

# France: can a new, revolutionary party be forged in struggle?

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The last year has been a crucial one in France. First, Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president on a platform that promised a wave of massive attacks against the working class. Then came the first major battle, as railway workers defied him. Although they were defeated on the field of battle, this was a result of the betrayals of their own leaderships, not any reluctance to fight. Indeed, the union leaders had clearly signalled their intention to surrender on the very eve of the battle. Lastly, once again, the "revolutionary left" proved to be the dog that did not bark, that is, it failed to alert workers to bureaucratic treachery. This left the heirs of May 1968 in itself clearly at a turning point. Lutte Ouvriere (LO), the most unchanging of them all, is moving rightwards to standing on a common slate with the Parti socialiste (PS) and has finally expelled its only faction. Meanwhile, the Ligue communiste rÉvolutionnaire (LCR) has decided to launch a new, anticapitalist party.

In many respects France is an exception among the European countries. Despite attempts at privatisation by successive governments since 1995, the state still controls major enterprises in key sectors like energy and transport. The public welfare system, the Securite Sociale, manages an enormous budget of €400 billion including pensions, health and unemployment benefits. In whole sectors, like education, childcare, universities and healthcare, the private sector plays a very limited role. Moreover, labour market regulation is amongst the tightest in Europe, offering real protection to workers with regular fulltime employment. Most of these workers are employed with a Contrat - Duree Indeterminee, whose strict rules regulate the 35 hour week, long vacations, restrictions against shop-steward victimisation and sacking. In short, the main structures of class collaboration that were created during de Gaulle's short-lived post war government, in which the Parti communiste francais (PCF) served, are still in place.

Today, neoliberal commentators and financiers regard France as the new "sick man of Europe". Public debt stands at 66 per cent of GDP and has grown faster than in any other EU country. The share of French exports outside the euro area has dropped by 18 per cent while Germany's has grown by 15 per cent. GDP growth has been sluggish at around 2 per cent in recent years in contrast to a euro-zone average of 2.8 per cent. For many years, French bosses have been demanding a radical change. They want a drastic cut in taxes and public spending, privatisation of public services and a total deregulation of labour supply and conditions. The latter includes longer working hours, fewer social benefits, lower pensions and easier sacking of workers.

The previous president, Jacques Chirac, although sympathetic to many of these demands, was not the man to steer France into the neoliberal club. Having served in government with every president since de Gaulle, Chirac had too many ties to the old regime and its system of social and power relations. A political opportunist, he adopted or dropped policies depending on whether they would strengthen or weaken his own position. In 1995, he was elected on a platform of closing the "social rift" between rich and poor, only to appoint Prime Minister Alain JuppÉ with the project of cutting pensions and reducing public sector

spending. The result was a tidal wave of class struggle, again headed by the railway workers, which forced the government into a humiliating climbdown. As an effective proponent of neoliberal "reforms", Chirac never recovered from this defeat. In 1997, he tried to get a clear mandate for them by calling new elections, but these delivered a PS government led by Lionel Jospin. This government, despite introducing flexibility and, indeed, more privatisations than Chirac, had to make concessions to workers in the shape of the 35 hour week.

Chirac's second term as president followed a similar course. Having been re-elected with 82 per cent of the vote in the second round, against Jean Marie Le Pen of the far right, he did manage to push through some partial reforms. Once again, however, he met with vigorous resistance from the working class. In both 2003 and 2004, huge waves of strikes and protests against the reforms rocked the country and threatened to spiral into a general strike. In 2005, in the referendum on the European Union constitution, the No Campaign of the Left struck a body blow to Chirac and neoliberalism. Soon after, the youth of the banlieues (suburbs) rebelled against racist police repression and brutality, as well as their appalling living conditions and an average unemployment rate running at 40-50 per cent. In 2006, Chirac's prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, attempted to introduce laws that would have reduced job security for young workers. This "First Employment Contract" (CPE) project had to be withdrawn in the face of enormous resistance from the youth, including university and high school students, who won the active support of workers.

The balance sheet of the Chirac years is clear. Neoliberal reforms were successfully delayed or even blocked altogether by workers' resistance. What is more, the role of the PS in government during this period finally broke the illusions of many workers who had seen in it a party of the left. Yet, at the same time, the working class has not emerged out of these struggles united around a new leadership, that is, a party, and programme. While the rank and file of the unions were able to drag their leaders into action on these reforms, most of these officials were unwilling to fight and some actually agreed with the government's proposals. This huge gap, between combativity and resistance from the workers on the one side and a treacherous bureaucratic leadership on the other, has been a permanent feature of the class struggle over recent years.

### **Sarkozy's declaration of war**

The 2007 presidential election was rightly perceived as a decisive change. After winning control of the main right wing party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), Nicolas Sarkozy promoted himself as the French Margaret Thatcher who would break the power of the unions and cut workers' rights and social gains to the bone. Sarkozy also successfully used populist and racist demagogy in the name of fighting crime, promising repression and victimisation of immigrants and youth. Indeed, the whole 2005 rebellion in the banlieues started when he openly referred to the youth in these areas as "filth" that he would clean out with high-pressure hoses. This, of course, proved popular with the reactionary and racist electorate of Jean-Marie Le Pen. In his presidential campaign, Sarkozy also combined "law and order" with the urgency of a radical change, a "break" towards, although he did not say it openly, neoliberalism. Reflecting this, his motto was: "work more to earn more".

After his election, Sarkozy lost no time. First, he rewarded his own social class generously, with a €15 billion package of measures for the bosses and the rich, including hefty cuts in inheritance and wealth taxes. Then he proceeded to a series of brutal attacks against the workers:

? Restrictions on the right to strike and the introduction of a "minimum service provision" in the transport sector (where the vanguard of the French working class is).

? A general cut in the reimbursement of medical expenses a measure that hits lower income workers hardest.

? Privatisation of state owned utility companies: in the case of GDF, the gas company, this was despite his earlier promise not to privatise it, and was brought about via its fusion with the private water, gas and electricity monopoly, Suez.

? 20,000 job cuts in the public sector, most of them among teachers.

? Steps towards bringing private enterprise and the market into the universities.

? The end of special pension schemes for railway, metro and electricity workers

This was just the first round. This year, Sarkozy has gone on to "reform" the labour laws, in a way reminiscent of the defeated first employment contract (CPE). He has created a new ministry of "immigration and national identity" with the implication that the French nationhood is under threat. He has given this body the task of ensuring 25,000 deportations a year and justifies this with the racist lie that immigrants are taking jobs from French workers and are responsible for crime and other social ills.

### **Railway workers strike back**

The first big social battle was around the régimes spéciaux, the pension schemes for some 500,000 public sector workers, in the railway, metro, and electricity industries. Here, the rank and file were ready for a long and hard fight and were united around the demand to scrap the new pension "reform" altogether. Their union leaders, however, had a very different position. All of them, except the smaller SUD union, were convinced that "pension reform" was inevitable and that their role was not to organise all out resistance to this neoliberal assault but, as they put it, "to accompany it", i.e. to negotiate minor alterations to it. The CGT, the strongest union in the railway sector, for all its tougher words, also adopted this line. Its leader, Bernard Thibault, was invited several times to the presidential palace for friendly discussions.

How did the union leaders succeed in derailing the strike despite the combativity of their members? First, instead of uniting all the workers who were under attack from Sarkozy, they mobilised each sector separately. After a very successful day of action and strike on 18 October, the railway workers spontaneously continued the strike for several days, despite union leaders urging them to return to work and to "prepare their forces" for another day of action the following month. Then the leaders fixed a day of strike action for teachers and the public sector for 20 November, although railway and metro workers were due to strike on 14 November. The leaders hoped this strike would peter out after a few days so that no united action between the different sectors would occur but the metro and railway workers continued their action, causing a week of chaos in the French transport system.

On the very eve of the big strike on 20 November, Thibault announced he was in favour of separate negotiations with the government for each sector (railway, metro, electricity workers) a move that would enormously weaken each one's bargaining position. This was clearly recognised by the rank and file as a total stab in the back. Anger and resentment were very strong. François Chérèque, leader of the CFDT union, who had opposed a united struggle all along, was forced off the Paris demo by furious workers but Thibault, too, was hissed at mass meetings of railworkers. The anger was such that Sarkozy even told Le Monde (26 November) "we have to save private (le soldat) Thibault" from his own members by "conceding" a month of negotiations, while insisting that an end to the strikes was a pre-condition for talks. He calculated that the strikes would lose all momentum in this period and the union leaders would assent to virtually all his demands. He was right.

On 20 November the three sectors in struggle marched together: metro and railway workers fighting for their pension rights; postal, gas and electricity workers, facing privatisation; teachers affected by job cuts; students against a "reform" of universities opening them to the bosses' influence and effectively preparing their privatisation. So why were the rank and file, who had mobilised for the days of action by means of *assemblées générales* (AGs or local mass meetings in the workplaces) and who, in the case of rail and metro workers, had struck for over a week to unite with the teachers, students, and other workers, not able to resist the sell out? Quite simply because they had no alternative leadership, no democratic organisational structure that could lead and coordinate their struggles, free from the bureaucrats' stranglehold.

In the days following 20 November, under massive CGT pressure and feeling isolated, the rail and metro workers' AGs voted for the "suspension" of the strike. The union leaders trumpeted the opening of separate negotiations with Sarkozy as a victory. Indeed it was, but for Sarkozy, and his loyal "privates", the trade union leaders. They ensured their continued right to negotiate away their members' rights.

So, during October and November last year, there was a marvellous opportunity to force the scrapping of the pension reform, as workers did in the face of previous attacks (1995, 2006-07). All the elements for a victorious movement were present: a key militant sector, the railway and metro workers, were on indefinite strike; much wider layers of public sector workers were ready to fight against the government; school and university students were already fighting the education reforms; and the youth in the banlieues again rose up against racist police harassment and homicide. In short, an almighty rebellion could have forced the Sarkozy government into surrender, and even threatened its very existence.

The reformist trade union leaders, ever the willing doctors called to the bed of an ailing capitalism rather than its undertakers, did everything in their power to prevent such a revolutionary situation emerging. These bureaucrats cannot envisage a higher goal than negotiating slightly better conditions for workers. Thus, when the government demands a give-back of workers' previous gains, all they can think of is ensuring that they negotiate the giving. At no point do they even conceive of mobilising the workers to defeat these attacks outright, let alone force a political confrontation between the government and the streets, a confrontation that might threaten the very existence of French capitalism.

Was a general strike against Sarkozy possible? Yes it was. The central missing element was a political force, a revolutionary party, with roots in the working class and a clear revolutionary intervention into the movement. It would have fought for the creation of joint committees of all sections of workers with the students and banlieue youth, and for self-defence squads against scabs, police and provocateurs. Central to this would have been the development of workers' self-organisation, going beyond the local *assemblées générales* and coordinations (meetings of delegates from the various sectors) into a national network with an elected central leadership. This alone could have effectively challenged the right of the trade union leaders to negotiate a defeat. Heading a vast national network, as big as the movement that defeated the European Constitution, it could have mobilised workers in other sectors around a programme of action to defeat the whole Sarkozy offensive.

Pushing through the pension reform was a clear victory for Sarkozy. However, it was not yet the strategic defeat of the French working class that Sarkozy is after. More and bigger attacks are planned and, because of their politics, the union leaders will fail to oppose them as well. Indeed, they will be more determined to prevent an effective fight than to lead one. The reformism of the trade union leaders means that they accept, fully and unconditionally, the permanence of the capitalist state, and the need to respect and obey it, whatever sacrifices it may demand of the workers. Protest to let off steam, to try to persuade certainly, but if anyone wants to seriously modify or reverse the bosses' attack then it must be done via the

ballot box, not by direct action. This is all the union leaders will allow, but only in order to divert their members' anger towards future elections, not in order to win on the streets.

After the strikes, they have begun to talk again about a closer partnership with the Parti socialiste. Against this petty electoralism, revolutionaries should maintain that the struggles against Sarkozy in the workplaces, in the schools, in the universities and on the streets are potentially a political struggle, and that a mass strike wave will quickly pose the question, "Who rules the bosses or the workers?" The problem facing the union leaders in the face of Sarkozy's continuing attacks is that the only electorally viable reformist party, the PS, is in a terrible state following its trouncing by Sarkozy last Spring.

### **Reformism at a loss**

After the presidential election, despite or, rather, because of, the rising level of the class struggle, the whole spectrum of the reformist left in France is in a devastated state. In particular, PS has been virtually silent on Sarkozy's policies, still less joining any resistance to them. Why? First, many Parti socialiste leaders wholeheartedly agree with the need for "reforms", even with Sarkozy's reforms for instance the pension reform. Second, incredibly, many important PS leaders have actually accepted positions as ministers or advisers in Sarkozy's government!

Bernard Kouchner, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, is leading the warmongering against Iran. Another Socialist, Fadela Amara, initiator of a campaign (Ni pute, ni soumise) against women's oppression in the banlieues, has taken a junior post in the ministry headed by the arch-reactionary Catholic, anti-abortionist and homophobe, Christine Boutin. Another, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, defeated challenger to SÈgol'ne Royal for the PS presidential candidacy, accepted Sarkozy's appointment to the Managing Directorship of the International Monetary Fund!

Meanwhile, the PS leaders are deeply divided and continuing an internecine conflict for control of the party. In political terms, all the PS leaders agree with continuing the rightward evolution of the entire European social democracy, following in the steps of Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and José Zapatero. This has taken its logical endpoint in Italy with Walter Veltroni, the ex-leader of the Democratic Socialists, transforming his party into a fully-fledged US-style Democratic Party through a fusion with openly bourgeois parties.

The first steps of the neoliberalisation of the PS were already clear in the government of Lionel Jospin, who successfully and without serious opposition privatised many state-owned companies and introduced elements of "work flexibility" through the 35-hour week reform. He happily signed up to the Nice Treaty and the Lisbon agenda. Further steps on this road were taken in the campaign of SÈgolÈne Royal. Her programme was a mish-mash of weak concessions to her working class base (increase of minimum wage, no job cuts in the public sector) with the overall goal of a new "just order" with authoritarian nationalist overtones and creeping neoliberal reform. An emblematic measure of her new order was the creation of "re-education" camps for "juvenile delinquents", under the control of the army. After the election she revealed that she never believed in her own programme, and in particular the promise of wage increases, although that was a PS policy! She also disclosed that she had maintained contact between the two rounds with rightwing candidate François Bayrou, whom she had secretly promised to appoint as Prime Minister.

Today, all PS leaders agree on this overall rightward direction arguing only about its speed and who should lead it. While Royal is pushing for acceleration towards the right, the rest of the party is more reluctant to follow her. They make the not unreasonable calculation that French workers will be hit by Sarkozy's attacks, and will use a vote for the PS to stop him. Hence, they think the PS should at least downplay its

support for Sarkozy's reforms, and just sit comfortably in their chairs, either in parliament or in the mayoralties, and wait to come back to power in five years.

It is certainly not the Parti communiste français that will disrupt this cynical calculation. With a result barely above 1 per cent, the PCF is close to its end as an independent force in electoral politics. It owes its survival, both political and organisational, to its alliance with the PS to keep its MPs and its positions in local administrations. While it retains an influence in the working class through its relatively large membership and its strong (but weakening) bonds with the CGT bureaucracy, its members and leaders are patently deeply demoralised and suffering from an identity crisis.

Clearly, the trade union leadership will be unable to completely sit out the struggles of the next few years. Given the impotence of political reformism and the attacks of this government, they are caught in the front lines of the battle. They have all, including the CGT, made their cowardly choice: to negotiate with the government over minor concessions that will barely and very partially mitigate a brutal shift towards longer hours, insecure jobs, less rights and more exploitation. These leaders feel cushioned from the anger of their basis by the many layers of intermediate bureaucracy, the lack of internal democracy and the temporary political irrelevance of the bourgeois workers' party.

The political struggle against betrayal by trade union leaderships is a crucial task for the far left in France in the months and years ahead. Given the confusion and weakness of the reformist left, given the onslaught from Sarkozy and the bosses and the cowardice of the union leaders, it might seem obvious that an enormous opportunity presents itself to the revolutionary left: an opportunity to show its mettle as an alternative leadership, armed with a practical strategy for beating off Sarkozy's attacks and reviving the workplace and political organisation of the working class movement. Such, indeed, is the case, objectively speaking. The circumstances in France today offer enormous possibilities to build a new party, drawing into its ranks the front line fighters from the trade unions, the schools and colleges, the banlieues, to create a real Leninist combat party. Such a party would of course not simply group together the revolutionary vanguard but would, without any sectarian self-isolation, utilise the united front and transitional demands to maintain and strengthen the closest links with the millions of still reformist workers, helping them to expose, control and replace the treacherous trade union bureaucrats and win victories against Sarkozy that would eventually convince these workers that they can overthrow the capitalist class and reorganise society to meet the needs of the millions, not the millionaires. So how has the actual "revolutionary left" in France responded to these opportunities? Unfortunately, precisely by not offering a clear proposal for building a revolutionary party or outlining a revolutionary transitional programme.

### **LO: from economism to pact with socialists**

No one should doubt that the several thousand militants and supporters of the major far left organisations in the trade unions, schools and universities, particularly LO and the LCR, played an important role in the Autumn mobilisations against Sarkozy. It was the political strategy and tactics of their leaderships that failed the movement.

With Lutte ouvrière it has often seemed to outsiders that nothing has ever changed and nothing ever will. They keep repeating the same flawed analysis and answers like a religious mantra. They raise only the most immediate demands, avoid the question of government, raise no transitional demands, ignore issues like racism, deny globalisation and refuse to participate in the mobilisations connected with it, and basically tail what they believe to be the present consciousness of vanguard militants in the workplace.

For LO, the economic struggle of the working class, in the narrowest sense, is the only important terrain of battle. Although it has important historical roots in the working class, it ultimately believes that it cannot

have an influence on the course of the class struggle. In its own terms, a global workers' movement will erupt one day to smash capitalism but, in the meantime, denouncing capitalism and keeping alive the belief in socialism is the main, indeed the only, task.

How then should revolutionaries relate to a class struggle that does not develop exclusively around the economic demands of blue-collar workers? LO does not have a clue. Worse, it considers it a dangerous distraction from more important issues. During the 2005 banlieues youth rebellion, LO, far from denouncing the state racism and repression, denounced - the youth. For LO, the banlieue youth were not part of the working class and it denounced with contempt their struggle as lumpen acts of vandalism. This attitude continued during the CPE struggle when LO denounced the direct actions of the youth (blocking train stations and motorways) as dangerously counterposing the youth and the working class. In reality, the youth were playing a vanguard role in rallying the mass of the workers into action. Instead, LO praised the role and the unity of the trade union leaders, at a time when they were doing all they could to limit the demands of the movement as well as the movement's influence on the working class. In these two important crises, LO economist orthodoxy was revealed to be worse than useless.

LO's electoral campaign in 2007 was abstract and dull, even for them. Their main slogan was: "LO, always on the side of the workers" clearly neither an inspiration to struggle against the coming neoliberal offensive nor any solution to the crisis of leadership. LO's programme was, if anything, even worse than before. It was called "a programme of defence of the workers" and had very little in it beyond a series of reforms: a plan for more social housing, a minimum wage of €1,500, the creation of 750,000 jobs in the public sector. Its most radical measures to achieve these reforms were opening the books of the corporations and taxing the rich.

The preamble to this platform raised hopes for a "powerful social movement capable of scaring the bosses and making them retreat". Arlette Laguiller, LO's presidential candidate, continued by outlining how, one day, popular anger will erupt and create this mass movement and that:

"It is in order that this movement does not aim at a wrong goal when it happens that I propose this programme that contains nothing revolutionary in the sense that it does not foresee either the expropriation of capital or the transformation of the private propriety of large companies into collective propriety, into the property of the state. However, this programme re-establishes a little the equilibrium between the capitalist class and the workers. What I propose here is what should be the first steps of a presidency and a really socialist government."

This encapsulates LO's method with all its tailism and passive propagandism. Instead of seeking to organise the vanguard around an action programme that strikes at capitalism, LO adapts to prevalent reformist ideas and demands. The whole idea that a mighty workers' movement would aim simply to restore the balance with the bosses is a utopian fantasy. Disequilibrium and instability are constant features of capitalism, ones that arise from the exploitative character of the capital-labour relation and the process of capital accumulation. More to the point, the latter processes create a class society that is contradictory, with a working class fragmented and subject to different ideological and political influences.

The very idea of a "perfect" social movement, like the one implied in the LO schema, is a fantasy. What we have is the reality of class struggle and actual social movements on the streets in France today that, with all their attendant problems and difficulties, nevertheless, express the potentiality of a socialist revolution. To realise this potential means presenting the working class with a strategy that seeks to turn the struggles taking place today into a struggle for power, for a workers' government, for a socialist revolution. It means avoiding the twin errors of opportunism and sectarianism, by using united front tactics to enable the working class to take effective action, while at the same time exposing the treachery of its existing

leadership and distinguishing revolutionary politics and demands from the reformist programme.

For LO, having long ago abandoned the transitional programme as "only applicable in revolutionary situations", this method is completely alien. What is more, LO, of course, has nothing to say to victims of social oppression and state racism, like the banlieue youth, except the most abstract explanations of racism as being caused by capital and finger wagging about the danger of "lumpen actions" like burning cars, municipal property and buses. The question of how these young people's struggle, with all its militancy, courage and, of course, mistakes, can be organised to strengthen and develop the struggle of the whole class is ignored.

LO's intervention in the railway strike movement of October 2007 followed from its general approach to the class struggle. While supporting the movement, LO refused to put forward any concrete demand on the union leaders for a general strike, or any concrete slogan to help the workers organise in rank and file coordinations to keep control of their struggles. Before the big strikes, an LO editorial warned:

"A day of strike as on 18 October, even if successful will not be enough to make them [the bosses] give in. However, it should be a warning to the bosses and the government and at the same time an incitement to the trade unions to foresee and announce the next action".<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of the crucial day of action on 20 November, LO's newspaper criticised the union leaders who had chosen to go for separate actions but it concluded with more optimistic musings.

"However, the workers have many times shown in the past that their combativity can be stronger than the hesitations of the union leaderships and can impose on them to go further. It is in the interest of all the workers that this time again things take this course."<sup>2</sup>

We say, frankly, that such politics stops where revolutionary politics begins. The clear betrayal of the trade union leaders is only diplomatically alluded to. How should the workers organise to respond to this betrayal? How can they struggle, how can they win? The very term "coordination" never gets a mention despite the fact that LO itself organised such bodies of railway workers in the 1980s and that LO members were indeed organising metro workers in Paris against the trade union leaders this time, too. In short, LO refuses to give a political leadership to the vanguard of the working class by stating clearly and explicitly what needs to be done.

Yet, very occasionally, unchanging LO does take an initiative, but usually quickly comes to regret it. Thus, after Arlette Laguiller's better than usual electoral result in 1995, 5.30 per cent, LO briefly toyed with the idea of calling for a new workers' party. It dropped the idea like a hot potato almost immediately, despite (or because) of its positive reception on the left. This retreat, however, contributed to a split by over 100 militants to form the Voix des Travailleurs group which eventually joined the LCR as a faction. A recent break by LO from its routine, this time that of never calling for a vote for the PS (since 1981 when it did call for a vote for Mitterand in the second round), has led to another split.

Following Arlette Laguiller's appallingly low score in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections, 1.33 per cent, compared her score of 5.72 per cent in 2002, a loss of two thirds of its voters, LO was badly shaken. It was left with a campaign debt of Å1.4 million. To add insult to injury, the LCR's candidate Olivier Besancenot got 4.08 per cent, not only beating Arlette's score by 3 to 1 but also trouncing Marie-George Buffet (Parti communiste franÁais) and JosÈ BovÈ, the "unity of the left" candidate.

But it gets worse. Faced with stagnation, or even a drop, in its membership and with these election results, the LO leadership has decided on a desperate solution: a dramatic move rightwards towards common



slates with the reformist parties in the next round of local elections. In a situation where the PS and PCF are deeply discredited and incapable of mounting any serious resistance to Sarkozy, not least because many of their leaders are actually in favour of neoliberal reforms, LO's move is utter madness.

It also flatly contradicts the historical LO line of avoiding any contact with PS, indeed, they have treated reformism as a contagious illness, to be avoided at all costs, often drawing the sectarian conclusion that revolutionaries should not place united front demands on the big reformist parties. Only a few months ago, LO harshly criticised LCR for campaigning together with PS leaders for the No Campaign of the Left (notwithstanding the LCR's tendency to opportunism, this was a perfectly legitimate and correct campaign).

Now, however, they propose a dramatic u-turn to form lists together with many of these same leaders and to even share the responsibility for their reformist policy applied at the local level. The reason for this? LO has decided that only elected officials can give them more visibility, contacts, and greater possibility of local activity. In short, their reasons express a shamelessly reformist attitude to party building. The move has not gone without reverberations within LO. The long standing public opposition, who had a monthly column in the paper, have been effectively expelled for opposing it suspended by the party until the December 2008 congress with their regular column curtailed. The opposition, said to number somewhere between 100 and 150 members, have called it a de facto expulsion.

### **LCR: for a new party?**

Since the mid 1990s the LCR and its supporters in the Fourth International have been chiefly characterised by deep pessimism about the goal of building a revolutionary party of socialist revolution. Indeed, after 1991, they concluded that the "epoch of October [1917] is over", along with the immediate importance of the dichotomy between reform and revolution in terms of building working class parties. The task of period, they argue, is the "recomposition" of the workers' movement, that is, to rebuild it together with the workers, youth, groups, trade unions and parties opposed to neoliberalism and struggling against it. An early supporter of the anticapitalist movement with the "Euromarches" of 1997 (Amsterdam) and 1999 (Cologne), the LCR certainly does not suffer from the rigid sectarian economism of LO. Nevertheless, for the LCR, unity in the anticapitalist movement always meant dropping important aspects of the revolutionary programme, and never calling on reformist leaderships, be that in the trade unions, the European Left Party in the European Social Forum, or Lula's supporters in the World Social Forum, to go further than they were willing to do at any given moment.

Despite the LCR's view that the "broad parties" that they propose should not be identified as either reformist or revolutionary, in truth, this means a strategic orientation to the building of new reformist parties. Reflecting this, their leading theorists have revised key elements of classical Marxism, such as the theory of the state<sup>3</sup> and re-elaborated notions of Gramscian hegemony derived from the Eurocommunists of the 1970s. Central tenets of bolshevism, like the dictatorship of proletariat or the workers' councils as basis of the workers' state, were abandoned in favour of utopian half-way house solutions like the coexistence of workers' council with a parliamentary assembly.<sup>4</sup> While these ideas about the tasks of the period and party building are not codified in a well-defined form and there is a whole spectrum of different positions deriving from them according to different tendencies inside LCR, they constitute nevertheless their basic guiding principles. Moreover, the LCR's deeply ingrained opportunism means it can twist this very flexible schema to justify almost any tactical orientation, be it towards leftward developments in workers and youth struggles or electoral alliances.

In the 1990s, the LCR frantically searched for a major reformist partner with whom it could fuse. These were the years when the Stalinist left was still politically and numerically strong but was going through a period of decline and crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For years, the Fourth International's

textbook example of this new tactic was Italy's Rifondazione Comunista, in which their section remained a tendency from its foundation in the early 1990s until just a few months ago. While this tactic was also "successfully" applied by many of its sister organisations (in Mexico, Spain and Portugal) to the point that some of them are now almost extinct, the LCR's wooing was in vain. Neither the PCF nor the Green Party were willing to fuse with a relatively large and coherent group that could have had a serious impact in a joint organisation. Nevertheless, in the "regroupment" years after 1995, the LCR swallowed up a split from LO as well as other small centrist groups. More importantly, it correctly oriented to the workers' struggles and to the new movements against globalisation. By the mid-years of the new decade, it had a fresh look with its new presidential candidate figure Olivier Besancenot, who has become very popular beyond the far left and is surrounded by an aura of sympathy even in traditionally hostile milieux, including the hardline Stalinists at the F'ête de l'Humanité, for instance.

Despite strong numerical growth, the LCR's overall strategy of party building was far from clear, even to its own leadership. The majority wavered between two tactics: electoral alliances with LO (as was the case in 2004) on one side, and a search for partners on the left of PS and with the PCF on the other. These two orientations are embodied in semi-permanent tendencies inside the party. The first, called Plateforme 2, represents the "left" of LCR and is composed mainly of the 1997 split from LO (VDT). The second, whose main leader is Christian Piquet, constantly orients towards "unity of the left" and actively promotes left reformism.

Until the end of 2006, the LCR was still attempting to stitch together a party with left reformist forces. This included ATTAC (acronym for Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), sectors around the left trade union SUD, and José Bové of the Confédération paysanne (the radical farmers' movement). The belief that this goal was actually within the LCR's reach came with the 2005 No Campaign of the Left, where several hundred collectives were formed across the whole country, mobilising thousands of members from PCF, ATTAC and LCR, plus Bové's supporters, as well as some old members, sympathisers and contacts of the LCR. With an approaching presidential election campaign, the LCR leadership wanted to cement this alliance around a common "unitary" candidate. This dream collapsed in a disastrous shambles for two reasons.

Firstly, ATTAC exploded in a scandal over rigged internal elections. For an organisation whose motto was "to make politics differently" (meaning in a clean way) this was a mortal deathblow. Then the PCF manoeuvred to have its candidate, Marie-George Buffet, crowned candidate of this whole movement, but leaving the PCF with its hands free to negotiate ministerial posts in a future PS government. To achieve its goal, the PCF shamelessly packed the selection meetings of the collectives with its supporters and pushed through the nomination of Buffet. But it rejected the LCR's correct proposal that any candidate should refuse to participate in a government with the PS. The LCR quite rightly refused to submit to this coup d'état. Thus, the PCF did for the collectives: instead of a single "unitary" candidate, the disunited left presented three candidates: Olivier Besancenot, Marie-George Buffet and a last minute entrant, laughably claiming to "unite" the movement, José Bové.

The LCR was comforted by the fact that Besancenot collected more votes than Buffet, Laguiller and Bové put together! He appeared to the radicalised workers and youth, correctly enough, as the candidate closest to their struggles and promising not to betray them by taking part in a neoliberal government with PS. Flushed by their success and encouraged by the warm response to Besancenot at mass election rallies, the LCR felt that they needed to take a new initiative. In June 2007, Besancenot issued a call for a new anticapitalist party. This is an unusual move for the LCR. Instead of adapting to a section of the existing reformist leadership, they assigned themselves a leading role. Later, the LCR clarified its plan to build the

new party for the defence of the interest of the workers and based on an anticapitalist programme. It proposes that anticapitalists regroup in this party, "rooted in the youth, the workplaces, the public sector and the working class areas, to build the mobilisations of today, which should prepare a radical, revolutionary change in society."

While the new party is to be many things "Guevarist", "Feminist", "Ecologist", etc. the LCR have insisted that it should not be Trotskyist or Leninist. Indeed, they seem to be proposing a minimum/maximum programme, that is, a series of left reformist demands combined with a call for a new socialist, anticapitalist society. In doing so, they tacitly drop the transitional method, as developed by the Communist International in its early years and then more fully by Leon Trotsky. Trotsky argued that demands like workers' control of production, and a mass workers' militia, are key elements of the communist programme because they challenge the rule of capital; they can be won in high periods of struggle but fundamentally destabilise capitalist class rule, and pose the breaking up of the old state machine and a revolutionary seizure of power by the working class.

Despite their apparent enthusiasm, the LCR's first steps towards implementing their policy have been timid and faltering. Despite a major strike wave that mobilised hundreds of thousands of workers and students across the country, no major series of meetings or launch conferences for such a party project have taken place. Instead, each local branch has been left to take its own initiative or not: in many cases they had no clue how to proceed! At a national level, the move towards a new party is far from being enthusiastically accepted and a sizeable minority tendency within the LCR is publicly and vociferously opposed to it.

Since Sarkozy's election, the LCR has correctly called for social resistance against his reactionary programme. It has denounced the class character of his measures and has rightly addressed all the social sectors that will be hit by his politics: workers, youth, immigrants. In October and November 2007, in the middle of the first big battle, Rouge, LCR's newspaper, correctly called for a generalised mobilisation: "Let us build the social fightback", "Pursue, generalise to win", "Unity on strike", "Convergence is necessary". LCR's position was against negotiations, for a broadening of the struggle to bring in other sectors and for an unlimited strike. Finally, the call for a new party is put in the context of the wider political struggle against Sarkozy; we need a new party to win this struggle.

However, behind these entirely correct positions it is striking to note that LCR politics is lacking any concrete implementation. How can we generalise the struggle? Around what demands? How can we organise ourselves to take control of the strike out of the hands of the union bureaucrats? Simple and clear slogans like "unlimited general strike", "build strike committees and coordinations", not to speak of self-defence and workers' militias, are all noticeable only by their absence. In this respect, LCR is mainly responding to the mounting mobilisation by simply transmitting politically the existing ideas and consciousness of the broad, quite politically heterogeneous vanguard who want to fight Sarkozy. Clearly the role of a revolutionary party would be to help this vanguard to take the next steps, warn it of the betrayal of the union bureaucrats and give it the concrete political and organisational means to fight back.

For the moment, the LCR's emphasis, which is closely related to their new party proposal, is to assemble an electoral umbrella for the March 2008 local elections, hardly a decisive occasion for workers attacked on so many fronts by the government! Indeed, left to its own initiative, it is difficult to believe that LCR is capable of preparing anything better than a new, left reformist party. Ultimately, its perspective is for incremental increases in electoral support over a long period.

Ultimately, then, the LCR do not see what György Lukács characterised as marking V.I. Lenin's method, "the actuality of the revolution", that is, its objective possibility, its potentiality in the struggles taking place against Sarkozy today. As we continuously re-iterate, a new party is urgently needed to fight for a

revolutionary programme to generalise each of these struggles and force a major confrontation between the government and the streets. Nevertheless, the LCR's initiative, opening a debate on the need for a new party, must be welcomed insofar as it is quite openly calling for a split between the vanguard of the working class and the wretched leadership of the PCF and PS. In the context of anger and revolts against the government, and a continuously rightward moving PS, the LCR initiative, if it is pursued with vigour, could well attract many thousands of workers and youth. Such a movement for a new party could be an important arena of struggle for a revolutionary programme and a Leninist combat party in the period ahead.

### **Crisis of leadership**

In the autumn, the betrayal of the trade union leaders not only sent the working class down to defeat over public sector pensions, but also encouraged the demobilisation of the students who launched occupations and protests opposing the beginnings of privatisation in higher education. This spring, Sarkozy buoyed up by his autumn victories, has pressed on with his offensive. The attacks on the "special regimes" pensions were passed into law on 16 January even though negotiations were still underway at the state electricity and railway companies. However, despite this setback, workers have continued to mobilise. On 24 January, a quarter of French public sector workers participated in the day of action on wages, against a background of rising inflation, and in opposition to the 22,900 public sector job cuts planned for this year. While smaller than the November demonstrations, these nevertheless showed the continued willingness of workers to fight.

The trade unions leaders have typically enough continued their acts of betrayal. In discussions with the state, the major trade unions accepted government plans for a massive increase in "flexibilisation", or *prÉcaritÉ*, in French labour laws. The heart of the package was the introduction of a "fixed length contract" (the CDD) that is strikingly similar to the CPE (first job contract). In the first 18 to 36 months of employment, the employer may sack the worker with a severance package worth just 10 per cent of his or her annual pay. While the CPE only applied to young workers, the CDD will effect workers young and old. All the major trade union federations have accepted it and it will now be debated in the National Assembly. Only the CGT withdrew its support at the last minute, knowing that it would still be sent to the National Assembly if it had the backing of the other unions.

Once again, the response of the leaderships of the trade unions shows the profound crisis of leadership afflicting the French working class. The size and scale of workers' and students' mobilisations is impressive, but will not indefinitely survive a series of such defeats. At the same time, the far left is going through a period of quite fundamental change. The LO has lurched rightwards and suffered a split while the LCR marches slowly towards a new party, with a large section of its membership openly opposed to this radical new policy and continuing to cling to the old perspective of regrouping with the PCF.

In this situation, we propose the following to those workers and leftists in France who realise the opportunity that exists in the current crisis to forge a revolutionary party and the urgency to take up this struggle. Our starting point is the conviction that a revolutionary party can be built in the period ahead, providing we have the boldness to explain what this means to workers and youth fighting Sarkozy. Doing so means rearming the working class with the political weapons it needs to fight the trade union bureaucracy in the coming struggles. Persistent agitation for democratic organs of working class struggle, strike committees, local, regional and national coordinations, will be essential to wrestle control of the struggle from the trade union bureaucracy. At the same time, we should take the same struggle into the unions themselves, fighting for a movement of the rank and file to transform the unions and dissolve the parasitic union bureaucracy. Lastly, we should support all initiatives towards a new working class party, while at the same time fighting openly for a re-elaborated, revolutionary action programme.

## ENDNOTES

1 Lutte Ouvrier, Editorial 12/10/2007

2 Lutte Ouvrier Editorial, 16/11/2007

3 Cooper, L., Daniel Bensaid and the Return of Strategy, [www.fifthinternational.org](http://www.fifthinternational.org) <sup>[1]</sup>

4 Cooper, ibid

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.fifthinternational.org>