

# France: NPA congress fails to address, let alone solve, the party's crisis

Marc Lasalle Wed, 13/02/2013 - 10:29

Marc Lasalle

From 1-3 February, 231 delegates assembled in Saint-Denis, Paris, for the second congress of the New Anticapitalist Party (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste, NPA). The main question staring delegates in the face was the deep internal crisis of their party. Over 9,000 strong in 2009, today it has an official membership of 2,500 and of these only 1,700 participated in the local conferences to elect congress delegates. Many branches are at, or below, the critical size, a mere shadow of their strength during the party's founding years. In fact, the membership is right back to the level of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) when it launched the founding process of the NPA.

The official report of the conference attempts to deny that the party is still mired in a deep crisis, 'This congress represents a new and decisive stage in the work of refounding and reconstructing our party, work which is based on our presidential campaign.' Such claims make the NPA look like the proverbial ostrich.

While the official balance sheet gives objective factors as the cause for this dramatic decline, in particular, the defeat of the 2010 movement against the pension reform, the crisis is in fact the expression of a deep going internal political crisis. It exposes the total inadequacy of the NPA's programmatic basis and its organisational structure of permanent warring public factions that do not observe discipline, even on the electoral terrain.

In its first years, the NPA was able to attract whole new layers of activists from a wide variety of backgrounds: militant trade unionists, youth, greens, feminists, and even anarchists. Numbers of militants from smaller political groups which claimed adherence to Trotskyism joined it, too. However, it failed to win them to a clear common strategic orientation for fighting capitalism; in short to develop a coherent programme. Nor did it gain homogeneity on how to defeat the right wing government of Nicolas Sarkozy and drive him from power.

Many of the new recruits had hardly broken from reformism and certainly were not (yet) fully revolutionary communists. A deep political discussion was necessary to win them over to a revolutionary perspective. Unfortunately, the NPA leadership, overwhelmingly drawn from the LCR, the French section of the Fourth International, rejected such an approach. Instead, they pursued the goal of creating a halfway house between reformism and a revolutionary party.

They believed this would allow them to attract ever more members and achieve electoral successes such as the 4.08 per cent won by Olivier Besançon in the first round of the presidential elections of 2007. This idea of deliberately creating centrist, not revolutionary, parties, believing that the objective revolutionary process would convert them into revolutionary parties in the longer term, has long been the project of the

Fourth International.

Many NPA leaders harboured the illusion that Besançon's successes in 2002 and 2007 showed they had already succeeded in creating a strong electoral machine. Most of the discussions were therefore focused on electoral campaigns, instead of on the tactics and strategy to be pursued in the battle against the right wing government of Nicolas Sarkozy. After a short, but promising, first attempt at drafting programmatic positions, this project, too, was abandoned and the NPA slipped back to the LCR's old habit of standing on a left reformist platform. As a result, the party still does not have anything remotely approaching a revolutionary programme.

The NPA was founded on a resolute commitment to maintain total electoral separation from the Socialist Party and to abandon its long held orientation towards fusion with the Communist Party (PCF). It was recognised that the PCF could never sever its links with the SP, the main party of French reformism. However, that was as far as the political independence of the new party went.

In the autumn of 2010, in the great wave of strikes and youth mobilisations against the pension reform, NPA militants eagerly plunged into the fray, advocating a general strike. However, when the union leaders, especially the CGT, backed down in the face of Sarkozy's threats of legal repression, the NPA did not act as a centre of resistance to the sell out, or even roundly denounce it. They simply 'moved on' to the next set of elections.

But it soon transpired that a new political star was rising; that of the charismatic platform orator, Jean-Luc Mélenchon. He allied his Parti de Gauche (Left Party) with the Communist Party (PCF) in the Front de Gauche (FdG) which also includes various smaller left groupings.

The growth of the NPA in the key sectors of youth and working class militants soon tailed off. New members began to leave the party when they realised that, far from making a major electoral breakthrough, it was actually being squeezed by the dynamic Mélenchon. If electoral success is what you are after, and if you believe a left reformist platform is good enough, then why not go for the real thing rather than a shamefaced 'revolutionary' imitation?

The old right wing of the LCR, who had vehemently opposed the foundation of the NPA from the start, kept up a very public barrage of criticism of the NPA. In particular, they attacked its insistence on an explicit and total break with the PS as a precondition for any electoral bloc with the FdG. They recognise that this is, in effect, an impossible demand because the PCF, in particular, depends on electoral deals with the PS to defend its seats in regional and local councils (and the generous state funding they bring with them).

When the NPA chose as its candidate the car worker militant Philippe Poutou, large sections of the right announced they would not campaign for him. Some made it clear they would support Mélenchon. The party did nothing to discipline them and Poutou's campaign was constantly raked from the NPA right by withering fire accusing him of sectarianism. No wonder he gained only 1.15 per cent of the vote as against 11.5 per cent for Mélenchon.

Last year, the sizeable rightist tendency in the NPA, the Gauche anticapitaliste, GA, (having 23 per cent support at an NPA conference in July) finally decided to quit the party. They left with around 300 members to join with former LCR rightists around Christian Piquet inside the FdG.

Those in Britain who regard 'pluralism', 'heterogeneity' and permanent public factions, as the royal road to success and regard the NPA as the model for this, should ponder on these experiences.

Unfortunately, many of them will probably draw the conclusion 'in for a penny, in for a pound'. Maybe the

NPA was just too independent, not plural enough (i.e. it did not liquidate itself into the FdG). At the very least, they might think, it should have supported Mélenchon. How this would have prevented militants gravitating to the FdG is a mystery.

### Factional struggle at the Second Congress

The debate leading to this year's congress was not really devoted to analysing the political roots of this crisis or to drawing a balance sheet of its failures. Instead, it focused on the current political situation and the immediate tasks of the NPA. In particular, it debated the question of the united front with the left reformists and the role of the NPA within such a united front.

Certainly, there is every need for such a united front. The government of the recently elected President, François Hollande, despite all his promises of change, continues with Sarkozy's austerity programme, attacking working class rights and generously offering money to the bosses. With the intervention by French forces in Mali, he has also continued with Sarkozy's Francafrique policy, disguised as a defence of secularist democracy and human rights. He has succeeded in boosting himself in the polls as a strong President.

The FdG opposes Hollande's austerity policies in words (while giving critical support to his adventure in Mali). But it does not take any steps to create a strong movement against the government. For instance, on the question of an agreement between employers and the CFDT union federation, which actually increases the number of insecure temporary and part-time jobs, the FdG has threatened Hollande with nothing more than "a debate in the Assembly." With less than 20 MPs, they certainly will not stop the government with parliamentary rhetoric. The same is true on the question of factory closures; neither the FdG nor the CGT union will unify the fights in the different workplaces into a national movement.

For the winning faction, platform X, made up of the historical leadership of LCR and the NPA, with 51 per cent of the delegates, the key question remains relations with the FdG. The tempting scenario they offer is that of a French repeat of the rapid rise of Syriza in Greece, under Alexis Tsipras. Perhaps the fiery orator Mélenchon could pull off a similar feat? While they acknowledge that France is not yet in a deep crisis like that of Greece, that is for them a possible development. They argue that the NPA's next step should be the creation, with the FdG, of a left opposition to the "neoliberal left" government. Its goal would be a "democratic government of the workers and their political and the TU organisations who reject austerity on the basis of the mobilisation and the organisation of the workers and the population. This gives them the means to be in control of the whole society."

The problem with this formulation is that it ties the united front that is necessary here and now, in today's struggles against Hollande's austerity and his imperialist adventures, to an electoral perspective for regional elections in 2014 and the presidentials in 2017. Even leaving aside the electoral cretinism, this is the same error the Gauche anticapitaliste was guilty of; the overriding obsession of unity with the FdG. The immediate need for a united front to struggle against Hollande's attacks is entirely subordinated to this. Successful use of such a united front tactic could eventually break workers from the control of all the reformists and their trade union bureaucrats. But a united front could not, and should not, exclude those who voted for Hollande nor even those who are still members of the PS.

To make a qualitative distinction between Hollande's PS and Mélenchon and the Front de Gauche is a serious error, if unfortunately a typical one for the French left. They might ponder on the way that the FdG's parliamentary fraction rallied to the Tricolour in the debate on Mali in the Assembly. This is a much clearer indication of where the FdG really stands, when the chips are down, than the forest of red flags in the Place de Bastille at Mélenchon's election rally.

Instead, the NPA leadership has created for itself a fantasy scenario in which experience of a future anti-austerity government under Mélenchon will result in a recomposition of the workers' movement. In this, the different "strategic orientations with respect to capitalism" in other words revolutionary and non-revolutionary currents, will emerge as an organic process. While it is not explicitly stated, a reader will surely understand that finding a niche inside this (supposed) new recomposition of forces will be the best outcome for the NPA. A far cry indeed from taking the lead in consolidating a revolutionary alternative. The only problem with this fantasy is that the FdG has no need of the NPA, least of all on the electoral front. It is a sure recipe for continued membership loss and ultimate collapse.

The left platform, Y, (31 % of the delegates) is the big loser of the congress. Indeed, after the GA split and mounting differences inside the majority, it seemed like Y could fight for the leadership of NPA. However, two factors prevented this. The first was the sheer loss of its members, some 50 per cent of them in just a few years. The second was the mounting differences between several orientations inside Y (previously platform 2 or P2). It was from the start a strange assembly of several groups, the two largest being the JCR group (the leadership of the former youth organisation of the LCR) and the Etincelle Faction, originating as a split from Lutte Ouvrière, LO, in the 1990s. While they correctly criticised the NPA leadership's electoral cretinism, they failed to create a democratic platform with a clear strategy for the party.

Today, they criticise the orientation of the majority but their own project is vague and strongly resembles that of LO: a party focused on economic struggles and its own implantation in the working class. Its approach to programme is, like LO's, tailist and economicist. In practical terms, this translates into a sectarian attitude towards FdG; 'beyond the unity of action in the struggles, we propose to the currents of the workers' movement who do not support the government to form a front against its politics to stop its neoliberal offensive, a workers' and people's opposition to the government and the bosses.' However, what to do if FdG refuses, as it does, to oppose openly the government? The Y formulation, left as it may sound, is in reality ineffective in the current political situation.

Platform Z (which won 9 per cent of the votes) is composed of FT-CCR (Fraction Trotskiste - Courant Communiste Révolutionnaire) and the Tendence Clair. They more than doubled their vote and this is a real achievement. Unfortunately, although clearly the furthest to the left, and calling for a fully revolutionary programme for the NPA, they interpret the question of the united front in an even more sectarian, passive propagandist, way than Platform Y. For them, the united front is a closed book.

'We openly denounce the leaders of FdG and the TU leaders when they support the government, cooperate and refuse to oppose it. And when they criticise the government, we publicly request that they really break with it, so that they call for a fight against it, for the unity of the organisations of the workers' movement against the government. However, given the leaderships of the unions and FdG, we do not create any illusions in the possibility of an agreement with the reformists on a programme of a global break with capitalism.'

Such pre-conditions and ultimatums will only isolate revolutionaries, leaving them with just an abstract perspective of workers' self-organisation already free of the reformist leaders, which therefore turns its back on the actually existing organisations of the working class.

While most of the platforms inside NPA agree on a turn outwards, towards activity in the class struggle, this develops under the worst circumstances. First, the NPA leadership is the same as before the congress and has the same orientation. Despite the fact that Philippe Poutou was a member of the left, it was not able to capitalise on his campaign. Indeed, it was weakened by it. It will continue to play a subordinate role inside NPA.

Then, the overall political and class struggle situation is not, for the time being, so favourable to the spontaneous development and interlinkage of the struggles. Under a reformist government, even one that is tearing up its promises, the trade union leaders will do all that is in their power to limit and defuse the workers' anger. The PS is already using all its closest union allies, like the CFDT bureaucracy, plus front organisations like the FCPE (school students' left organisation) and the UNEF (student union) to create a consensus favourable to the government. The CGT, too, will keep its opposition well within the bounds of an occasional demonstration because its priority will be to maintain the semi-alliance between the FdG, especially the PCF, and Hollande.

The task of creating a class-wide militant movement against austerity needs to address the central question of the united front tactic towards reformism with a clearer understanding and a developed action programme. In this respect, the NPA is once again falling short of the tasks of the moment. It is easy to predict that, unless it radically changes course, this will lead to more discouragement and further losses.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/france-npa-congress-fails-address-let-alone-solve-party%E2%80%99s-crisis>