

France in Crisis

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Equipped with a democratic leadership, relying on mass mobilisations in virtually all the universities and in hundreds of schools, and using radical methods of struggle, the anti-CPE movement showed us what kind of movement we need. By its victory, it changed the balance of forces and shook the government of Dominique de Villepin to its foundations.

In the year ahead, we must take advantage of this victory to hit them even harder. But how? And on what basis should we organise? How can we ensure that preparations for the presidential elections in 2007 do not derail the class struggle in the workplaces and on the streets, as they have done so often in the past? How can we prevent the leaders of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party demobilising struggles in order to win office and then, once again, implementing neoliberal policies that serve the bosses and demoralise the workers? How, in short, do we find the strategy and the leadership that can break this vicious circle?

This article will attempt to answer these essential questions.

First, we analyse the class struggles in France since 2002, especially those of 2005-06, and draw the lessons from our defeats and our victories.

In the second part, we focus on the attacks being prepared by the bourgeoisie and the current crisis of leadership within the workers' movement.

Finally, we call for a broad, democratic debate on a programme of action for the class struggle, going from the autumn rentrée to the 2007 elections. This means above all, creating a new workers' party, a real alternative to reformism, armed with a revolutionary strategy.

2002 - 2006: defeats and victories

The current cycle of the class struggle started with the presidential elections in 2002. Lionel Jospin, the Socialist Party candidate, was confident of a good score in the first round, based on the record of the government of the Gauche Plurielle (the pluralist left), which had held office since 1997. His hopes were cruelly dashed. Millions of workers refused to give him a vote of confidence. In the first round, he came third, behind the incumbent president Jacques Chirac and the old fascist leader of the Front Nationale, Jean Marie Le Pen. Chirac then went on to win with an enormous 82.21 percent.

How had Jospin alienated so much of his core electorate? First and foremost, his commitment to privatisation, stronger than that of previous right-wing governments, alienated the public sector workers. Even the one serious reform of his government, the 35-hour week, came at the cost of a wage freeze and the imposition of 'flexible working'. The other significant reform, the 'youth jobs' scheme, was pitifully paid, low-grade work, with no prospect of permanent employment.

In short, all his 'reforms' dashed workers' and young people's expectations. Many of them demonstrated this by voting for candidates of the far left. Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière (LO) got 1,630,244 votes (5.72 per cent) and Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) got (4.25 per

cent) nearly 10 per cent between them. Both individually beat the French Communist Party candidate Robert Hue's 960,757 votes (3.37%), in part because his party was compromised by its role in Jospin's government. This period saw the CP lose nearly half its membership and many of its bastions in local government.

Clearly the exposure in office of the two main reformist parties had given the far left an enormous opportunity. Almost immediately, however, they began to fritter this away by a series of opportunist and sectarian zigzags. Between the two rounds of the presidential election, the left failed to seize the opportunity provided by the mass demonstrations against Le Pen to prepare workers for the attacks which were going to follow. Worse still, the LCR talked of fighting Le Pen 'on the streets and in the ballots', in other words, they effectively called for a vote for Chirac, the candidate of the bourgeoisie, thus contributing to his huge victory.

With no hesitation, Chirac used his mandate to launch a whole series of attacks on the working class, young people and immigrants. Nicolas Sarkozy, interior minister, initiated a policy of police repression against youth and immigrants, a policy which continues to this day with the racist CESEDA (code on entry and residence of foreigners and asylum rights) and a supposed 'regularisation' which could well turn into a new round-up of immigrants without papers (sans papiers). Similarly, Chirac's first prime minister, Jean Pierre Raffarin, openly governed in favour of the rich (reduction of the ISF private wealth tax and other taxes) and targeted the public employees and services.

Initially, the scale of Chirac's victory disoriented the working class and crippled any immediate workers' fight back. It was not until 2003 that the first significant movement against the government's attacks really started. From the outset, this movement displayed two features which were to reappear several times in the next couple of years: mass, radical action by its rank and file; passivity and weakness, even complicity with the government, on the side of the political and trade union leaders.

In 2003, a well-organised and determined section, the teachers, embarked on a very combative strike against pension 'reform' which lasted more than two months. The trade union leaderships confined themselves to letting off rank and file pressure through the usual tactic of 'days of action.' These were often very impressive - over a million workers on the streets in May 2003 - but they were limited in timescale and there was no follow-up. Isolated, bitter and worn out, the teachers were abandoned to a defeat that still weighs on workers' consciousness today. Naturally, the reformist political leaders did nothing to change that. They simply waited to benefit from a massive electoral rejection of the right in the regional elections of 2004.

The same year saw another chance to build a sizeable movement with the struggle against the privatisations of the Électricité de France (EDF) and Gaz de France (GDF) and the 'reform' of social security. The electrical and gas workers showed they were prepared to fight: public and private sector workers were mobilised on a mass scale. Together, they could easily have defeated the privatisation of public services but the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), by far the strongest union in these sectors, preferred negotiation and reached a rotten compromise with Sarkozy. This accepted a 'change of status' of the EDF and the GDF in return for vague promises that this would not mean privatisation. We can see today, with the announced privatisation of the GDF, how much these agreements were worth.

2005 saw another intensification of the class struggle. First, the workers' movement mobilised over wages, then the school students attacked the Fillon education reform in a series of demonstrations lasting from February to May. Though the movements coincided, their leaderships, particularly the unions, made sure they did not unite and coordinate their actions. Once again, the two movements were allowed to wear themselves out without any significant advance being won, especially on the burning question of wages.

Nonetheless, these struggles were followed by a militant campaign for a No Vote in the referendum on the neoliberal European constitution. This not only expressed the discontent of the workers but also delivered a monumental blow to the plans of the European bourgeoisie. Once again though, this opportunity was not used to launch a call to defeat the neoliberal reforms once and for all. Indeed, over the summer the government introduced another reform of employment law, the *contrat nouvelle embauche* (CNE), which was the thin end of wedge of a series of attacks on workers' rights in employment law. The unions did next to nothing.

It was not until the autumn that the movement made a critical advance. In September and October there was a militant two-week strike on Corsican ferries (SNCF) and on the Marseille buses, and a major demonstration against the attacks on the public services. Yet, once again, the trade union leaders sabotaged this movement. In fact, it was the youth of the banlieues, mainly the children of migrant North African workers, who launched a real fight back that demonstrated all their pent-up rage and frustration, their radical rejection of a system that offers them nothing but unemployment, the worst jobs and violent racism from the police.

As might be expected, the reformist left condemned the youth for rioting, i.e. for fighting back against racism on the streets. More shameful still, *Lutte Ouvrière* condemned their actions and lectured them on the need to approach the working class. In fact, the workers' movement as a whole did little or nothing to oppose the state of emergency decreed by the government on November 8 - certain Socialist Party mayors even called for the deployment of the army. The LCR and other left organizations, however, did organise demonstrations against police repression and the state of emergency. This mass revolt of the most oppressed and exploited section of young people in France took the whole struggle to a higher level, indeed towards the pre-revolutionary situation which unfolded in February and March 2006.

This was the anti-CPE movement which was exceptional because it won a significant victory, and demonstrated the scope and the combativeness of the youth and workers' movements. The anti-CPE struggle was successful for several reasons. First, the students mobilised en masse, occupied the universities and connected with the movement in the schools. They formed a clear united front based on the demand for the withdrawal of the CPE and the whole law aimed at destroying rights at work (cynically named 'equality of opportunity?'). Even more important, the students developed new forms of democratic organisation and leadership, the *assemblée générale* or AGs, the student coordinations, the inter-struggle collectives. Unity, rank and file mobilisation, a clear objective, and a democratically accountable leadership were the features that enabled them to beat the government.

Could they have gone as far as overturning the government? Yes, if the workers, who did mobilise on days of action in solidarity with the students, had been able to break the restraints imposed on them by their reformist trade union leaders and if a call for an all-out general strike had been won. But that would have required the conscious intervention of revolutionaries around an action programme.

The lesson to draw from the last few years of class struggle is the glaring contradiction between the radical nature of the movements, the combativeness of rank and file workers, who have attempted to fight off the multiple attacks of the government and the bosses, on the one hand, and the obvious desire of the trade union leaderships to limit, rein in, weaken and even sabotage these movements, on the other.

Such a united movement, if it were able to break free from the trade union leaders' restraints, could call into question the whole functioning of society. The trade union bureaucrats, however, are always determined to limit the movement, to utilise it to reinforce their position with respect to the government. They make sure they always stay masters of the game and, in the end, impose whatever compromise they see fit. Thus, although self-organisation and democratic leadership will certainly be necessary for the coming struggles, solving the crisis of leadership is also crucial. To answer this question requires a

perspective for the transformation of the unions, from bureaucratic tools of reformism into weapons of class struggle; it also demands absolute clarity about where the movement should go and what its goal should be. To chart a new political direction for the workers' movement means raising the necessity of creating a new workers' party, a revolutionary alternative to the Socialist Party and the Communist Party.

New attacks and the crisis of leadership

The outcome of the 2007 elections remains uncertain. But one thing is sure: whoever wins, the attacks on the working class will be much harder and more profound than those we have seen so far. Why? Europe, and particularly France, is an exception in the imperialist camp because so many of the gains won by workers during the last century are still in place. For years, the bosses have been demanding radical 'reforms', especially in relation to the labour code and workers' rights, the public services, the number, pay and status of public service workers. The CPE was a foretaste of what to expect: generalized casualisation, calling into question fundamental rights, a major attempt to shift the balance of power in favour of the bosses. That would enable the bosses to put even more downward pressure on wages and salaries, worsen working conditions, and so increase profits. The 'liberalisation' of health, education, retirement, and insurance would give the bosses enormous and lucrative markets.

At a global level, the European, and particularly the French, capitalists need to divert massive sums currently allocated for social purposes into control, repression and above all the army. Only in this way will they be able to compete with US imperialism, which dominates the planet and still takes the lion's share. In other words, the attacks on our rights are not an aberration in a system that could just as easily function peacefully, preserving our gains. The attacks on workers and the construction of a European imperialist superpower are two sides of the same coin: imperialism in the age of globalisation.

It is clear that Sarkozy as the front-runner for the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire - Union for a Popular Movement) is preparing for this kind of attack. Unrestrained liberalism and repression are the two key elements of his policy, as was shown by his years as interior minister and finance minister and his role in provoking the uprising in the banlieues. In short, he aspires to be the French Thatcher.

One key element is common to all the potential candidates of the Socialist Party. Whether it is Jack Lang, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Ségolène Royale, Lionel Jospin or Laurent Fabius, they all proved themselves politically under Mitterand. Beyond the personal quarrels and the sordid manoeuvres that divide them, they all have in common that they learned to govern the country in the interests of the bosses, disguising their attacks under an increasingly thin layer of reformist rhetoric.

Like all the other social democratic parties in Europe and elsewhere, the PS maintained a rightward trajectory during the Mitterand years, distancing itself ever further from workers' expectations. Within a social democracy that has chosen to shamelessly implement neoliberal policies, each would-be candidate has their own formula to sweeten the pill. Royale, at present the front runner, declares herself a Blairite and has tried to outmanoeuvre Sarkozy on the law and order issue by calling for juvenile delinquents to be put under a regime 'with a military dimension' and for immigrants convicted of a criminal offence to be deported after serving their sentence. We can, therefore, be certain that even if the next president comes from the ranks of the Socialist Party, she or he will implement a neoliberal policy and attack workers as much as, if not more than, Chirac himself.

Could the Communist Party, which seemed to be in its death agony after 2002, form the nucleus of a 'recomposition' of the anti-neoliberal, even anti-capitalist, left as many seem to believe? We say frankly - no.

Since 1935, when the PC, following the class collaborationist line dictated by its masters in Moscow, supported the bourgeois government of Laval, the PC's line has had one overriding goal: organise the

working class... to serve the bourgeoisie. At every critical moment of the last century, from 1936 through 1944 to 1968, the PC proved to be an invaluable tool and ally for the bourgeoisie, rescuing it at the very times when the workers and youth could have overthrown it.

The Communist Party today is reduced to the status of a small party of 134,000 members, of whom 99,281 were paid up in February of this year. The party's decline is essentially due to the faithful support it gave the Mitterand governments between 1981 and 1995. The PC was part of the Jospin government and thus sanctioned its neoliberal policy. Historically, the role of the PC has been to give left cover to reformist governments, to channel the workers' movement into the service of its reformist project. Nothing has changed since then except that, having faced electoral extinction in 2002, the CP has tried to give itself a 'radical' and modern makeover.

Marie-George Buffet, its national secretary and first woman leader, broke the standing alliance with the Socialist Party after Jospin's debacle in 2002. She aligned the CP with the anti-globalisation movement and was the main organising force behind its support for the European Social Forum in Saint Denis. Then it launched all its forces into the campaign for a No Vote. It has even coquetted with the LCR, encouraging the latter's false hopes that it might, perhaps, agree to some kind of electoral block for 2007, but never renouncing its real goal, to get back into government with the Socialist Party.

Far from signalling a profound change of policy, all this merely represents a re-positioning. This has cost little, has doubtless pleased its activists, and will enable the PC to raise the price of its future support for a PS government. Deep down, despite all the hints towards with the LCR, its only objective has been preparation for the 2007 campaign in which it hopes to scrape together a few more PC deputies, senators and mayors through negotiations with the PS.

For this reason, we believe that the comrades of the LCR, who rage against the neo-liberalism of the SP, yet remain silent on the PC's history of complicity in all these policies when the Socialists were in power, are showing self-defeating opportunism. An unprincipled block, including suppression of criticism, with a party to one's right always benefits the latter. The CP found this in its near twenty-year alliance with Mitterand. It found it out under Jospin. It went from a party which could get 15-20 percent of the vote to one which gets 2-4 percent. The LCR, which surpassed the PC electorally in 2002, has gained nothing from its flirtation with it.

We do not believe that this party, which has followed a reformist line for decades without so much as a murmur, could be anyone's choice to rebuild a radical left in France.

Of course, the PC is still a mass party: it has de facto control of the CGT, its cadres are present in most workers' struggles. Revolutionaries seeking to build a mass revolutionary party certainly should not avoid a debate with its activists, some of whom are sincere fighters, and even less with the hundreds of thousands of workers and trade union activists that they lead. But to say that the dividing line between the 'two lefts', the social liberals and the anti-capitalists, passes through the PC, as the LCR does, does not get us anywhere. First, there is no organised anti-capitalist section within the PC. Second, if some rank and file activists are asking real questions, then we must engage them in debates and in common actions, in order to find ways of detaching them from their leaders, but that will not be achieved through private discussions and negotiations with those leaders.

What programme, what party?

An electoral bloc on the lowest common denominator that the PCF could possibly agree to is not what we need. In any case, this is a fantasy as the LCR ruefully had to acknowledge when they decided to stand Olivier Besancenot. The conditions surrounding the election will be set by the state of the class struggle. In

the coming months, tens of thousands of workers and youth will face important struggles. Without doubt too, those youth and worker militants who were active in the anti-CPE movement will be looking for the party which best embodies their rejection of casualisation and racism.

Militant revolutionaries have a duty to offer them something better than the perspective of a joint candidature behind who? Marie-George? Besancenot? José Bové? Or even a cartel of all three? They certainly deserve something better than LO's self-proclamation of itself as the party. What we need is unity in action, now, to continue the work of defeating the government's neoliberal offensive. Any holding back on this in pursuit of some parliamentary advance is simply electoral cretinism. In fact, it will have the exact opposite effect because it will start a swing back to the right.

There is a fundamental lesson that we have to draw from the anti-CPE movement and that is the importance of the democracy within the movement and the rapport between the rank and file and leadership. If that worked during the movement, why should we not continue on that basis as we discuss the election campaign and the best way for the movement to find a political, that is, a party, expression? Why exclude the tens of thousands of youth, trade unionists, rank and file workers for the benefit of an accord between a handful of reformist and centrist leaders?

A mass, open, democratic debate would be the best way to ensure we engage these new forces - forces that are needed not just to fight capitalism, but also to avoid both electoral cretinism and sterile divisions.

In this debate, we would put forward what we see as the main components of an action programme which will enable workers to organise and fight the attacks. Such a programme must emphasise the direct action of the working class in the enterprises and on the streets. Thus, at the same time as a 'ban' on sackings, we must drive home the necessity of workers' action. That means occupying threatened enterprises, spreading the movement to the whole sector, protecting them against the CRS with workers' defence squads, building coordinations, committees of action and solidarity and mobilising the whole working class in an all-out and unlimited general strike.

On this point, our fundamental differences with the LCR and LO are clear to see. For these organisations, the demands of an emergency plan are for the most part neutralised by omissions that can only lead workers to reformist conclusions: the demands are far reaching, indeed unrealisable under globalised capitalism, but they are posed within a reformist framework, not a perspective of a struggle for power and transcending the market and replacing it with a socially owned and planned economy.

For example, the emergency plan they advance includes demands for a 'law' to outlaw sackings. Excellent! But, as LO and the LCR know full well, to impose such a policy on the bosses we have to radically change the balance of forces between bosses and workers - which requires the latter to enter into struggle against sackings within the enterprises. What's more, it's not a parliamentary majority that is going to adopt and enforce such a law, but a workers' government, an alternative to parliamentary democracy, rooted in the working class and its struggles.

LO and the LCR know this but, if they say it at all, they do so half-heartedly in order not to upset ex-PC voters. But if 'the revolutionaries' don't say loud and clear what policy we need, who will say it? In fact those who will not say it are quite simply not revolutionaries but centrists, hovering uncertainly between reform and revolution.

For us, there is no question of a social truce in the lead up to the elections. The best way for the working class to prepare for post-2007 is to organise the struggle now! From the rentrée, in the enterprises menaced by sackings and privatisation, wherever working conditions are deteriorating, in the universities and the schools hit by austerity and lack of staff, in the districts where youth are harassed daily by the

cops, we must convene general assemblies to organise the fightback. They should also start the debate on what candidates workers need and on what programme they should stand.

Apart from the election campaign, it is clear that workers need a new party. Faced with this situation, many activists are eager for the creation of a new workers' party. As early as 1995, Arlette Laguiller called for a 'great party of the workers', which LO tried to establish through a series of meetings, and these did get a response. In fact, realising what this might mean, i.e. getting out of the rut of making abstract propaganda for socialism and leading workers in mass political struggle, frightened LO into headlong retreat claiming that this, too, had been 'simply a question of propaganda'!

For years, the LCR has also given prominence to the question of a 'political translation' of the movements, even a 'new anti-capitalist force'. Alas, if its score in 2002 gave it not only the responsibility but also the opportunity to get a hearing from the masses, its subsequent response was stamped with passivity. The movement of 2003, the Paris Social Forum, the anti-CPE movement were all occasions when the call for the formation of a new party would have found a widespread and enthusiastic response from the vanguard of the struggle. But the LCR preferred to turn itself into an electoral force, betting everything on the outcome of bourgeois democracy rather than the class struggle. They believed they could ride the tide of their popularity and be recognised as a full partner by the mass reformist parties. The result: the political leadership of the PC was never openly challenged and it was able to re-establish itself. After the disappointing slump in its vote in 2004, the LCR preferred to court the PC and allow people to believe that a new force could arise from a marriage with this utterly reformist party.

Even though the centrists have proved incapable of responding to the calls of the masses, the question of a new party still remains fundamental. The PS and the PCF have repeatedly betrayed the workers and will continue to do so as long as they exist and maintain their influence on the working class. The key question for every party, its real *raison d'être*, is that of its programme, its strategy for power. What type of party does the working class need? A reformist party? A 'class struggle' party which, nevertheless, does not say how capitalism can be abolished? Or a revolutionary party?

For us, such a party has to have a programme which, starting from the situation of the working class today, puts forward solutions which make it possible both to fight oppression and exploitation and to organise the masses to create new fighting organisations, in the workplaces, in the communities and in the industries and services where we work.

It must be a true transitional programme, easy to understand, free of jargon and vague phrases, which resolutely defends the interests of the oppressed and exploited economically, politically and ideologically. It must lead the masses from the struggles of today to the forcible smashing of the capitalist state, the break-up of the army and police, and the establishment of a government based on workers' councils and a workers' militia: a new French Revolution that puts the working class in power.

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