France: The Parti de gauche, a reformist answer to anticapitalism

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During the downfall of the USSR and the ?actually existing socialism? of eastern European states, the Parti communiste français (PCF) underwent a major rethink of its old pro-Moscow Stalinism, what it called mutation. It explicitly dropped ?democratic centralism? (in reality bureaucratic centralism), allowing inner party tendencies, alternative lists for central committee elections, etc.

This was all hailed as a renaissance of the party. And indeed it rapidly seemed to bear fruit. The party?s secretary Robert Hue won 8.8 per cent of the vote in the first round of the 1995 presidential election and in the 1997 parliamentary elections the PCF won 9.9 per cent and 35 seats.

But it won these advances on the basis of an alliance with the Parti socialiste (PS) under Lionel Jospin ? the Gauche plurielle/Plural Left. Indeed the PCF got ministerial posts in the government. But short-term gain led to long-term pain. Implication in Jospin?s turn to neoliberal policies of privatisation and cuts dictated by the Maastricht process of European integration led to the discredit of the PCF amongst its working class electorate.

In 2002 Jospin suffered a catastrophe in the presidential elections, being knocked out in the first round. At the same time the PCF saw its candidate Robert Hue get an all-time low of 3.37 per cent, or just 967,000 votes. The beneficiaries of this debacle for reformism were the far left groups. In 2002 Trotskyist candidates together got over 10 per cent or nearly 3 million votes, humbling the once mighty PCF.

The SP and the PCF proved unable to recover by the next presidential elections in 2007, which saw the right under Nicolas Sarkozy hold onto power. And once again the far left in the person of the young postal worker Olivier Besancenot, candidate of the Ligue communiste revolutionnaire (LCR), got nearly 1.5 million votes. The PCF?s Marie-Georges Buffet did even worse than Hue and scored 707,000, or just under 2 per cent.

It appeared to both the reformist left and the far left itself that a major displacement was underway in terms of who would lead the militant vanguard of the French working class. The LCR in 2008-09 launched the campaign for a New Anticapitalist Party (Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, NPA), which rapidly attracted around 9,000 members. But the near-death experience for the PCF (and to some extent the SP) convinced a section of their leaderships of the need to create something new and more attractive to militant workers and anticapitalist youth, who might otherwise consolidate around the NPA.

Since then, getting this ?double digit? result has obsessed the leaders of both the radical reformist and the far left. Connected with this is the project of uniting all the parties to the left of the SP. While many activists
were strongly in favour of a unity candidate for the presidential elections in 2007, these discussions
foundered because the PCF undemocratically tried to fix the selection process so that its own lacklustre
leader, Marie-Georges Buffet, would win. In some sense, the foundation of the Parti de gauche (PG) and
the NPA were differing answers given to the opportunities posed by this political conjuncture.

Within the PS faced with leaders like Jospin, Ségolène Royal and François Hollande, all unwilling to oppose
the neoliberal ?reforms? being pressed for by the EU, Jean-Luc Mélenchon decided to split with the party
and build a left reformist alternative. Before 2008 he was a relatively minor figure on the left wing of the
party. A junior minister under Jospin, he did not distinguish himself by expressing any radical opinions,
though, like Jospin, his early political education was in the Trotskyist group of Pierre Lambert.

Mélenchon decided that to make any headway he would have to borrow as much of the rhetorical
radicalism and even revolutionary slogans as he safely could from the NPA without breaking from
reformism and a strictly electoral strategy. At the same time, he was realistic enough to know that to make
headway at the ballot box he needed the aid of bureaucratic apparatus of the PCF in local and national
government and the support of the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) union federation, still
dominated by the PCF.

Immediately after the announcement of the formation of the PG in November 2008, Mélenchon and the
PCF declared that they were forming an alliance for the European elections. It was to be called the ?Left
Front for another Europe, democratic and social, against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the other
European treaties? (FG).

They clarified that the front was open to all the parties who had engaged in the victorious campaign against
the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005. In the following months, the PG launched a unity offensive
aimed at the NPA, calling it to join this front and writing an open letter to its members.

This manoeuvre revealed the aim of both the PG and FG: to form an electoral bloc able to attract votes
from both the far left and from disillusioned SP-ers. Their target was the substantial number who had voted
for Arlette Laguiller of Lutte ouvriere (LO) and Besancenot of the LCR. This move proved a remarkable
success, thanks purely to the deep divisions within the NPA, inherited from its founder the LCR, but also to
the fact that LO, which had refused to participate in forming the NPA, retained its self-isolating passive
propaganda existence.

The destructive factional struggle which broke out in the NPA when it turned down the unity proposals of
the FG and the subsequent growth of the latter produced a decline in the NPA?s membership and a
decline in its electoral fortunes as rapid as its rise ? leaving the field wide open to Mélenchon and a PCF,
undergoing yet another of its periodic renaissances.

The peak of this success was Mélenchon?s dynamic presidential campaign in 2012. In Vierzon, he
declared: ?We?re back ? the France of revolution!? and ?If Europe is a volcano ? then France is the
revolutionary crater!? This barnstorming style culminated in his mass rally at the Place Bastille on 18 March, where he called for
the foundation a Sixth republic and a ?citizen insurrection? to take back the power from the financiers and
give it to the people. And once again the revolutionary rhetoric was laid on in buckets:

?In a revolution, there are no nice bits and nasty bits. It is a whole unto itself! Yes, there may be mistakes
and failures ? but oh, how marvellous, how glorious, how splendid, how extraordinary, how luminous a
story for humankind!?
Yet when it comes to the class struggle – direct action by the youth or strikes by the workers – Mélenchon and the PG drop their revolutionary rhetoric completely. Indeed it is clear that their ‘revolutionism’ is that of a petty bourgeois populist not that of the socialist working class.

In fact, the PG has consistently emphasised traditional ‘political’ means – elections, petitions and rallies, rather than direct action and strikes. This was the case in 2008, when Sarkozy introduced a new ‘reform’ of the postal service. A large mobilisation by workers and users posed the problem of how to continue the struggle. Mélenchon suggested a campaign for a referendum as an alternative to any form of direct action. When in 2009 the NPA proposed a national march of unemployed, Mélenchon rejected the idea:

“This worries me a little. Politics should not come up like this in the social movement giving instructions. The trade unions have raised the lid on social resignation. Our responsibility is to lift that of political resignation. The link between social movements and politics is not mechanical. We need to offer a political alternative rather than to be in a competition with the unions.”

These arguments are in line with the famous 1906 Charter of Amiens – adopted by the CGT – that proclaimed the unions’ ‘complete independence from political parties’. Whilst its syndicalist authors saw this as a means to keep reformist socialism out of the revolutionary trade unions, today, this division only results in blocking mass social and union struggles from espousing and attaining political goals.

It condemns the mass strike waves and social movements, which are regular occurrences in France, to either winning temporary concessions or failing completely like the great anti-pension reform struggle of 2010. Such failures for direct action occur because they cannot transform themselves into all out political strike action. This ends up reinforcing a vote for reformist parties as the only solution. Thus the defeat for the unions in 2010 opened the way for a revival of the PS.

Another classic reformist element to Mélenchon and the PG’s politics is nationalism. This starts with his view of Europe and his criticism of German dominance:

“We need to strike at the heart of the problem, Europe. We need a break on three points. First, the French-German relationship, that is totally out of equilibrium and profits only German capitalism. Then the euro? we have always defended the idea that the common currency could help a progressive politics; however, today this is not anymore possible because of the obstinacy of the European leaders. Finally the Mediterranean arc? is it not the moment to understand that we have another centre of gravity different from Germany, namely the Mediterranean??

Here Mélenchon clarifies his view of the role of France in the world. Europe does not work because it does not profit French capitalism sufficiently. Even his allusion to the Mediterranean suggests that the natural space for France to turn to is North Africa.

Despite ambiguous statements and veiled criticisms, the reality is that PG supports French imperialism in Africa. When Sarkozy decided to intervene in Libya, the PG supported this intervention. When Hollande intervened in Mali, the FG’s official spokesperson in the parliament voiced his full support for the intervention. Mélenchon himself, it is true, restricted himself to asking Hollande to reveal the real reasons for this intervention but he did not condemn it, and neither the PG nor FG organised nor joined any sort of demonstration against this intervention.

More recently, when France sent troops to the Central African Republic in December 2013, François Delapierre, national secretary of PG, expressed their position pretty bluntly:

“In contrast to previous military operations, this is totally within international law because the UN Security
Council has given to our country a mandate to support the African force MISCA, whose objective is to protect the civilian population and to stabilise the country.

He went straight on to say:

?Energy production in our country depends on this resource (uranium) that is not produced in our subsoil. Central Africa has the Bakuma deposits and strategic borders with neighbours who have the precious mineral. So long as nuclear energy remains the primary source for electricity production in our country, France will control the governments which keep the keys to the African mines.?

Refreshingly frank imperialist reasoning but not a whiff of socialism or a revolutionary standpoint.

Those who think that the distinction between reform and revolution is an ?old 20th Century dogma? and of no use in practical politics should ponder on this: while the NPA consistently opposes French imperialist interventions in the African countries, the PG does not.

Conclusion

The PG profited from a rapid upward trajectory, developing in a year or two from a small split into a national party. Its electoral front with the PCF, the FG, has obtained non-negligible scores (around 6%) in the 2009 and 2010 European and regional elections. Mélenchon did manage to attain the yearned for double-digit score (11%) in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections. However, the reasons of these successes could be also the seeds of its next crisis.

The PG is still quite small and weakly rooted when measured against the PCF. It has only around 12,000 members. Its elected representatives are few ? one member of the European Parliament, 17 regional councillors, 11 general councillors, one metropolitan councillor and two Paris councillors. It heads only seven communes of more than 3,500 inhabitants and has no deputies in the lower house of parliament or the Senate. Moreover the PG could only realise what gains it has thanks to the still dense network of the PCF in French society, and especially thanks to the CGT campaigning for FG on several occasions.

Compare this with the PCF. It has 138,000 members, even though only 70,000 of these pay their subs. It has 13 MPs and 19 senators, 10,000 councillors in 800 councils, 89 mayors of towns with more than 9,000 inhabitants. Given many of these receive handsome salaries it is clear why defending these gains ? most made with PS support at local level ? is non-negotiable for the PCF, as is its refusal to rule out taking office again as a junior partner in a PS-led government.

The PG on the other hand can only grow at the expense of the PS and by challenging it electorally wherever possible. And from its point of view the PS doesn?t need deals with such an electorally negligible a force as the PG (in contrast to its need for PCF votes in the latter?s old heartlands).

After the election of Hollande, the PCF and PG were immediately faced with a serious political difference. The PCF, true to its traditions since the 1980s, has chosen not to oppose the government but to simply criticise it. It believes in this way it will obtain some progressive measures. In reality the PS has a grip on the PCF?s financial lifeline, since only with its support does it hang on to its MPs, councillors, mayors and many other elected and salaried positions.

The PCF?s determination to strike electoral agreements with the PS for the March 2014 local elections, especially in Paris, led to sharp exchanges with Mélenchon and the PG. In October last year the PCF?s unilateral decision to do this provoked Mélenchon into delaying an FG agreement for the European elections in May. Since the PCF?s summer school, a veritable vendetta has also been going on between
the PG leader and Pierre Laurent, leader of the PCF. Mélenchon was even more furious when Laurent was elected as president of the European Left Party - the bloc of parties to left of the Social Democratic and Labour parties in the European Parliament - and threatened to withdraw temporarily from the organisation.

In fact, in half the seats the two parties of the FG fought with different allies - the PCF with the governing SP and the PG with the Greens, also in the government.

For all its denunciation of financial capitalism, the PG is not an anticapitalist party at all. For all its talk of a "citizen revolution" and a Sixth Republic, it still supports the repressive machinery of the existing capitalist state. It is also a party that defends French imperialism and its control of countries of the former French Empire in Africa when the chips are down. It is the kind of a party that neither the French nor the British working class needs.

The PG’s squabbling with the PCF over the spoils of electoral office indicates exactly what sort of party the PG is. It is not really a "new party" whose "broadness" should serve as a model for Left Unity in Britain or anywhere else for that matter. It is an absolutely traditional reformist party: like those that have betrayed the working class, both in power and opposition, for the past hundred years. The task remains to rescue the NPA from its confusion and internal squabbling - and win it to a revolutionary programme and a class struggle practice.

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