Would the real NPA please stand up?

Marc Lassalle, Workers Power 299, December 2022

The long death agony of the French Nouveau parti anticapitaliste has reached its terminal stage following a walk-out of its recent conference by the former leadership. Those who remain need to draw the balance sheet of the plural party experiment.

What happened?

What happened at the fifth national conference of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), held in Paris on 11 December, may come as a shock to those who do not closely follow the French far left. To its militants however, this split into two groups? each claiming to be the continuity of the NPA?comes as no surprise. The NPA was founded in 2009 with an appeal to the radical left to join the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (French section of the Fourth International) in forming a new revolutionary organisation. Fronted by Olivier Besancenot, a young postal worker who had received 1.5 million votes as the LCR?s candidate in the 2007 presidential election, the NPA quickly attracted close to 10,000 members. At its founding conference it committed itself to forging a new party programme. But aside from a few policy commissions, this never materialised. Instead, the old LCR habit of division into permanently warring factions reasserted itself and became endemic. Meanwhile, the NPA?s hope of attracting large numbers of left wing people alienated by the right-wing Socialist Party government of Francois Hollande was thwarted by the intervention of former SP deputy Jean-Luc Mélenchon who founded the Parti de Gauche in 2009, which after various avatars, became the core of La France Insoumise (LFI) and NUPES. With prospects for an electoral breakthrough stymied by the emergence of a left populist party, the NPA spent the better part of a decade in a long death agony, beset by splits to its left and right.

Platforms

Faced with this terminal crisis, the 2022 conference saw two main tendencies fighting for control over the organisation?s future orientation. Platform B (with 48.5% of the delegates) is led by the Besancenot and Philippe Poutou. This current has led the NPA since its foundation and represents the continuity with the LCR and Fourth International (USFI). Today it proposes a major turn for the NPA: from an independent organisation dedicated to building an anticapitalist party challenging the reformist parties, to a ?unitary? orientation towards FI and the left populist broader electoral alliance NUPES, which now includes what is left of the PS, the Greens, French Communist Party and other smaller fry. Clearly having failed to beat them the conclusion is to join them.

This turn is not new: in the local election in Bordeaux in 2021, Poutou (Besancenot?s successor as presidential candidate) promoted an alliance with LFI. At the general elections in June 2022, the NPA for the first time supported NUPES candidates in most of the country.

Platform B justified the turn on the basis of an analysis of the balance of forces nationally and internationally, arguing that ?today the working class is dislocated, the proletariat in the midst of social reconfiguration?and that ?the balance of forces is unfavourable with the dominant class on the offensive?, therefore ?We need to claim and pursue our unitary orientation. Wherever there are dynamic, militant, open structures, we join them to conduct our politics of unitary combat and to contribute to the life of our revolutionary perspectives.?

Despite stressing that this does not mean actually joining LFI, it nevertheless means a strategic orientation towards it and the bloc of reformist parties around it, including through political alliances. Indeed, the leadership of NPA was very
close to striking a deal with LFI to join NUPES and stand NPA candidates under its banner in the last general elections. They are proud of the fact that the slogan ?Mélenchon on the ballots, Poutou on the streets? is very popular, this supposedly giving the NPA a more important role than the simple electoral result.

Platform C (with 45% of the delegates) is itself an alliance of three heterogeneous groups: L?Etincelle a former tendency in Lutte Ouvrière (LO), is the leading force. Next in size is Anticapitalisme & Révolution, a tendency linked to the left opposition in the USFI. Finally, there is Democratie Révolutionnaire which traces its roots to Voix des Travailleurs, which originated in LO before joining the LCR in 1997.

Platform C claims to represent a majority within the NPA, strong in big cities like Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Lille, and Rouen and, most importantly, in the youth organisation. They reject any political alliance with LFI and NUPES and call for an openly revolutionary NPA. They advocate ?the actuality and urgency of revolution? to be prepared by a strong intervention in the working class: they do indeed organise militant workers in important sectors including transport, automobiles and hospitals.

Amicable separation?

Since 2020, the Besancenot-Poutou leadership has been warning that a split was inevitable and even proposed an ?amicable? separation as the only way out. The departure of another opposition faction, the CCR (linked internationally to the Trotskyist Faction) in 2021, halted this development for a moment, as the various currents of NPA found a temporary unity in the campaign of Philippe Poutou for the 2022 presidential election.

However, the underlying differences were not resolved. The functioning of NPA as a party is totally overshadowed by its component political factions, with their own papers, websites, etc. For a decade or more most NPA branches have been dominated by one or another tendency; the various groups hold separate branch meetings, separate educational programmes, paying separate subs. In some workplaces, there are even rival NPA bulletins. There were even separate NPA rank-and-file committees during a recent railway workers strike. Such a mockery of party unity must appear scandalous to serious worker militants and young activists.

Despite these grave problems, the ?amicable separation? proposed by Platform B is an absolute travesty, a cynical bureaucratic manoeuvre to get rid of the opposition and keep control of the apparatus. So why now? Quite simply they think there is a bigger fish to fry!

The rise of LFI /NUPES seems to open a fresh perspective?i.e. the possibility of getting seats in the parliament and in regional and municipal assemblies, via their lists. President Emmanuel Macron has only a relative majority in Parliament obliging the government to painfully seek support either from the PS or from Les Républicains (the right-wing Gaullists). An early dissolution of parliament and general election is a possible solution for Macron in the hope of getting a clear majority. This anticipated development represents a tempting possibility for Platform B, since they dream of ?working with LFI? as Poutou bluntly put it in a recent interview.

However, this is not the only reason. A series of rightward splits since the foundation of the NPA have weakened the current today represented by Platform B. All these splits, including leading cadres and important parts of the apparatus, were rapidly attracted by Mélenchon?s ever-mutating movements and their ?dynamism?. But all these grouplets rapidly became politically irrelevant after leaving NPA. The consequence was that Platform B progressively lost its majority and control of NPA, and this tendency has accelerated, as demonstrated by the growth of the youth section, which constitutes at least a quarter of the membership and at no time has been under the control of the leadership tendency.

During the national conference, a resolution put by Platform C calling for the continuation of NPA was likely to win a majority of delegates. Indeed, even long-term supporters of Platform B were shocked by the idea of actually quitting and liquidating an organisation that they have been loyally and patiently building for more than a decade. Some of them hesitated or went over to Platform C before the conference and the trend could have continued during debates at the conference. Therefore Platform B decided to quit the conference before any vote was taken. In doing so they violated their obligation to those who voted for them, to participate and struggle for their politics at the conference. They also bear a heavy responsibility for weakening to an extreme degree the NPA, which, despite its errors and weaknesses, has stood against the racist far-right, against French imperialism, has built workers struggles and self-organisation, and has struggled for elements of a revolutionary perspective.

The claim that by walking out Platform B is the ?true? NPA is a joke. To honest NPA militants, even those who
formerly supported them, it reminiscent of the low manoeuvres employed by the most cynical Stalinist trade union bureaucrats. First you separate, then you found a second union, and finally you denounce the others as illegitimate for not following you. We strongly denounce this kind of manoeuvre that can only discredit revolutionaries and weaken their voice. The fact that the NPA contained all these tendencies from the beginning and that Platform B for a long time praised the idea of permanent factions shows that what they really found intolerable was the prospect of losing their majority and control of the party apparatus and resources.

Where now?

However, this appalling mess is not simply the result of the lack of political integrity by one or other currents. It is rather the rotten fruit of the centrist tradition of the LCR and USFI and their scorn for and misunderstanding of democratic centralism. The NPA was founded on the basis of a weak declaration of principles, with the promise to initiate a serious programmatic discussion. However, that discussion never happened, and the more or less separate existence of various factions within NPA was accepted on the basis of diplomatic agreements. It was a house built on sand, unable to withstand the storms and shocks of routine political life let alone the intensifying class struggle. This means that the potential of the NPA which offered the far left, however tentatively, the prospect of transcending the stage of a small propaganda group, has been thrown away. Indeed, it was the class struggle? the question of anti-Muslim racism, the question of tactics in the trade unions, and the challenge of a re-emerging reformist left party? which posed the need for programmatic, that is, strategic and tactical unification. This need was missed because the LCR, like LO, never saw programme as a question of creatively applying revolutionary principles to new periods and tasks of the class struggle. The repeated crises since 2009 have provided many opportunities for this. Likewise the NPA never really saw itself as a revolutionary strategist for the class struggle, including critically the need to take united action with reformists and all sorts of progressive movements. In short the NPA failed the test of developing a living programme or even organising the debate on one it had pledged itself to do. As a result it remained obsessed with elections on the one hand, and on the other, tailing left forces in the unions when it came to movements against the different neoliberal reforms. And the more it avoided the task of political clarification and homogenisation, the more it crystallised into mutually hostile factions and platforms. The current crisis is a result of that failure. In addition, the political situation has changed dramatically since the foundation of the NPA. The populist Mélenchon is a serious contender for leadership within the workers? movement; reactionary and racist ideas and parties are on the rise with the Rassemblement National. Clearly a strong and coherent party is needed to combat both the right and neo-reformism. In this respect, the split will not in itself clarify anything. L?Etincelle, A&R and DR have fundamental political differences between themselves and have built different organisations with different methods. We can support their ambition to continue the NPA and will take part in this, despite the fact that we have serious programmatic and political differences with them. But they will have to return to the pledges of 2009 to seek programmatic unity and an end to permanent factions. The right to form factions and tendencies is of course a vital part of democratic?as opposed to bureaucractic?centralism. But centralism means agreeing strategy and tactics for impending class struggles and united local branches and factions in the unions to fight for it in common. Without this, unity will be just a facade that will break apart whenever it faces a serious challenge.

A credible refoundation of the NPA necessarily must start with a thorough balance sheet of the class struggle in France, and the development of a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry at the international level, with the conclusions summarised in a programme of working class action in the coming period. These are urgent tasks that cannot be evaded or simply postponed. The working class and youth of France has demonstrated a willing combativity against neoliberal attacks. It needs the militants of the NPA to become a coherent combat party, not a loose alliance of competing factions. The League for the Fifth International is very willing to take its place in this discussion and to mount active solidarity with the struggles of the French workers in the coming years.