



# France's New Anticapitalist Party in Crisis

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Marc Lasalle and Dave Stockton report on the growing crisis in the NPA as it heads closer to the presidential elections

It is a paradox that in the depths of the most severe and prolonged crisis of capitalism since the Second World War, France's New Anticapitalist Party is itself in deep crisis.

Since the founding congress of the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA), in 2009, there has been no shortage of social struggles - in the universities and the lycées, in the banlieues and the workplaces. Some of them like the 2010 movement against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension law were of exceptional strength and duration. It peaked on the October 12 and 19, days of action, when 3.5 million people were on the streets and power station and refinery workers took indefinite strike action. Had they been joined by the entire movement in an all out general strike this could have brought down the government of Nicolas Sarkozy.

The failure of the NPA to make a breakthrough to become large fighting party in such a heightened period of class struggle cannot be put down to objective factors, from a lack of resistance or a workers movement hostile to revolutionary politics. It lies far more in the inner contradictions of the NPA itself and its failure to rise to the potentialities of the situation. It seems the NPA membership has fallen back from 9-10,000 of its first year to around 3,000 today.

The NPA's contradictions

The League for the Fifth International has always regarded the NPA's founder, the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire) (LCR) as a centrist organisation combining revolutionary and reformist elements in its politics in an unstable mix. Like the Fourth International of which it is the largest section, it has for a long while sought to build parties and an International not on the basis of its own politics but as a mélange of a range of traditions, stemming from libertarianism, left Stalinism (Guevarism, Maoism). However these projects have rarely got off the ground. The NPA is by far the most successful attempt.

The reason we welcomed the 2009 all for the NPA was that the LCR opened a process of mass meetings across France and advanced a prospect of debate and discussion on its programme ? not the immediate adoption of some sort of hybrid designed by themselves. And indeed at first that was what happened. Thousands joined and there was a discussion on programme. But this healthy process did not last for long.

The old LCR had a habit of alternating between involvement in mass days of action called and led by the unions sometimes with waves of movements of the youth and electioneering on a left reformist programme. This pattern was soon repeated in the NPA. Electioneering with its inevitable temptations to form electoral blocks with one or another of a cluster of small left parties, has always been a source of illusions in the great breakthrough. These have been invariably followed by frustration and disappointment - with a mass of principles thrown overboard en route. Since the LCR rejoiced in its division into several permanent factions, an untroubled development for the NPA was unlikely, especially if growth slowed or election successes were not sustained.

## Right and Left

If a centrist organisation makes a turn towards the creation of an even broader and more heterogeneous party, it is

natural to think that a resistance to this turn will come from its left wing. In the case of the LCR, this resistance came mainly from the right wing; worried that NPA would be an obstacle to the LCR's former strategy of a closer alliance with of the French Communist Party (PCF) and the newer left reformist formation, the Left Party (PdG) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. These parties formed the Left Front/Front de Gauche for the 2009 European elections winning 6.47 per cent and 5 MEPs whilst the NPA narrowly failed to cross the 5 per cent hurdle (4.98 per cent) and thus got no seats.

Since the beginning of NPA, the ex-LCR right wing has been a powerful obstacle to building the new party. Two incarnations of these currents, Christian Piquet's Gauche Unitaire and Convergences et Alternatives rapidly split from NPA to join the Front de Gauche. Those who remained have openly sabotaged the party activities - protected by the extremely lax discipline of the party. For instance, the bulk of the NPA apparatus of full timers belong to these pro-FdG trends. French electoral law stipulates that those who wish to stand for president must have 500 signatures from mayors or local officials from at least 30 districts in France or its overseas territories, with no more than 50 signatures from a single district or territory. The Constitutional Court must validate before the first round of the elections - this year by March 16. So far the NPA has managed to get 438 signatures.

Mysteriously the listing of mayors who signed for Olivier Besancenot in 2002 and 2007 has disappeared, obliging hundreds of activists to undertake the onerous task of visiting each mayor in the most isolated regions of rural France. In addition Piquet's Gauche Unitaire has submitted a claim €400 000 as its quota of the funds from the LCR at a moment when NPA is in a difficult financial position.

At the January meeting of the NPA's National Council (the leading body between congresses), the current version of the right wing, confusingly called the Anticapitalist Left (GA), unashamedly called for an end to the presidential campaign of the NPA's candidate Philippe Poutou, saying; "In summary, the campaign has no political function, therefore no audience and this weakens our ability to diffuse our ideas."

The GA strategy is to stop the campaign for the presidential election in order to prepare the campaign for the parliamentary elections in June. They would like to turn this campaign into a joint campaign with Front de Gauche with the cynical and hopeless argument: "If we must be marginal, it is better to be so inside a functioning party (FdG) rather than inside the NPA."

Given that they are a minority nationally, they intend to present their candidates on this political line as NPA, in the areas where GA has a local majority, as GA elsewhere. And to do so they request that NPA, in a time of very difficult financial situation, allocates € 700 000 of its state funding for the GA candidates!

However, the right wing is not the only obstacle to NPA. Its historic centre faction, based on leaders like Alain Krivine, Olivier Besancenot and François Sabado, have over the past two years, shown that they lacked any vision of the NPA's development; indeed any strategy for it whatsoever.

Of course from the very start they founded NPA on a completely eclectic programme. Revolutionary statements on the need to smash the bourgeois state went alongside ambiguity as to whether there could be an electoral road to socialism. Gramsci, Guevara, anarchism as well as Trotskyism were invoked in the founding congress documents.

A programme commission drew up documents on various aspects with revolutionary positions in them but no clear overall programme was ever adopted. However at first Olivier Besancenot's popularity as a young and very articulate postal worker assured plenty of media coverage and electoral success. Members flooded into the party taking it up to close on 10,000 members- many of hem new to politics.

The party in fact turned out to be a halfway house between reform and revolution. Only a clear and sharp debate on programme involving all the new members could have clarified this muddle. But according to the LCR 's tradition, a programme is little more than a catalogue of measures to be popularized during an election campaign, like wage increases, defence of public services etc. There is no conception that a programme is a more general understanding of the tasks and struggles of the party; no idea that it must be a strategy for a revolutionary seizure of power

Of course this enabled LCR, and then NPA, to happily coexist with or absorb a variety of other 'left' ideological currents. However, a 'broad', i.e. a more politically heterogeneous party is a very different organism from a relatively small group stemming from one tradition. Evolutions, clashes and splits happened in the NPA at a heightened tempo. All the debates about programme and principle that the leadership spirited away in order not to divide the party eventually came back like a boomerang, demoralising and splitting the party.

This is more clearly seen on the question of the NPA candidate, Ilham Moussaid, who wore the hijab, the attitude to state bans on it in schools and other public buildings, where misconceptions about laïcité (secularism) showed how many in the party were permeated with bourgeois anticlericalism. This applied to the left as well as to the right. That the state should not allow religious ceremonies or display religious symbols in its schools and other public buildings is a progressive republican principal, greatly superior to the situation in Britain for example. Revolutionaries should vigorously defend it. But to force individual believers, especially those belonging to a minority marked out for racist persecution, to be forced not to observe their religious dress code, or to have to attend private religious schools, is a reactionary stance.

Nor is this made any the better by feminist arguments. The hijab is indeed a symbol of women's oppression and socialists must be against the forcing of women to wear it, but for the bourgeois state to force women who wear it voluntarily not to do so is an outrage. No revolutionary party should equivocate on this. After a heated internal debate the party, to its credit, did support their hijab wearing candidate.

Then came the first electoral battles and the confrontation with reformism. It is significant that today NPA has no well thought out approach towards reformism. Its only foundation is the pragmatic position raised to the status of a dogma; 'we will not support the Socialist Party PS or ally with parties that will not commit themselves not to support PS.' As a statement that the NPA intends to stand against the PS and will not join coalitions to administer the bourgeois state at local or national level this is correct.

Of course this call confuses or obscures the fact that it may be necessary - and indeed be perfectly principled - to call for a critical vote for François Hollande. for example in the second round of elections where the PS will almost certainly face only a right wing bourgeois party - Sarkozy's RPR or Marine Le Pen's FN. Millions of French workers will undoubtedly do so. It is a historic weakness of the far left that it never understood Lenin's tactic of critical electoral support - 'like the rope supports the hanged man.' Its objective is the exposure of the reformists in office, starting with placing key demands on the PS that can break illusions and start the process of a fight against Hollande in office.

But the NPA's approach is also completely insufficient to deal with left reformism, of the Mélenchon brand or for that matter the old PCF's.

This incapacity of NPA to take a clear stand on reformism - left as well as right - explains why Philippe Poutou's campaign is in such a bad state today. There was a proposal to prepare propaganda material against Mélenchon but this was boycotted by the leadership. Poutou is basically left alone to answer to the media, sometimes attacking Mélenchon as a potential ally of PS, sometimes merely explaining that Mélenchon is not our enemy and that if he has a high score at the expense of NPA this is not too bad (!).

The NPA election campaign

Poutou's official website shows this contradiction in a series of questions and answers ([How to put our programme to work](#) [1]):

Poutou's perspective is not of course electoralist but it is extremely vague about how to kick out Sarkozy since as he says electing Hollande will not be 'effective' since he will carry out much the same policies. We need he says a broad social movement which will install a workers government.

'It is not with a ballot paper that real problems will be solved: we've known that for a long time. A workers government won't see the light of day unless there are strong mobilizations, unless workers, and young people mobilise and organize for themselves: a government will only be useful if it is based on workers mobilising themselves, without that it will not be able to do anything or worse it would betray us as did the traditional left always did in the past.

Here there is nothing really concrete; no talk of a general strike, of the need to form councils of action, co-ordinations, assemblies in the workplaces nor of the concrete experience of the two or three major social movements that took place over the last five or six years. Above all there is no mention of the fact that the union leaders sold them out and led them to defeat, that the non-PS left (i.e. the PCF and the PdG) offered no leadership at the critical moment, supporting the union leaders. One would think the only problem in the French workers movement was the PS and its right wing policies in government.

Because there is no concrete perspective of a revolutionary upheaval with working class democratic organs of struggle being formed the question of the NPA's willingness to govern and the reforms (for they are all reforms) it would take are dealt in a similar feeble manner.

"But who would there be in this government? Are you ready to work or govern with others?"

Sure, but what counts for us is first, the programme and how to carry it out: to govern, if it is to cancel the debt, prevent layoffs, increase wages, tax the rich ... no problem: in fact, that's our goal! But to be in government for its own sake, to seek to ally with the PS, it would lead to doing the opposite of what one stands for, the opposite of what our people needs. Break with the PS and institutions, rely on the mobilisations.

So it seems that the NPA believes that if Hollande or Mélenchon were to carry out these militant but reformist measures (singly or together they do not challenge the existence of capitalism however unwelcome they would be to capitalists) then Poutou would be willing to enter a parliamentary government within the framework of the capitalist state whilst relying on the mobilisations. No mention of transitional demands that break the logic of the profit system, of workers councils, the militia, of the need to break up the repressive machinery of the capitalist state. No mention of the expropriation of the banks and the big corporation, No mention of the revolution!

### **The faction fight in the NPA**

At the first internal difficulties and ideological internal battles, NPA centre imploded. At the last congress, the centre (Position 1) allied with the right (Position 3) on a reformist-oriented platform.

A few months later, the centre split and left a big mess at the leadership level. Position 1a (a part of Position 1 around Yvan Le Maitre and Alain Krivine) blocked with the left to stand Philippe Poutou. The left, itself a composite bloc of four or more groups, accepted this happily but did nothing to ensure a clear document as a platform for Poutou campaign. This is in large measure because their roots in the Lutte Ouvriere tradition (the Voix des Travailleurs split away from LO in the late 1990s) is also inclined to standing in elections on a small number of immediate demands plus abstract propaganda for socialism.

Since then, NPA has been paralysed, as every document and every decision at the leadership needs to be painfully negotiated with various figures in Position 1. This explains why there has been no vibrant campaign for the cancellation of the debt. Position 2 promised to prepare this kind of campaign, on this basis but then made another concession to the centre and accepted the ATTAC slogan for it "an expert inquiry (audit) and suspension of the payment". It is difficult to see how this slogan can appeal to the masses, but clearly is suited to an educational campaign with experts, economy professors, public lectures etc. This is the lifeless approach of a policy think tank for a future reformist government rather than a fighting slogan for mass working class action. In short it is very appropriate for ATTAC and utterly inappropriate for a revolutionary party.

Undoubtedly, a period of tension, internal clashes, crisis desertions and splits has opened inside NPA. The Gauche Anticapitaliste has analysed the situation in its [recent declaration](#) [1] dated February 12. They say:

"We need from today to build an anti-crises left bloc, on the streets as well as at the ballot boxes, a candidate for power to apply, in close relation with the self-activity of the masses, a program to break with capitalism." This bloc should group a spectrum from far left to the "anti-neoliberal" left reformists. The GA proposes to immediately drop the Poutou campaign which they judge not only useless but damaging and to start immediately a "public battle for unity". They say that this will in any case be carried out by GA if not by NPA as a whole. Its main objective is standing left unity (not NPA) candidates in the parliamentary elections in June. This implies ignoring the NPA's decision not to stand candidates in alliance with FdG and that NPA members "should start to work locally in this direction immediately."

This is a perspective of a de facto split if NPA does not follow this new course. In local branch discussions, things are put in even more bluntly. Members of GA have started holding separate meetings locally to prepare for this turn. In these discussions, the questions raised are 'Is NPA dead or not?' 'Is NPA political project?' and 'Is the NPA reformable with an emergency congress?' These questions could be settled in a meeting of GA for March 17-18 and the perspective of major split is approaching. The GA claims 500 members.

It is possible that, at that meeting or if they wait for the wake an electoral debacle for the NPA presidential campaign, the right wing will follow the course charted by Chritsin Piquet's Gauche Unitaire and Convergences et Alternatives and split to join FdG.

Already now, the Gauche Révolutionnaire, (section of CWI like the proverbial rodents, faced with a foundering ship,) has left NPA, where it was part of the left platform and of NPA national leadership. It has done so in the most inglorious manner imaginable, without a serious battle to reorient NPA and its campaign.

### **Where is the NPA going?**

What is then the perspective for NPA in the election and after? At the moment? given the weakness and disorientation of the left a crippled, paralysed and rightward moving NPA is a real danger.

A tired feeling of resignation is detectable in Poutou's answers to the press. 'We defend the idea that we must fight but people do not believe in it anymore, even if they share our ideas.' It is probable that Philippe Poutou score will be higher than the zero point something of opinion polls but it is difficult to imagine a score between 4 and 5 per cent that Olivier Besancenot obtained.

After the presidential elections, the parliamentary elections will probably follow the same course. This would not be a catastrophe if the NPA leadership were not obsessed about success in the election as the only true measure of party building and had not permeated the rank and file with their electoral cretinism.

Given this culture a widespread demoralisation for the election-oriented NPA is, unfortunately a probable outcome, with or without a split. Yet for all its limits and failures, the NPA remains today a focus point for many of the best activists. It could play a central role in the resistance against austerity, whether it comes from Sarkozy or from Hollande.

But to play this role, the party must be virtually refounded. It must acknowledge its electoralist and trade union errors and launch a struggle for an action program against austerity in the unions, in the workplaces, in the schools and universities. It must radically break from the practice of strictly separating politics (elections and demonstrations) from trade unionism.

Despite the NPA members active involvement in all the strikes and days of action, despite Besancenot's outspoken rejection of the CFDT leaders demand the NPA keep off the picket lines in 2010, the party does not see as its role as a strategist on all the fronts and for all the sectors of the class struggle.

Elections must not be a chase after votes on a minimum programme but a tribune from which to call for a revolutionary strategy in the struggles to come whoever wins the elections. The social movements and days of action must not be left in the hands of union leaders who have sold them out time and again. The NPA must loudly and courageously warn of their treachery, organise ranks and file democratic control from below, campaign to reject any sell-out and recruit the best militants to the party.

The NPA is now threatened to become itself the victim of the halfway house between reform and revolution the LCR leaders founded it on. The inner contradictions of a party, founded on a centrist rotten compromise are breaking down, and threaten to destroy the positive, progressive potential the NPA had when it attracted thousands of working class militants. Whilst the NPA is in decline and confusion, the struggle of its future is still to be fought out to a decision. For these reasons we not only call for a vote for Philippe Poutou but for a fight for a revolutionary programme against

reformism and centrism in the ranks of NPA.

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