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France

# On the French Left: what's going on?

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*The political divisions on the left in France in the run-up to the Presidential elections have provoked much debate internationally. François Duval, from the LCR national leadership recently set out the position of the LCR in a report to the European Anti-capitalist Left.*

Many friends from the anti-capitalist Left in Europe (and elsewhere) are worried about what's happening now in France and are asking questions about the political orientation and behaviour of the LCR. [1] This document intends to give some information in order for "non French readers" to understand the French situation, and some explanations about the way the LCR has tried to deal with it.

There is no doubt about it: having - at least! - four candidates to the left of social-democracy standing for the next presidential election (end of April 2007) is not the best thing that could have happened! So, inevitably, it raises some questions, such as:

- Regroupments of the Left and/or united coalitions have been possible in various European countries such as England and Wales with Respect, or Germany with the WASG/Linkspartei. So why not in France?
- Is the LCR responsible for that? Has the LCR wasted a major opportunity to reshape the French left? As you probably guess, we plead "not guilty"!

## A dramatic situation in France? Yes, but...

First of all, it is necessary to provide a more complete and better-balanced approach to the long-lasting trends of the French situation. One generally considers that since 1995 there is a rich and powerful social movement in France with big strikes and huge demonstrations, and even political successes for the Left. And one could easily enumerate:

- The result gained by Arlette Laguiller [2] for the presidential election in 1995;
- The strikes and demonstrations against the government six months later;
- The election of five revolutionary MPs [3] to the European Parliament in 1999;
- The cumulated results of revolutionary candidates in the presidential election in 2002: 10% of votes. Even 13% if you add the result of the CP leader.
- The huge strikes of March and April 2003: almost a general strike;
- The victory of the "No" during the referendum on the neo-liberal European constitution, on 29 May 2005;
- The rebellion of the youth and riots in the French suburbs, in November 2005;

– The victory of youth and workers' movement against CPE [\[4\]](#) in May 2006.

All these events are very important. They show the strength of the resistance - both social and political resistance - against liberalism and corporate capitalism. They obviously suggest the need for a political expression through the emergence of a political alternative, embodied by a new broad anti-capitalist party, a new political representation for the exploited and the oppressed.

But these events are just one side of the situation. If you look at the other side of the situation, you will see an especially low level of "days of work lost because of strikes", a succession of neo-liberal reforms that have been implemented through workers' defeats - or even without any resistance at all -, a very limited membership of unions and parties, a growing rate of abstention for elections, an avalanche of laws in favour of cops and against youngsters and immigrants, an uninterrupted shift to the right of the political elite, including the leadership of trade unions and the social-democrat party. And so on ...

In the political and electoral arena, real life has not been a continuous increase of the results for the radical and/or revolutionary Left. A few weeks after the presidential election in 2002, for general elections, the cumulated results of the LCR and LO (Lutte Ouvrière) represented an average rate of 2.5%. In 2004, common slates (LCR and LO) reached an average rate of 3 to 5%.

In fact the situation in France is more complex and contrasted:

– On one side, long periods where everything is "quiet": no strike, no movement and hard attacks from right wing parties and bosses.

– But, on the other side, (very) short periods of impetuous social explosion.

It does not mean a "downturn", like in the 1980s and the first part of the 1990s. But, at least, it means that the situation is unstable and volatile. The short periods of social explosion have not succeeded in reversing the relationship of forces between the ruling classes and the working class. And because the periods of social movements are intense but very short, the lessons drawn by significant sectors of the working class or even groups of activists are very heterogeneous. That is the first substantial obstacle confronting any attempt to change resistance into a political alternative. And that point really explains a lot of things that have happened since May 2005!

## After the victory

Actually, after 29 May 2005, we have been faced with a succession of missed rendezvous, false hopes and distorted debates. To put it simply, it was not so easy - and perhaps impossible - to change the coalition against the European Constitution into an electoral coalition for 2007.

The revolutionary Left (mainly the LCR), the French CP, a platform inside the Green Party, a platform inside the Socialist Party, activists from the trade unions movement, from associations, from the feminist movement, from the global justice movement and thousands of ordinary people with left wing ideas agreed to campaign against the EU Constitution. Obviously, that was the rich basis we had to build on. But some political clarifications were needed.

A shared refusal of the neo-liberal European Constitution does not mean that all these people could automatically agree – or, even, easily – agree on a common approach for elections. More precisely: specific elections, general elections, where what is at stake is political power, government, parliamentary majority. Or, to say it with "old" words: state power.

The most widely shared explanation for the failure of the process for a common candidate of the anti-liberal Left is: because of the sectarianism of LCR and/or because of the hegemonic behaviour of the French CP (and its desire to keep control of the movement).

This explanation is so widely shared because it is a simple one, it is an easy one and it is a comfortable one. I don't share that explanation. Precisely because I feel it is too simple, too easy and too comfortable. And is not – political!

If the only problem has been the sectarianism of the LCR, then what would have occurred? A united coalition and a common candidate of everybody from the anti-liberal Left, eventually without the LCR! But that did not happen ...

If the only problem has been the hegemonic behaviour of the CP leadership, then what would have occurred? A united coalition and a common candidate of everybody from the anti-liberal Left, eventually without the CP! But that did not happen, either ...

My explanation is that the process for a united coalition and common candidates failed for substantial political reasons. It failed because there was – and there still is – a central political disagreement on a central political question: what kind of relationships can the anti-liberal movement have with the leadership of the Socialist Party, related to the issues of government, parliamentary majority and state power.

## The sectarianism of the LCR, really?

Let's make things as clear as possible! We think that our organisation has a good programme, built on social and democratic emergency measures. But, we were perfectly aware that a united anti-liberal coalition could not just endorse our programme! And we were ready to accept compromises, as long as the compromises were not opposed to our own proposals.

By the way, the 29 May collectives have adopted a programme. We agreed with many of their proposals. We also have differences. Just enumerate a few of them.

The LCR thinks that a genuine anti-liberal candidate must be clear on the level of minimum wage we are fighting for. Neither Marie-George Buffet nor Jose Bové is clear.

The LCR thinks that a genuine anti-liberal candidate must say clearly that he (or she) is in favour of getting rid of nuclear power as soon as possible. But the programme of the "29 May collectives" did not say that, mainly because the Communist Party is deeply involved in the pro-nuclear lobby!

The LCR thinks that a genuine anti-liberal candidate must not just act for the dissolution of imperialist coalitions: she (or he) must say clearly that France has to withdraw immediately from NATO, without waiting for any consensus on that issue with other European countries.

But, during the debates about the programme for election, the LCR has not made any overbidding. We just stated that these points (and some others) were not an absolute obstacle for a united coalition, but temporarily unsolved questions we could deal with.

Of course, the main problem was not that these very "cautious" ideas were not shared among the activists of the "anti-liberal collectives". Most of them agreed with our more advanced demands. The main problem was the orientation of the CP, which was also by far the main political current involved in the process.

So, during several months, in Spring 2006, the LCR tried seriously to organise an open and honest debate with the CP. Common working groups were planned, with two or three "experts" of the CP and two or three "experts" from the LCR, on each topic, in order to establish the list of measures everybody could agree on and the list of measures that needed additional work or compromises. Some of these groups met once or twice - until the CP decided that there were no reasons to discuss with the LCR and that it was a better idea to discuss with "people"!

## The scenario, not the cast

For months, everybody seemed to agree: a political agreement was the most important issue, not the name of the common candidate.

The LCR thought that its own candidate, Olivier Besancenot, was a good candidate, perhaps the best among the various leaders of the anti-liberal movement. Olivier is very popular among workers and young people. But he is our best-known spokesperson and, for that reason, we were perfectly aware he could not be the candidate of a united anti-liberal coalition. We were ready for a compromise, for another candidate. Even after having announced his candidature, we said clearly that we were ready to withdraw his candidature at any moment if a political agreement was found.

But, yes: there was a single issue about which we were not ready to make a compromise. Not an unlimited series of pretexts: just one simple and single issue that needed - and still needs - an answer, a clear answer, an answer without any ambiguity. As you have surely understood it, the question we raised from the beginning of the process has remained the same: the question of the relationship with the SP, related to government and Parliament.

And the answer we wanted to hear was: no, an anti-liberal candidate will not be member of a government led by the SP. No anti-liberal candidates for general elections, if elected as MPs, will either belong to the same parliamentary majority or support a government led by the SP.

We have not heard such an answer.

## Distorted debate

The debate on this issue raged during the first part of 2006. Once again, the main problem was not the average mood of activists from the anti-liberal collectives. A significant number of them more or less shared our point of view, even when they thought that we were exaggerating the importance of that issue. The main problem was - and still remains - the political approach of the CP.

The leaders of the French CP have a two-faced speech. On one side, they reaffirm that they don't want to reiterate the experience of the so-called "plural left" government between 1997 and 2002, when they participated in Jospin's government and a parliamentary majority with the SP and were obliged to endorse its social-liberal program. The end of that experience was the electoral disaster of April 2002.

But, on the other side, they pretend that it is possible to gather "all the left on an anti-liberal programme", that it is possible to conciliate the parties which were in favour of the No to the referendum and those which were in favour of the Yes! They have not given up the hypothesis of being again members of a government led by the SP.

This was the reason why we tried to have an open and honest debate with the CP on that issue. Both the LCR and the CP agreed to write a document about how each party considers the issue of political power, coalition, common government, and so on. After a little while, the leadership of the LCR wrote this document, specifying our conditions for belonging to a common government. The document was passed and sent to the CP. The CP neither wrote any document nor answered to our own document.

## Turning point

The next step was the debate about that issue inside the National Collective and the hundreds of collectives. This debate ended in September 2006 when the National Conference of the "anti-liberal collectives" adopted a document entitled "Ambition and strategy". This document included ambiguous formulas about the hegemony of "social-liberalism". But it does not clearly state that it will be impossible to join a SP government, nor to support it in the framework of a common parliamentary majority with the really existing SP, its programme and its leadership.

The LCR proposed amendments in order to clarify the issues. These amendments were neither accepted by the national Collective nor submitted to the vote of National Conference of the "anti-liberal collectives". A quite similar amendment from a collective from the South East of France was moved out of the way as well. Another amendment from the same collective specifying that the "common candidate cannot be the spokesperson of a political party" was also eliminated in the same way.

That conference was the turning point of the process: our partners from the anti-liberal coalition against the EU constitution decided to get rid of the LCR. It is not paranoia ... though even paranoid persons sometimes have genuine enemies! The main purpose of the other political currents and the other members of the National Collective was not to get rid of the LCR. But they thought that the choice was between keeping the LCR and pushing aside the CP, or keeping the CP and pushing aside the LCR, hoping that sooner or later the LCR will join. But we didn't. Because ... we believe in political ideas!

Many people in the collectives said that, in fact, the document approved by the National Conference should satisfy us. But a few days afterwards, several speeches and articles from CP leaders confirmed our fears. They obviously had a different interpretation of what the collectives were supposed to have agreed on. And they insisted on the fact that the political orientation supported by the LCR had been defeated by the "collectives". Which, I think, was - unfortunately - right.

That's the reason why the LCR did not participate in the process of choosing a common candidate: from our point of view, the prerequisite was a political agreement and a shared position on the issue of the relationship with SP.

## Misunderstanding

The decision of the National Collective to withdraw any amendment specifying that the spokesperson of a political party could not be the common candidate was another weakness in the process. Actually, the CP thought that, in the end, everybody would agree to support its candidate. And the other currents and the other members of the National Collective thought that, in the end, the CP would agree to withdraw its candidate! But that did not happen.

As usual, the CP wished to gain a unitary cover, but it also wanted to keep control of the movement. And the best way to do so was to have its own candidate standing on the behalf of the anti-liberal movement! It never intended to do anything different. And that is exactly what had happen...

The process blew up in November 2006 when the CP tried to impose its candidate, Marie-George Buffet, the general secretary of the CP. Of course, the CP used "post-Stalinist" methods to do so, such as a blossoming of "new" collectives populated with CP members in order to gain a majority for choosing the candidate. Some pre-existing and genuine collectives were suddenly invaded by CP activists who came to meetings just in time to vote for choosing the candidate. In some boroughs, local branches of the CP were hastily changed into anti-liberal collectives!

These old methods inherited from the Stalinist past of the CP have worried many people inside the collectives. But, actually, the CP leadership were encouraged to do so by the National Collective, when it decided to blank out and postpone the problem of the designation of the candidate.

Everybody (except us) was sure that the first steps of the process had been completed successfully: the anti-liberal movement had a strategic document and an electoral programme (adopted in October 2006). Deciding the name of the candidate would be the last and easy step...

But it is not so easy to get rid of political issues and political differences!

The question we raised had not been answered. It has led to our political eviction from the process. But the unsolved problem — and the divergences between some activists and leaders of the anti-liberal process and the CP leadership — has reappeared in the worst manner: the designation of the candidate. Almost 60% of consulted people were in favour of MG Buffet, which only illustrates the real ratio between CP membership and other people in the "collectives".

## A major opportunity lost?

Would things have been different if the LCR have remained in the process and have been more involved in the collectives? It is not a serious statement.

For months, we saw reiterated signs that the CP wanted to have its own candidate and would not give any guarantees about its relationship with SP. The involvement of the LCR in the collectives could not change that. We are not so powerful!

Did we underestimate the "dynamic" of the anti-liberal movement after our common victory over the EU Constitution? I don't think so.

This movement raised the issue of a political alternative and we have tried, with our own political orientation, to move forwards alongside people who came together during the campaign. But, as explained before, the prerequisite for a move forwards was political clarification on central issues.

Some people on the Left have argued that another approach was possible: anyhow, there is never an absolute guarantee. So the clever thing to do was to get involved in the process although its political bases were ambiguous, to rely on its dynamic and, eventually to break with the CP if our fears were confirmed. But life is not that simple.

The LCR has been under heavy pressure from all those who wanted a unique candidate, whatever the political basis would be. If we had accepted an ambiguous basis and got involved in the process, the pressure to remain in this framework would have been higher. If we had tried to break after a while, everybody would have reminded us: there is nothing new, you have accepted the basis, it's a betrayal! We wouldn't have been better understood and we wouldn't have made any demonstration ...

Have we underestimated the crisis inside the CP? I don't think so.

After the disintegration of Soviet Union and the disastrous results of the former coalitions with the SP, this crisis is deeper than ever. Many CP members - and even elected MPs and mayors - are breaking with the CP leadership and its orientation. But this does not indicate the direction of their evolution: from right to left, or from left to right?

Of course, we hope that some of them could make a good choice: leaving the neo-reformist and post-Stalinist tradition in favour of the building of a new broad anti-capitalist party with others. But we must also consider that many of them - just like the CP leadership - need the support of the SP to be elected again. And that doesn't lead them to move towards left!

In the past, smaller groups of activists or leaders have resigned or split from the CP. Some of them had really broken with Stalinism and were more open to work with the radical Left. But most of them were attracted by the SP and became its satellites.

Have we missed the opportunity to reshape the Left through the good electoral result of a common candidate?

Many people in the movement believed that a unitary candidate of the anti-liberal Left could have a good result because, in 2005, the majority of left voters, including SP voters, were against the EU Constitution. Some dreamed: more than 10% of the votes! Some even forecast that the anti-liberal candidate would have more votes than the social-democrat candidate! And this absolute lack of lucidity has been encouraged by CP leaders and the main spokespersons of the National Collectives ... For the worst possible reason: why worry about the relations with the SP if the anti-liberal candidate could win?

## The LCR isolated?

Our campaign for the Presidential election has already started. The rallies and public meetings with Olivier Besancenot are significant successes. We are receiving encouraging letters and e-mails after each broadcast or TV talk-show or interview. He is warmly welcomed in workplaces and on demonstrations. Social questions and the fight against discriminations are the core of this campaign and thousands of workers, women and youngsters show their interest for that.



It is obviously too soon to establish a serious balance sheet on the orientation, the behaviour and the action of the LCR. The time will come, after the presidential and general election. Most probably, the conclusions will be: the LCR has not done everything in the best way and made some mistakes.

Obviously, the divisions among our own members have increased. Obviously, genuine activists of the anti-liberal movement, very good people, are angry against the CP, but they are also angry against the LCR. Obviously, we have not been understood and have been partly isolated. Obviously, that is not a good result and the failure of the attempt to have a genuine independent and anti-liberal coalition with a common candidate is a political defeat.

But regrets and sorrows are inefficient. It is more important to try to understand what happened. We have been partly isolated because we have raised some difficult and uncomfortable questions. It was not so popular to tell people and activists who desperately want a single candidate of the anti-liberal left that it was not so easy. It was not so popular to tell them that political clarifications were mandatory in order to build a long-lasting coalition. It was not so popular to tell them that the electoral results of an anti-liberal candidate, even a unitary and unique one, will not be fabulous. It was not so popular to tell them: although the majority of the people who usually vote for left-wing parties have voted against the EU Constitution, although the SP was in favour of the Constitution, nevertheless many of them will vote directly for the candidate of the SP for presidential election. It was not so popular to tell them: no, there will not be several dozens of anti-liberal candidates elected as MPs. It was not so popular to try to tell these things (which were true) to people who didn't want to hear them! Of course, our political function is not to smash the hopes of thousands of people. But we are not supposed to feed them with fanciful illusions!

## J. Bové, the man we need?

After a lot of developments, the former peasant leader, José Bové, is now the fourth candidate of the anti-liberal" and/or radical Left. He is rather popular for his attacks against McDonalds, his campaigns against genetically modified crops and his involvement in the global justice movement. He is a courageous activist, who has been sent to jail once for several months and he is again under the threat of a new sentence. And, no doubt about that, he has the right to be a candidate, as a representative figure of a specific current (radical ecology, global justice, ...).

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bbb.jpg>]

Bové, Besancenot and Buffet

But he is neither a unitary candidate nor a "natural" candidate of the anti-liberal movement or of the "29th May collectives". He is supported by none of the political parties or currents involved in the coalition against the EU Constitution: PRS ("for the social Republic"), a platform inside the SP, is now supporting the SP candidate; the LCR is supporting Olivier Besancenot; the CP is supporting Marie-George Buffet; and the small groups from the "republican left" (former supporters of JP Chevènement) don't agree with his candidature. Only "The Alternatives", a small platform inside the Greens and a minority of the collectives are in favour of J. Bové.

The methods used to build this candidature are really worrying. Until November 2006, J. Bové was in competition with others to be the candidate of the collectives. Then, he decided to withdraw his candidature, most probably because the first results of the votes inside the collectives were not very good for him. After that, he said that he would stand only if Buffet and Besancenot withdrew.

Then, after the announcement of the candidature of the CP general secretary and the blowing out of the process for a unitary candidate, a petition was organised by his friends through websites and e-mails to ask him to be a candidate. And he finally decided to be a candidate!

This event is not the result of a democratic and contradictory debate inside the collectives; it is not the result of political confrontation and agreement between political parties. It is the result of a plebiscitary approach, based on the signature of an e-mail petition, with a nasty smell of "anti-parties" mood.

Everybody in the alternative Left must realise that political parties, even alternative and/or revolutionary ones, have disappointed people. But thinking that loose networks can replace them is a dangerous illusion, in terms of political efficiency and in terms of democracy as well.

This is important because the background of all these debates is about the type of new anti-capitalist movement or broad left party we want to build in the future. [5]

## A fight for political independence

Just a few more words about the main question we have raised. The relation with the SP and the issues of government and parliamentary coalitions are not purely theoretical ones. They are not obsessions or nightmares born in the sick imagination of the LCR. They don't rely on the so-called "French exception". They are real challenges for the Left, worldwide.

Revolutionary and/or radical groups have been already faced to these challenges: in Brazil and in Italy, for instance. Becoming satellites of social democracy via common governments or parliamentary coalitions with the centre left can end up with the destruction of the radical Left. We know for sure that new experiences of centre left governments will only lead to greater disappointment, greater bitterness and an increased support for populist and far right parties. If we want to avoid this, the radical Left must not share the responsibility of these social and political disasters.

The difficult debate we had in France was not about Reform and Revolution. It was not about "Party and Movement": the long-lasting tradition of the LCR is to build a (revolutionary) party in close relation with involvement in the movement(s), unitary coalitions and open regroupments.

It was not about "united front" versus sectarian isolation: from the 1970s until now, there is much evidence (such as our involvement in the 2005 campaign against the EU Constitution) that the LCR has always favoured the building of a unitary framework for action rather than the emphasis on our party.

It was not about the false polarity between opportunism and revolutionary purism. By the way, such a reproach - revolutionary purism - has rarely been addressed to LCR!

No, more modestly, it was about subordination to social democracy (and/or social-liberalism) or political independence!

**Link:** Visit the [site of the Olivier Besancenot campaign](#).

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[1] LCR - Ligue communiste révolutionnaire - French section of the Fourth International.

[2] Candidate for Lutte Ouvrière (LO).

## On the French Left: what's going on?

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[3] On a joint slate between LO and the LCR.

[4] First Employment Contract.

[5] Those who want to know more about it can read the document written by Pierre Rousset - <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article4979>