

France: The Permanent Crisis of the NPA

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In recent years, the NPA (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste; New Anti-Capitalist Party) has been quiet. At the time of its foundation in 2009, it was regarded by the European left as a beacon of hope and a model of anti-capitalist unity. Today, it has become a talking point mainly because of its internal crises, conflicts, threatened and actual splits.

As early as August 2020, Le Monde published an article reporting the party's imminent split and dissolution. According to the article, the traditional leadership around Olivier Besancenot and Philippe Poutou was seeking an "amicable divorce" at a forthcoming congress.

This never took place, no doubt affected by the pandemic. The plan itself, however, now seems to have disappeared, at least for the time being. Instead, the internal conflict with one of the largest, if not the largest, minority factions, the CCR (Courant Communiste Révolutionnaire; Revolutionary Communist Current), which is linked to the Fracción Trotskista (FT) at the international level, has come to a head in recent weeks.

The alleged expulsion of the CCR

On June 10, the CCR published a letter accusing the majority of the NPA of having expelled it from the organisation:

"A few days before the national conference that is supposed to spell out the orientation of the New Anticapitalist Party and nominate a candidate for the next presidential election, we are forced to take note of our de facto expulsion from this organization."

There was no choice for the CCR, according to a gathering of nearly 300 of its supporters, but to take the struggle for a revolutionary workers' party and a candidacy for the 2022 presidential election outside the NPA:

"Therefore, today, after being expelled from the NPA, we immediately begin the process of forming a new organisation, with the perspective of building a revolutionary party of workers, as well as seeking the 500 signatures necessary for Anasse to be a candidate for the 2022 presidential election."

The CCR portrays the conflict coming to a head as if all the other currents and factions had conspired together against it and were deliberately driving it out of the organisation. The right wing around Poutou and Besancenot was setting the tone and all (!) other left factions were tacitly accepting it.

At first glance, the vehemence with which the CCR makes the accusation gives the impression that it has been excluded because of its political positions and its tireless struggle against the right-wing leadership of the NPA. A closer examination of the text, however, raises questions: when, where and by whom was a decision to expel them taken? Further research, a review of the minutes and reports of NPA meetings,

reveals the answer: there was no such decision, they have not been expelled.

Rather the reverse. If we look at the evidence the CCR cites for its "de facto" exclusion, their story evaporates. Their website explains that the "de facto" expulsion was a result of the NPA leadership's decisions of 22 and 23 May. These decisions, which can be read in the pre-conference bulletin, contain nothing about any expulsion. What the NPA leadership did adopt was a resolution which set the application deadlines and modalities for the election of delegates, etc, for conference; with 54 votes for, 10 abstentions and not a single vote against. The CCR representatives abstained on a resolution that allegedly amounted to their de facto expulsion! The CCR might at least have tried to explain this inconsistency.

So, there was no expulsion, the only question now is why does the CCR claim this so persistently?

The development of the NPA

Before we can answer this, however, we must briefly review the development of the NPA in recent years during which the CCR managed to strengthen its position within the party considerably. This was mainly due to the resignation of thousands of members and the passivity of not only the traditional majority but also of the other left currents, faced with this. The CCR was evidently the most dynamic faction in the NPA, and actively intervened in the social movements and struggles of the working class and was more visible there than the others, which does not necessarily mean that it had more anchorage in these struggles or played a greater role than others.

Of the approximately 9000 members at the founding of the NPA in 2009, at most only 1500 remain today. Although the CCR has itself grown, its greater influence is, above all, a result of this extreme decline of the NPA.

In 2020, the situation came to a head, when the NPA leadership entered into unprincipled blocs with the left-populist La France Insoumise (Unruly France; FI) led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and other, less significant, reformist or petty-bourgeois groupings in the regional elections. The most successful candidacy, from the NPA's point of view, was "Bordeaux en lutte" (Bordeaux in struggle). This list, led by the NPA's presidential candidate in 2012 and 2017, Philippe Poutou, who received over 12 percent of the vote, was strongly influenced by the NPA and comparatively left-wing. Other regional list combinations were openly dominated by left populism, and the NPA became their foot soldiers.

Some left factions in the NPA (e.g. L'Étincelle; The Spark) opposed this linkage from the beginning. The CCR initially agreed with the project, but later criticised it vehemently. To justify this turnaround, it presented the original concept of "Bordeaux en lutte" as fundamentally different from the other electoral alliances with left populism.

At the same time, these questions highlighted a fundamental problem that remains unresolved to this day: how should the NPA characterise France Insoumise? What tactics should it use towards it? Even more fundamentally, how does the NPA relate to non-revolutionary organisations, trade unions and movements?

Almost all currents in the NPA characterise FI as simply reformist, not a left-populist force. The political break that Mélenchon made with his turn from the Parti de Gauche (Party of the Left; PdG) to FI in 2016, is thus not sufficiently understood. Basically, the NPA uses the same tactics against left populism as against reformist workers' parties.

The second problem was that in all these electoral blocs, the NPA renounced its own programme in favour of a "united front" programme that sometimes was more "leftist", sometimes more directly populist.

Undoubtedly, the alignment with left populism represents a shift to the right. This was probably intended to explore the possibility of further joint candidacies up to the parliamentary and presidential elections. As is so often the case with opportunist manoeuvres, many of its former supporters, that is, the long-standing majority, are even now backing away from further alliances with FI, as the latter has obviously outflanked the NPA in most lists.

In "Bordeaux en lutte" and the other candidacies, moreover, another problem that has characterised the NPA from the beginning becomes clear: its lack of understanding of reformism and tactics towards it.

A founding problem of the NPA

When the NPA was founded, the party leadership at the time assumed that reformism in France and internationally had run its course and was moribund, if not dead. The Great Recession and the historic crisis of the world economy no longer allowed any room for reformist politics, or gradual reforms and, thus, none for the emergence of new reformist parties or the revival of old ones. This impressionistic and superficial view of things seemed to have a certain plausibility in 2009, at least in France. The Parti Socialiste seemed to be in free fall. It lost 12.4 percent of the vote in the 2009 European elections, winning only a disastrous 16.5 percent (although it would be happy with that today). The CP was also greatly weakened as an electoral force, even if it had, and still has, tens of thousands of members and many times the union base of the radical left as a whole.

Above all, the NPA had not reckoned with a left reformist start-up and rival, Melénchon's PdG, which was founded in 2009. Since then, the NPA has been marked by a constant dispute over how to relate to left reformism (and also to left populism), in which two fundamentally wrong positions confront each other. The leadership has generally followed a policy of accommodation, often to such a degree that many members have left and joined Melénchon. Such Opportunism takes various blatant forms, right up to programmatic subordination. It is almost always accompanied by a renunciation of criticism of its temporary allies.

Within the NPA, however, opposition to this adaptation has all too often taken the form of a sterile and ultimately sectarian attitude to reformism. An apparently irreconcilable demarcation, the de facto renunciation of the politics of the united front vis-à-vis both the reformist rank and file and their leadership, is then presented as "independence".

Throughout the history of the NPA, this question of the relationship to reformist (or left populist) parties has been a constant point of internal conflict, political confusion and vacillation. This is ultimately true of all currents of the NPA.

In the regional elections and in the combined list with FI, the NPA leadership swung far to the right. So, the criticism of these unprincipled links by the CCR and other left currents in the NPA undoubtedly hit an important and correct point. No less correct is the observation that a political struggle must be waged against this alignment. However, for the NPA to overcome this generic defect, criticism of its opportunist side is not enough. Rather, the organisation and its members must understand the causes of this adaptation, as well as the recurrent vacillation between opportunism and sectarianism on the question of the united front, and thus be able to consciously overcome these errors.

The manoeuvre of the CCR

In the face of changing majorities in the leadership of the NPA and the swing to the right in the electoral blocs with the left populists, the situation seemed favourable for the left platforms and currents. In purely numerical terms, they could have taken over the leadership of the organisation. But they did not do so, and

could not do so, because they themselves did not have a common concept for further building. Their common ground was usually limited to disagreeing with the long-standing leadership.

In this situation, the CCR decided to make a daring manoeuvre. On the one hand, it launched a campaign for the "unity of revolutionary forces" within the NPA against all those who sought an electoral bloc with the FI. However, after this bloc did not develop to its satisfaction, the CCR tried to create facts against all the other currents, left and right.

Without any discussion inside the NPA, it publicly presented a comrade from its own ranks, the young railway worker and local strike leader Anasse Kazib, as the party's "pre-candidate" for the 2022 presidential election. This manoeuvre was intended to impose a candidate on the other currents without prior discussion. The CCR presented this action as a disinterested proposal and offer, especially to the other left currents, naturally they immediately saw through such a transparent and adventurist manoeuvre.

It failed and deservedly so. No tendency, no platform within the NPA was prepared to take this step and bow to the pressure. Rather, all rejected the undemocratic affront of imposing a candidate on the NPA without internal discussion, without debate among its members and in its committees. After the other currents of the NPA, that is, the clear majority of the party, had refused to allow themselves to be publicly put under pressure and the manoeuvre had failed, any prospect of winning a majority for Anasse as presidential candidate was, of course, also gone.

After the CCR failed to get its candidate accepted, it obviously set course for a break with the NPA. It took flight and in turn declared all those who did not want to go along with its manoeuvres as forces preparing or willing to accept its expulsion. Indeed, parts of the NPA did threaten or push for the expulsion of the CCR in this situation. The fact is, however, that no NPA body with the power to do so, decided to expel this platform or even a single one of its members. Thus, the alleged expulsion simply did not take place. Nevertheless, the CCR never tires of talking about a "de facto" expulsion or about a political development that is tantamount to one. It can no longer work in the NPA, etc.

Whether further work in the NPA makes sense for them or not is, of course, for the CCR to decide for itself, just like every other current and every member. However, this is not an expulsion, and to deliberately blur these questions is only to throw political smoke bombs that serve only to create one's own legend.

The rhetoric fulfils the function of blaming the break with the NPA on an alleged undemocratic and bureaucratic manoeuvre by its old leadership (and all other currents). The CCR itself had probably reckoned on a real expulsion in order to lend credibility to its narrative. However, although this did not take place, the CCR and its sister organisations in the Fraccion Trotskista nevertheless report as if it had.

This creation of legends amounts to a deliberate manipulation not only of the members of the NPA, but also of their own current and the international left. Such manoeuvres, carried out for petty factional interests, not only contribute to the longer-term discrediting of a current, but are also grist to the mill of reformist, populist and anarchist opponents of the building of a revolutionary organisation.

Trotskyists are famous (infamous) for their splits and yet another one will doubtless provoke irony and scorn from professional cynics and philistines around the world. Such wisecracks counterpose to this the "big tent" or "broad church" parties of social democrats or democratic socialists. In these, mutually incompatible currents can coexist because the real politics of the party are decided by an elite of parliamentary careerists and bureaucrats.

In their time, the Russian Social Democracy and Bolshevism were also taunted for their splits. However,

serious militants will not lump all splits together as bad and all fusions as good. Any split poses a question for both sides: did it clarify important issues of strategy and tactics which, after debate, it was urgent to apply in the class and therefore required an organisational break? A split that has no such basis is unprincipled; doubly so when the issue is a presidential election in which it is highly unlikely either side will be able to run.

Meanwhile, both sides or, rather, all sides, have maintained an unprincipled unity for over ten years without either seriously attempting to resolve the programmatic issues or working together in a disciplined way. Had they done so, they could have built a small but effective combat party that could offer a real alternative to the reformist parties and unions, at key highpoints of the class struggle.

Even at this late hour, if the tendencies in and around the NPA, will finally address the question of hammering out a programme (not just an election platform) and a concrete plan of action for fighting Macron and Le Pen on the streets and in the workplaces in the coming years, the destructive effects of the breakdown of the party could be reversed.

The upcoming congress and the platforms in the NPA

The split of the CCR is a fact according to its own statements. The NPA will lose another 20-25 percent of its members. It is likely to have a demoralising effect on quite a few remaining activists precisely because of its unprincipled and manipulative character. Basically, the CCR was aiming for this effect, because it serves the narrative that they organise the smaller, but more dynamic, part of the membership while the demoralisation of those from other currents is presented as a sign of the correctness of their own manoeuvre.

Such a presentation may temporarily serve to consolidate their own ranks. After all, winning hundreds of supporters and dozens of rank-and-file militants in recent years is a considerable success for the CCR, as it is for any propaganda group. However, if we look at the overall balance of forces of the classes, it remains ultimately marginal, compared to the decline of the "radical" left in the last decade and the deep crisis of the NPA. The fact that the CCR was able to strengthen itself during this phase does not change the overall diagnosis. It does, however, cast doubt on the facile optimism of their statement that they can now really take off without the NPA ballast.

This is all the more so because not only is the legend-making mendacious, but the political substance of the split is also questionable. The CCR claims that there were and are fundamental, unsustainable differences in the NPA over political orientation that would make further cooperation impossible. Now, no one would want to deny fundamental differences. However, if we look at the bulletin containing the drafts of all platforms in the NPA for the conference at the end of June, the picture is different. Of the 6 drafts, 5 are in favour of an independent presidential candidacy, only one small platform (Platform 4) is not.

The CCR titles its proposal "Rompre avec la politique d'alliances avec la gauche institutionnelle, pour une candidature 100 % révolutionnaire du NPA à la présidentielle" (Break with the politics of alliances with the institutional left! For a 100 percent revolutionary candidacy of the NPA in the presidential elections!).

Platform 5, put forward jointly by the two major left currents - L'Étincelle and Anticapitalisme & Révolution - is: "Pour une candidature ouvrière, anticapitaliste et révolutionnaire du NPA à la présidentielle" (For an anti-capitalist and revolutionary workers' candidacy of the NPA in the presidential elections!). And the proposal of Platform 2, the largest current around Poutou and Besancenot, bears the headline: "Face à la crise, il faut une candidature du NPA à la présidentielle: ouverte, anticapitaliste et révolutionnaire!" (In the face of the crisis, there is a need for an open, anti-capitalist and revolutionary presidential candidacy of the NPA!).

Not only the names, but also the contents, both strengths and weaknesses, are strikingly similar. Most of the platforms (5 out of 6) and currents are not only in favour of their own revolutionary and anti-capitalist candidacy but also reject any accommodation with the bourgeois centre (Macron) as a lesser evil compared to Le Pen in the presidential elections. All also subject the "institutional left" - a collective term for FI, CP and Greens, to sharp criticism and stress the need for an independent profile with their own candidacy and platform in the elections.

Certainly, this unity represents only a snapshot. But this does not change the fact that Platform 2 seems to have taken a swing to the left. Having taken one or more steps to the left, its platform is not fundamentally different from the CCR proposal or from L'Étincelle and Anticapitalisme & Révolution. The latter (Platform 5) is actually the most rounded in terms of content and is also clearer and more precise than that of the CCR.

Practically all platforms include slogans to improve the situation of the working class (minimum wage, prohibition of dismissals, transformation of precarious jobs into secure ones), the demand for nationalisation under workers' control (especially in the health sector and basic industries), equal citizenship rights for all, the legalisation of people without papers, a rejection of imperialist interventions. All stress the need for mass strikes and a mass movement against the crisis, and that only a workers' government can provide a way out.

Even the weaknesses are largely shared by the documents. On many points (ecology, Europe, EU, internationalism) they are very general. For example, they all correctly emphasise that capitalism cannot solve the environmental question. However, there are hardly any immediate or transitional demands on the impending ecological catastrophe in the texts.

While they all agree on the need for a mass movement against the crisis, against the government, capital and the strengthened right, and also on the need for revolution and a workers' government, the only thing that is actually found in the papers is the emphasis on self-organisation, on struggles "from below" as a means to this end. The question of how such a movement can come about, how the working class can take a leading role in the face of the dominance of petty-bourgeois populist forces, for example, the Yellow Vests, is basically missing. In all platforms, we look in vain for a tactic and a policy towards the existing reformist organisations and especially towards the trade unions.

Thus, the main difference remains merely that the different platforms propose different candidates for the presidential election: Poutou (Platform 2), Besancenot (Platforms 1 and 5) and Anasse (Platform 6).

Even if the proposals for the presidential election are only a snapshot of the politics of the different currents, the platforms proposed are by no means so different as to justify a political break. Most, contrary to the CCR's claim, actually represent a step to the left.

Logically, this snapshot does not rule out future opportunist fluctuations. Just this makes it clear that we are not dealing with a reformist force in the NPA, including the current around Besancenot and Poutou, but with a centrist one, whose politics is characterised by fluctuations between opportunist, revolutionary and sectarian positions.

In this situation, revolutionaries would have to try to push this temporary development further and combine a common candidacy on a common action programme with a systematic discussion of the causes of the crisis of the NPA. The name of the candidate plays a secondary role in this, as long as he/she enjoys the confidence of the whole organisation to some extent, which would speak in favour of Besancenot, in addition to his public profile.

In any case, however, it is crucial that a candidacy for the presidential election is not confused with a solution to the crisis of the NPA. After all, at the moment, it is relatively easy to proclaim a revolutionary, anti-capitalist candidacy. Mélenchon has lost much of his appeal, so his prospects of reaching the second round of the election are slim and tactical voting and subordination to his campaign is no longer a great temptation. Equally, while an agreed candidacy could present a radical platform, it could also, under the aura of unity, lead to the further postponement of political problems and weaknesses that have led and will continue to lead to the decline of the NPA.

The situation in France and the problems of the NPA

Unfortunately, this includes the assessment of the political situation and the balance of power between the classes in France itself, a problem that appears to a greater or lesser extent in all the platforms.

France has seen considerable class struggles in recent years and these have been able to put the brakes on some attacks. In addition, the workers are disproportionately more ready to strike and fight than in Germany, Britain and most other imperialist countries in Europe.

Nevertheless, it was above all the right that benefited from the crises that the Macron government has gone through. The RN (Rassemblement National; National Rally) and Marine Le Pen are now seen as Macron's main challengers. It is very likely that she will make it to the run-off in the presidential election and there she could clear 40 percent of the vote. In regional elections, right-wing conservative parties now form a bloc with the RN. Three quarters of all French people do not rule out voting for the RN in principle.

At the same time, the death agony of social democracy and the public marginalisation of the CP continue. Mélenchon made a right turn from reformism to left populism in 2016 but has lost significant traction since 2017.

Despite social movements and massive struggles, the "radical" left has not been able to benefit from this situation, but has itself experienced a dramatic decline, this is particularly true of the NPA. Of the former 9000 members, about 80 percent have been lost, either by turning to reformist or populist forces or by leaving organised politics altogether.

However, this unfavourable balance of forces is not, or is at best insufficiently, recognised by the NPA. A central reason for this is the false assessment of the gilets jaunes (yellow vests). In all the NPA's platforms, they appear as a progressive mass movement against the government. Their petty-bourgeois class character and their populist orientation play no role in the considerations. Therefore, unpleasant facts, such as the above-average support of the RN by supporters of the yellow vests in elections, are ignored.

Instead, more or less all wings of the NPA, the "left" in part more than the "right", hope that the gilets jaunes will provide the basis for a radical movement against the government and a renewal of the working class. This impressionistic method allows for an "optimistic", or more precisely, for a mirage of the political situation. It blinds us to the fact that with this movement, the petty bourgeoisie emerged as a motive force in the political confrontation, while the working class was a subordinate force in this movement. In general, the NPA currents lack an understanding of petty bourgeois populism and its difference from working class reformism, so that the significance of Mélenchon's swing to the right in 2017 is not recognised at all.

Fortunately, the strengthening of petty-bourgeois populism was broken to some extent by the big strikes and struggles against the so-called pension reform in late 2019/early 2020. Here, the importance and role of the working class was shown. Although the strike could not achieve its goals, and ended up

fragmenting, the central role of trade unions not only in economic struggles but also in political class struggles with the government became clear in this movement. This is especially true of the CGT which, in this confrontation, effectively acted like a political leadership of the class.

While the documents of the NPA conference do not utter a word of criticism, see no problem and make no assessment of the class character of the gilets jaunes, the trade unions and their leaderships only appear as brakemen and traitors. Undoubtedly, many bureaucrats are that, too. Firstly, however, in practically all confrontations, the CGT and SUD/Solidaires, for example, play a more left-wing and militant role than the CFDT or FO and initiate and organise struggles that they later sell out or sell short. Secondly, demands on the trade unions are missing in all the documents. How are mass political strikes, big class struggles at the workplace level ever to come about in France without the trade unions? Even if they have relatively few members compared to Germany or Britain, they are much stronger associations of active trade unionists, that is, the activists in many companies and administrations.

Especially in view of the current defensive, ongoing and threatened attacks and the rise of the right, the formation of a workers' united front is of fundamental importance for organising defensive struggles in order to move from the defensive to the offensive. However, this also means adopting an active policy of the united front especially towards the trade unions (but also towards reformist parties and even towards the supporters of the FI). It is not enough to accuse them of unwillingness to mobilise. The NPA should rather try to force them into action, a united front, wherever possible.

However, this method, which is of course also applicable to the struggle against imperialism, racism, sexism and environmental destruction, is almost completely absent from the documents. The call for action committees, for mobilisations and control of struggles from below is an important aspect of any united front policy, but it cannot and must not replace a systematic policy towards existing mass organisations.

That problem does not appear in the NPA at present. However, there is no revolutionary response to previous adaptations, for example, in the regional elections, but only the replacement of one mistake with its no less wrong opposite.

A false understanding of united front tactics, reformism and populism are only some of the mistakes that have accompanied the NPA since its foundation. In 2009, it correctly proclaimed that the task of the NPA was to elaborate and concretise a programme. However, this correct approach, which alone would have been able to overcome the differences between the various currents, was not pursued. Rather, the NPA operated as an organisation in which major and heated differences emerged at all major turning points, leading to membership losses without the issues being resolved.

In addition, without overcoming their programmatic differences, the individual currents acted like separate organisations from the beginning, simply ignoring decisions with which they disagreed. The NPA's capacity to act was thus progressively reduced.

If the NPA wants to overcome its crisis, if the current Congress and the next few months are to be more than just another chapter in a protracted agony, then it must address these issues. It must use the intervention in the presidential election to campaign for a mass movement against the crisis, to elaborate and disseminate a programme of action and to systematically discuss how to overcome the differences between the currents. Only in this way can the centrist organisation become a revolutionary one.

Endnotes

<https://www.leftvoice.org/excluded-from-the-npa-we-begin-the-process-of-...> [1]

<https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Exclus-du-NPA-nous-engageons-le-proc...>

[2]

Translation by us; this paragraph of the statement does not appear in the version published by Left Voice.

<https://nouveaupartianticapitaliste.org/sites/default/files/bicnmai2021.pdf> [3]

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/france-permanent-crisis-npa>

Links:

[1] <https://www.leftvoice.org/excluded-from-the-npa-we-begin-the-process-of-building-a-new-revolutionary-organization-statement-of-296-npa-activists/>

[2] <https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Exclus-du-NPA-nous-engageons-le-processus-de-construction-d-une-nouvelle-organisation>

[3] <https://nouveaupartianticapitaliste.org/sites/default/files/bicnmai2021.pdf>