the central task of the Valls government is to attack the historical gains of the working class: workers' rights, the 35 hour week, as well as slashing the public sector workers' jobs and the public services.

While all this started with the previous government, under PM Jean-Marc Airault, which was itself continuing the line of right-wing President Sarkozy, it is clear that the recent choice of Valls as PM corresponds to an acceleration of these attacks, further confirmed by the demotion of the ?left? ministers like Montebourg, who in reality were only more inclined to economic patriotism than to a radically different political line.

Obedying the maxim that ?if the bicycle wobbles - pedal harder?, Hollande has decided to accelerate his agenda of attacks. The austerity budgets will continue, with €50 billion of cuts announced for the next few years and already partially implemented. However, despite a series of measures that help them, the bosses are always thirsty for new ?reforms?. In a massive propaganda move, they have claimed they could create one million jobs, if only they were allowed to deregulate the 35 hour week, weekends and night working, and abolish two national holidays.

Hollande?s miserable record

After only two years of Francois Hollande?s presidency, the balance sheet is very bad indeed, even measuring it by bourgeois criteria. Economically, the GDP has been stagnating, the deficit of the state budget remains at 4.4 percent with no hope in the foreseeable future of complying with the 3.5 percent Maastricht threshold. The unemployment rate has reached an unprecedented level, above 10 percent, with practically five million workers without a job.

Politically, the recent round of local and European elections has been a disaster for the Socialist Party. It lost control of hundreds of cities and important towns, including historical strongholds like Limoges, while Marine Le Pen?s Front National could boast a score of 25 percent at the European elections, posing a serious threat to the working class.

Bourgeois commentators openly describe this as a crisis not only of the Presidency but also of the Fifth Republic itself. One of the striking features of the political situation is the fact that, despite this weakness of the reformist parties, and despite real examples of a fight back by workers, the radical left is in tatters.

The overall class struggle situation has been hampered by a continued close collaboration between the main trade union federations and the government. Despite the attacks and the SP?s overall political line that is effectively a continuation of Sarkozy?s politics, the unions have not organised any form of national movement. They have limited their actions to sporadic ?days of action?, whose main purpose is to let the rank and file vent their anger with no perspective of a decisive confrontation .

There have been some important movements in certain regions, for example, in Brittany, and in some sectors including railway workers, temporary workers in the entertainment industry and pilots at Air France, but clearly the union leaders decided not to unify these movements and not to put any pressure on the government. Worse, they accept sitting at the negotiating table with the bosses and the government, where the only item on the agenda is the further deregulation of the workers' rights.

Nevertheless, the recent movements in SNCF and Air France show that some sectors of the working class are ready to resist the PS attacks and this constitutes a basis for a more unified resistance by other sectors.

The left in disarray

Despite all this, the left reformist project of the Left Front (Front de Gauche) is seriously, maybe mortally, wounded. Since its beginning, it was little more than a marriage of convenience between the Communist Party (PCF), strong in terms of apparatus and elected representatives but with a lacklustre leadership, and Jean-Luc Melenchon, the charismatic, left reformist leader of the Parti de Gauche (PG).

There were always severe frictions between the PCF and Melenchon, who have different aims. Melenchon's plan for the PG was to prepare a French equivalent of Syriza, for when the class struggle erupts and the PS suffers the fate of PASOK. He always presented a stronger critique of PS and posed as the alternative to it. The PCF, on the other hand, tended to see itself as the PS's life long partner in local government and hoped, once again, to gain a few ministers in a coalition.

The PCF is desperate not to lose its MPs and mayors, which are gained by local electoral agreements with the PS, since these are a major basis of its budget because of state funding for parties in France. This has led to important alliances with PS for the local elections in Paris. In some sense, the PCF is simply continuing its historical line of alliance with PS, which led to its support of the Mitterrand governments in the 1980s and Lionel Jospin's in the 1990s.

Marked by a series of violent internal tensions, the Front de Gauche was never more than an electoral front for PG, PCF and other minor forces, and not a unified party. In the recent elections, it stagnated at 6 percent, showing that the workers could not really tell the difference between it and the left parties in government.

Finally, this summer, Melenchon decided to resign his presidency of the Parti de Gauche and to prepare a new political movement for a Sixth Republic. He claims that his "political camp is in disarray" and that he does not intend to "rassembler" (gather together) "the left" but "the people". Here he plays on historic memories of the Popular Front (Rassemblement Populaire) of 1936 under Leon Blum that carried out a series of major reforms, (right to strike and collective bargaining, a 40 hour week, two weeks paid holidays etc.)

This move is obviously a preparation for the 2017 presidential elections when he hopes to be able to profit from the crisis of PS, free himself from the pact with PCF and try to rally a larger front behind himself as a great leader. In the meantime, the PCF has been flirting with what is left of the PS left, some 30 MPs who abstained in the confidence vote for Valls in September. This move might prepare a possible alternative government for Hollande if the Valls government hits an iceberg of working class resistance .

The Far Left without an answer

This disarray of the left reformist forces parallels a similar development inside the far left Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA.) Here, the main slogan in the last two years was "a left opposition to the government", aimed at creating a political front with both PG and the Front de Gauche. However, this never really took off because the FdG had no interest in a bloc with the dwindling forces of the NPA.

The main problem of the NPA's slogan was that it suggested a reformist solution to the crisis, as if a coalition of the NPA and FdG could simply constitute a new government and therefore a political alternative. A part of NPA, the Gauche Anticapitaliste, which included a large part of the leadership of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, LCR, from before the foundation of NPA, always pushed for a social

and political front with the left reformists. They took the slogan at face value, split from NPA in 2012 and simply joined FdG. Without them, NPA continued to function on much the same political line and was thus never able to advance a revolutionary solution to the crisis, be it only as a small cadre party.

The NPA has always operated on a weak and confused programmatic foundation, coupled with a strong emphasis on participation in elections. They were too revolutionary in their rhetoric and on certain issues like anti-racism and imperialist wars, to be trusted as electoral allies by genuine reformists, but not red-blooded revolutionaries enough to break from the reformists and the union bureaucrats when it came to the great waves of class struggle to which France is prone. This half and half approach could appear to work in the Sarkozy years when there were waves of intense class struggle, but the election of Hollande marked a new political phase, with new political tasks, that the NPA never analysed or understood. The result is a serious political and organisational crisis.

Organisationally, the NPA has suffered a severe loss of membership and is now possibly down to one quarter of its highest point, approximately the same as the LCR before it launched the NPA initiative. Electorally, it is now at, or below, 1 percent, graphically closing a cycle of party building, going right back to square one.

What is even more serious, the NPA is now entering a new phase of internal struggles around its next conference, due in January 2015. While the struggle between the majority and the left current is sharpening, there is little sign that this will lead to a political clarification. Indeed, none of the main currents understands the need for a programmatic clarification as the only possible basis for a renewed NPA in a new political phase.

The debate has started but is mainly polarised around tactical issues on the united front. Moreover, a long history of political ambiguity will weigh heavily on the debate, allowing short-term political moves and manoeuvres that will not bring any clarity. We will analyse these twists and turns, as well as the nature and politics of the various internal currents, in a subsequent article. It seems likely that the NPA's centrist tradition of misleadership will be unable to regenerate itself to stand up to the tasks of the moment.

Hollande and Valls' offensive in the coming month, however, could offer a possible focus for rallying the forces of the left. Time and again, the French working class has shown its ability to mobilise against such government offensives, despite the vacillations of its official leaders. A call for a 'day of action' to rally against an austerity programme from, for example, the CGT, could spark a renewed confrontation.

Given the division within the PS, the PCF's need to restore its role and Melenchon's call for a new movement, this could provide the context in which the NPA should advance a plan of action to revive the local united fronts that came into being in the struggles against Sarkozy, the coordinations. If they call loudly and critically for the union federations to stop their negotiations with the government and form a united front to reject all the neoliberal reforms and launch an escalating series of strikes and mass demonstrations, then the government can be stopped, even brought down.

If the left and the working class show their muscle and militancy, the main beneficiary will not be Marine Le Pen and the racist right; the question of a workers' government can be put on the agenda.

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