

France: Confusion on the left, reformist and revolutionary

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?The director reminds all employees of the obligation of laïcité (secularism) and neutrality. On this occasion, it stresses the essential importance attached to respect for everybody and that our language is French. Employees must not speak either among themselves or with users in another language (except in exceptional cases). No manifestation of communautarisme (communitarianism) should take place in the Mairie.?

These shameful lines come from a memo, dated September 2014, addressed to the personnel of a Paris mairie (in the X^{ème} Arrondissement, Ménilmontant and Belleville), that has a Socialist Party mayor. In a historic working class area, with a large ethnically north African population, the language which is the target of this statement is, of course, Arabic, and the ?community? that of immigrants from Maghreb.

Even before the Charlie Hebdo attacks, racism and islamophobia were widespread in France. But, since then, hostility against Arabs and Muslims has worsened. Former president Nicolas Sarkozy has openly called for a ban on wearing hijab in universities and expressed support for a mayor who stopped serving alternatives to pork in school cafeterias. Similar calls have been made from within the Socialist Party government.

In the wake of the attack on Charlie Hebdo, the Minister of Education launched a repressive campaign against any pupils who refused to repeat the phrase ?I am Charlie?. For thus failing to respect ?free speech?, one eight year old child ended up in the office of the school director, and was then taken to the police station until he finally recanted. One lycée teacher has been replaced because some parents judged that the discussions he had organised in classes were not to their political taste.

It is in this context that the government hoped to take advantage of such racist politics and the promotion of national unity to minimise its coming defeat in a round of local elections in late March this year. This attempt was only partially successful. In these ?departmental? elections, abstention remained high, around 50 per cent, and the Socialist Party lost most of the départements that it had previously controlled. This defeat will cost the Socialist Party dearly, since today it is essentially a party of municipal and state officials. The assistants of elected representatives make up some 10 per cent of Socialist Party members and the financial contribution from elected officials accounts for 25 per cent of the party?s income. Having lost a major fraction of them in last year?s local elections (municipales) this year is another big blow to the basis and the roots of Socialist Party across the country.

The major cause of this defeat is the policy the Socialist Party has followed since François Hollande?s election to the presidency. During his campaign, Hollande declared, ?I have one enemy, it is finance?. He promised to resist austerity, promote jobs and show there was an alternative to neoliberalism. Less than

two years later, his Prime Minister Manuel Valls said 'J'aime les entreprises' (I love businesses).

Words were followed by deeds. Large sums of public money, obtained through an increase in VAT, were devoted to supporting private companies. Emmanuel Macron, minister of the economy, is an emblematic figure of this pro-business line within the Socialist Party. His recent law contains measures to make it easier for employers to impose collective sackings and increases from 5 to 12 the number of Sundays when shops will be open. Until now, the hours of labour have been tightly regulated in France and workers benefit from a system of protection embodied in law (the Code du Travail). One of the objectives of the Socialist Party government, and Macron in particular, is to deregulate this sector in the name of 'removing the fetters from free enterprise'.

The next target could be the Contrat à Durée Illimitée (stable work contract) that they want to deregulate and, if possible, fuse with the fixed-term contract, in a similar way as Matteo Renzi has done in Italy with his Jobs Act. Macron has recently declared 'the fact that France is one of the countries that most protects its workers is one of the explanations for the unemployment rate being 10 per cent'. Valls and Macron have repeatedly expressed their opposition to the 35-hour week.

Despite their electoral pledges, next to nothing has been done for the 2.9 million unemployed (10.2 per cent of workforce), the youth toiling in precarious jobs if any or older people with inadequate pensions. 6.8 per cent of those employed are on temporary contracts and 6.5 per cent are underemployed. No wonder then that few turned out in the local elections and that the left has lost many of its historical strongholds.

In several respects the Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, has followed in the footsteps of Sarkozy. France is now involved in three imperialist interventions (Mali, the Central African Republic and in Syria) and the only constraint on further intervention seems to come from budgetary limitations rather than from any political opposition. Since Charlie Hebdo, an unprecedented 10,000 soldiers, have been deployed within France itself, to reinforce the idea that the country is at war. Valls has recently reinforced the power of the secret service in a French version of the US Patriot Act that allows spying and communications hacking on a scale that even the New York Times condemned as placing civil liberties in jeopardy. In addition, Valls has destroyed dozens of Roma camps and declared their inhabitants to be 'un-integrable' into French society.

The cynical logic behind Hollande and Valls' measures is to continue with, or even accelerate, the attacks against workers, the youth and the immigrants until the next presidential elections. They hope that this will attract more votes from the petty bourgeoisie and the middle layers. Come 2017, they hope this will enable the Socialist Party presidential candidate to get through to the second round, possibly facing a candidate from the Front National, FN. Thus, workers and progressive middle class people will have no alternative but to support the Socialist Party once again, however much they hate the sell-out of their promises.

Despite the Socialist Party's plans, the winner of this round of local elections was the Front National. It succeeded in presenting lists in most parts of the country and obtained 25 per cent of the vote. Many workers and layers of the petty bourgeoisie voted FN as a way to protest against the government's policies. The FN based its campaign on two demagogic themes : social justice (defence of public services, benefits for older people, housing) and its usual racism. The latter centres on the usual lies ('there are too many immigrants', 'they are here just for social benefits') and is aimed at setting French workers against immigrants.

The FN has greatly benefited from the racist politics of Sarkozy in 2007-2012, and recently from those of Hollande. Sarkozy went so far as to create a Minister of Immigration and National Identity. Under Hollande, the Muslim and immigrant bashing has continued, albeit under different forms. The danger, of course, is that today's protest voters will be transformed into tomorrow's solid FN supporters or members.

Despairing of a solution based on class struggle and socialist politics, some workers might turn to FN as the real alternative and this already poses a major threat to the French workers' movement.

The relative strength of FN is related to the weakness of the radical left. The NPA journal *l'Anticapitaliste* used to call for a 'Left opposition to the government?'. Today, the key to understanding the political situation is the recognition that the radical left is in total disarray and even in shreds: no active Left Opposition exists.

The main forces to the left of Socialist Party were for some time under the leadership of the Front de Gauche. This is an opportunistic electoral alliance between the Communist Party (PCF) and Parti de Gauche (PG), a split from the Socialist Party whose leading figure is Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The PG is actually merely the political tool of this charismatic figure. The problem with FG is that it has never been more than the occasional sum of its components, reformist parties with different, and sometimes conflicting, agendas. Having lost most of its working class membership, survival is now the PCF's principal goal and that means keeping its elected posts, whether in the Parliament or in local government, with their lucrative salaries and subsidies.

To achieve this, they have not hesitated to strike deals with the Socialist Party, for example in the Paris local administration. Tomorrow, the PCF is likely to continue to do this at the national level. This represents continuity with the party's line since the 1930s. Its only ambition is to cloak this crass opportunism with the cover of a 'left bloc?' that might include some Socialist Party MP's. These so-called 'frondeurs?' (rebels) are really simply afraid of losing their seats at the next election and have timidly expressed disapproval of some of Valls' policies. However, none of them has ever dared to vote against the government. Far from being a threat for Hollande, this 'left?' wing of the Socialist Party is actually an opportunity for some sort of an alternative line, if class struggle should pick up again.

On the other hand, Mélenchon and the PG plan to repeat in France what Syriza has done in Greece, that is, to build a radical opposition to the Socialist Party and then capitalise from the losses that party is sure to suffer because of its betrayals in government. Although the FdG seemed to be developing rapidly in 2010-11, the political contradictions within it proved fatal to its further growth. At the same time, while the PCF retains some influence over one of the main union federations, the CGT, it has done next to nothing to build a class struggle opposition to Hollande's austerity and racism.

Mélenchon was thus condemned to a passive role. In 2014, he quit the leadership of PG and announced the foundation of a Movement for the VI Republic. In preparing for the 2017 elections, rather than building a working class party, he prefers to play the role of a populist leader, aping his deceased hero, Hugo Chavez. Today FdG, and in some sense also PG, is a virtual organisation. They maintain some activity through their elected representatives but have practically disappeared from the political scene, apart from preparing for election after election.

The net result of all this was that the radical left was totally unable to mount any serious opposition to Hollande, be it on the front of social mobilisations, or against racism and imperialist attacks. Despite some resistance from sectors of the working class (the railways, Air France, intermittents du spectacle) no unified movement emerged. In fact, the biggest protest against Hollande came from a right-wing movement against same-sex marriage, including fascist groups, reactionary catholics, a part of FN and a part of Sarkozy's right wing party, the UMP.

The far left, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) has also shared in this decline. Its membership has been seriously reduced to the point where only 1400 voted in the aggregates preparing the last national conference in January 2015. Politically, the situation is very confused and this is compounded by the

actions of the various permanent tendencies within it. After the Anti-capitalist Left (Gauche Anticapitaliste, GA) split from the NPA to join the FdG in 2012, the left of NPA could have played a major role. However, it was itself a mere hodge-podge of various groups and factions with different methods and different programmes. At its last conference, the NPA left arrived in total disarray, with four different platforms (three of the rather sectarian type, with Tendence Claire, Fraction Etincelle and an alliance between the sympathising section of the Fracción Trotskista (FT) and the NPA-jeunes).

Another platform represented some continuity with the old leadership and even with the GA. As a result, the conference failed to provide any political clarification. On the contrary, the internecine struggles between the various platforms are now sharper and it is not clear how long the party itself can continue to function as a united force.

The basis of today's NPA line is summed up by the Platform 1 analysis, that echoes the old Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) analyses from the 1990s.

It states; 'The task of the period is the reconstruction of the workers' movement.' (l'Anticapitaliste 60, Dec 2014) It goes on to assert that;

'The reconstruction of a combative workers' movement and of a new class consciousness cannot ignore the traditions still carried by numerous activists. NPA should then continue to address activists of the organised workers' movement and their parties from the Front de Gauche to Lutte Ouvriere.'

And its conclusion is;

'The NPA restates its will to build with all those who wish it, individuals or political and social forces, an anti-austerity left opposition built upon social and ecological mobilisations, while debating with these political forces the content of the break (rupture) that we give to this formula, that cannot be confused with the perspective of an alternative parliamentary majority.'

What this actually means is that the NPA should continue to work in united fronts with FdG and others. However, the content of this united front is left open. It can go up to support for an 'anti-austerity government' whose character is left completely vague. This formulation allows all kinds of political associations with FdG, including electoral alliances.

The fundamental problem with the NPA today, is that it has not clarified its own nature or codified this in a programme. Today, it includes members who think the large demonstrations organised by the government after Charlie Hebdo were great, and that the NPA should have participated in them, while others reject that and condemn it as crossing class lines. On the questions of the FdG, of electoral alliances, of islamophobia, and many others, similar contradictory positions are held within the NPA.

With only 1,400 active members, NPA activists should realise that the party's founding project, to regroup large sectors of the workers' vanguard, has foundered. They have to go back and analyse the causes of this and debate openly and frankly the nature of what the NPA programme should be today. Failure to do so will demoralise their own ranks even more and repel potential revolutionaries developing in the class struggle.

The contradictions of the crisis of capitalism (France is, to some extent, one of the sick countries of the Eurozone) will repeatedly push thousands into battle against the system. This was recently confirmed by the April 9 demonstrations against the Macron Law and austerity organised by the unions. More than 300,000 workers marched on these demonstrations, showing the potential for a large national movement. The union leaders will clearly squander this potential, calling for nothing more than May Day demonstrations.

However, the NPA has not developed a clear perspective for this movement either. The emergency plan it has proposed stops short of calling for anything more than a series of measures that could be taken by an anti-austerity bourgeois government like Syriza. Charting a programme from today's struggles to the overthrow of capitalism is the concrete pressing task of revolutionaries in France.

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