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France

Pre-electoral turbulence in France

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This interview with François Sabado, member of the Political Bureau of the LCR, (Revolutionary Communist League, French section of the Fourth International) was first published on the website Viento Sur. Since this interview took place the process there have been further developments on the “left” of the French political scene. By a vote of its members the Socialist Party (PS) has designated Ségolène Royal as its candidate. Royal is a self-proclaimed admirer of Tony Blair and has not hesitated to engage in the debates on, for example, security or the education system, with positions hardly distinguishable from those of the right wing incarnated by Nicolas Sarkozy.

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

L to R: Marie-George Buffet (PCF), Oliver Besancenot (LCR), NoÃ«l MamÃ“re (Greens) and Arlette Laguiller

On the radical left, the difficult process of trying to determine a unitary candidate on the “anti-neoliberal” movement continues with votes in all the local collectives to determine which candidate each collective supports. This process should culminate in a national meeting on 9/10th September.

The global justice and peasant activist José Bové who was originally a “candidate to be candidate” has withdrawn. There remain in the running Marie-George Buffet, national secretary of the PCF (French Communist Party), Clémentine Autain, deputy mayor and member of Paris City Council in which she is a member of the PCF group without being a party member, Yves Salesse, president of the Copernic Foundation, a left wing think tank which launched the original appeal against the European Constitution but who is also a high ranking civil servant. These are the three main contenders. There are 4 others of whom the best known is Patrick Braouzec, PCF mayor of St Denis in the Paris suburbs.

Viento Sur: The possibility of a unitary anti-neoliberal candidate has awakened a broad interest in the European alternative left. But the development of the process and the position within it of the different political and social organisations and currents seems quite confused. And in addition it is a polemical subject, including within the LCR. We would like to know the position of the Ligue leadership and your own opinions on the questions in this process. To start with, could you summarise the general positions of the Ligue?

François Sabado: The starting point for this process was the NO victory in the referendum on the European Constitution on the 29th May 2005. For the first time in a long time there was a defeat of the economically liberal European project. It was thus completely natural that there was a continuation of this both on the level of a fight back against liberal attacks as well as the desire to build an electoral expression for the leftwing No forces. This did not pose major problems in action, in particular in the mobilisation against the Bolkenstein directive, or in solidarity with young people's fight against the CPE.

Although we should note that divergences appeared during the movement between, on the one hand, the left currents in the SP and the PCF who refused to challenge the rightwing government in power, and on the other hand, organisations like the LCR which, even with its limited forces, tried to direct the movement against the Chirac-Villepin government.

On the electoral level, there also this unitary aspiration, but there the things are complicated, because electoral and institutional questions pose, even on the parliamentary level, the problem of power, whether that is on the overall political level - what break with liberalism? - or in the form of the governmental answers.

That is why from September 2005 we said to the PCF that we were ready to discuss all these questions. In fact, we wrote that the PCF was at a crossroads: either it could choose to continue the dynamics of the leftwing No by clearly refusing all new parliamentary and governmental alliance with a PS leadership that had voted yes to the European constitution. And in this case, we were ready to constitute an anti-liberal front with all the components of the left No, including the PCF, for the elections.

Or it could try to do a balancing act, discussing with the LCR but keeping its agreements with the PS at the same time and, in that case, it could not count on us to constitute a unitary political alternative of unit.

We were ready to discuss and from that point the discussion developed on two closely related questions:

First, does a consistent defence of an anti-liberal programme imply moves along the path of a break with capitalism? Does defence of public services require not only undoing rightwing privatisations but also what the left privatised, which implies recommending general solutions of forms of public and social property for transport, energy, telecommunications and other key sectors of the economy? The LCR answered these questions by arguing the need for a break with capitalism.

The PCF though defended the idea of undoing rightwing privatisations but not those carried out by the plural left government of 1998-2002, in which it had participated. On employment, we defend radical solutions like forbidding "stock exchange" dismissals. The PCF sticks to general formulas for the defence of employment without posing the problem of a confrontation with employers.

The second question under discussion is the question of government. We think that the defence of an anti-liberal programme in the continuity of the referendum NO cannot go alongside a parliamentary coalition or participation in a government with the SP leadership. Can one take part in a government that, in the current balance of forces, would be dominated by the social-liberal policy of the SP leadership? Can there be joint government between supporters of the Yes and No on the European constitution? We answer no, unhesitatingly. The PCF explained to us that one could not rule out the possibility of a policy change by the SP leadership, of making it shift under pressure and then envisaging the possibility of forming a government.

But the PCF continued with a dual language, it proposed a series of more or less radical formulas to us but at the same time it took part in top-level meetings with the SP leadership to discuss a programmatic alternative for the whole "left" without the PS showing any sign of shifting under pressure. The PCF also made a joint list with the SP in recent local elections in Bordeaux, rejecting an anti-liberal unitary list. We made the proposal of such a list to all the components of the "left No" including the PCF, which refused. We had said that PCF was at a crossroads. It did not want to be released from its subaltern relationship with the PS.

From there the situation could lead only to a fragmentation of the anti-liberal forces. We do not want to allow ourselves to be drawn into a re-edition of the plural left government. This is not only a French question. It is posed in Italy with the current policy of Rifondazione, which supports the centre left Prodi government. It is posed in Berlin where the Linkspartei has just been sanctioned for having managed Berlin on a socio-liberal basis in alliance with the SPD leadership.

We do not stand fast on this position because we are sectarian. We are the systematic defenders of unity of action of the whole left - including the PS - in struggles and movements. But on the governmental question there are unavoidable fundamental delimitations that concern the question of the independence of the radical left, which are behind the problems posed in Italy or Germany: In a situation where there is a social and political fight back to liberalism, or there is the emergence of forces breaking with this liberalism, should the radical left remain independent of the centre left or social-democratic leaders or should it get involved in the mechanics of alliance with the centre left and social democracy?

We resolutely choose the first option, and thus we reject the policy of the PCF, which remains on the whole determined by its institutional alliances with the PS. From this point of view, we defend the perspective for unitary anti-liberal candidatures but on two conditions: a consistently anti-liberal programme and an independent perspective, in particular on the governmental level, from that of the PS leadership.

We even said that we presented a candidate to weigh on this discussion but we were ready to withdraw him provided that there is a political agreement on these questions. More precisely, we had a good formula that summed up our approach "what matters for us, is the scenario not the casting". But up to now, the organisers of these unitary collectives and the PCF leadership have not wanted to answer the political problems posed by the LCR.

There seem to be at least three significant political positions within the process: that of the PCF, that of sectors which support the candidature of José Bové and those which want a position on "non party" consensus. How do you characterise them?

José Bové did not like this situation and called on PCF leader Marie-George Buffet and LCR candidate Olivier Besancenot to withdraw and let him be the unitary candidate. For us the problem is not the people but the political basis and we have the same problem with Buffet and Bové on the question of the relations with the PS, even if it is in different forms. Fundamentally, there is an agreement by all the components of the left No, except the LCR, to discussing a programmatic and governmental alternative with the PS.

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

José Bové (microphone)

In fact the anti-liberal left No was an alliance of left reformists, Socialists or post-Stalinists, "anti liberal Europe" republicans, global justice activists, anti capitalists and revolutionaries. Once the unitary dynamic of that movement declined the left reformist apparatuses returned to their traditional policy and in particular the PCF apparatus, whose priority was the management of its institutional positions.

José Bové does not have an apparatus and represents a sector of the global justice movement, with which we share many common struggles - involvement on the question of political ecology and the fight against GMs for example, but it remains trapped in a certain conception of "lobbying pressure" on social democracy or the dominant left parties. This sector of the global justice movement can be very radical on a practical question like the anti GM fight, but at the same time it does not think about politics without posing the question of parliamentary or governmental alliances with the PS. In the relationship of forces this leads it to positions subordinate to the PS on the big questions.

Thus, we ask the same question to both the PCF and to Bové on the question of alliances. For example, he declared that he would not stand if Laurent Fabius (former PS Prime Minister, who campaigned for the No) were the PS candidate. One sees the problems and the ambiguities that his positions pose.

What is the reality of the unitary committees?

The collectives, and in particularly the public meetings for the left No, brought together many thousands of people during the campaign. Today the unitary aspiration remains strong but the collectives no longer have the representativity and the strength they had during the No campaign. This is because of the effects of the left No on the political situation.

May 29 had a very strong dynamic against European liberal policy but it was not sufficiently strong to change the political relationship of forces, first of all between the popular classes and the dominant classes, and then within the labour movement between the PS, PCF, a series of left reformist currents and revolutionaries. One thing was the dynamic at the base in the meetings in the collectives in the full swing of the campaign; another is that of the collectives more than one year after the campaign, which are now composed mainly of militants of a certain generation - fifty-year-olds.

What's more, the left No was pluralist from the socialist left to revolutionaries, but now many organisations or currents have returned to the fold: the socialist left has gone back to the PS, the different currents in the PCF have made an internal equilibrium their priority, rather than the dynamic of the leftwing No, and others have also returned to their origins.

On these political questions we have to recognise that we have lost the battle. The unitary feeling and the manoeuvres of the PCF leadership have been stronger than our arguments. The national meetings of the collectives have not wanted to clarify the questions asked. This has allowed the PCF leadership to position itself and continues its meetings with the PS leadership. Some people have begun to understand the orientation the PCF wants to impose on the collectives and this is creating a whole series of problems.

But this is where there is a second question, which is the specificity of the electoral terrain. Where there is a united front in action it is those who are the most determined and resolute in the action who win out, and in general the reformists are cautious about getting into united fronts in action because they see the danger of a radicalisation in the process.

For elections it is different, the strongest force is not the most determined for action or mobilisation but that which has the most institutional positions, the biggest apparatus and an electoral solution which is the most compatible with the electoral and institutional relationship of forces and that means to defeat the right, to have people elected, to get new positions an agreement with the PS that goes beyond politics or content.

In this game the PCF, despite its organisational and electoral weakening, still holds a number of aces. It claims more than 100,000 members, even on the most optimistic estimations there are not more than 5000 activists in the committees, many of whom are PCF cadres. Thus today the PCF leadership is determined to present Marie-George Buffet as the communist candidate and the candidate of the collectives and is using its relative strength to suffocate discussion in the collectives and to drag them all into supporting MGB.

Today we are continuing the discussion with a series of militants, currents or organizations in the collectives. But by refusing to clarify a series of political questions, the majority of the organisers of the collectives are refusing to map out a path that is clearly independent of the PS leadership. Thus the conditions for a unitary candidature do not exist. The PCF will have its candidate with its orientation. In this situation we could not allow the PCF to be the representative of the left No, so we decided to stand Olivier Besancenot as an LCR candidate but to withdraw him if there was a political agreement. Today this seems less and less likely so we are preparing the Besancenot campaign.

According to the press and some leftwing activists, including leading figures of the LCR, the Ligue is not fully participating in the creating the conditions for a unitary candidate and could pay a high price for what seems to be a demonstration of sectarianism. How do you react to this?

We are beginning our campaign now. It will be an anti-capitalist campaign. We place it in the continuity of the left No which, in order to present an overall alternative, must be anchored on class questions and independence from social-liberalism. Our programme starts from a series of social and democratic demands: an increase in buying power, defence of the public services, the right to stable and guaranteed employment with a system of job security which in practice forbids redundancies, starting with those caused by buy-outs.

Olivier Besancenot is the only candidate who also has begun a campaign against police discrimination and violence against immigrants and young people. We do a lot of work with a series of youth associations and others of undocumented workers.

Pre-electoral turbulence in France

Our enemy is the capitalist system, the government, the right, and in particular its representative in the next election, ultra-liberal authoritarian Nicolas Sarkozy. But we accuse the left and in particular the PS of adapting to neoliberalism, not breaking with what the right did, of seeking conciliation with the employers. The PS leadership identifies with the acts of the plural left government under Jospin, it refuses to reconsider the privatisations made by the left in the early 2000s. These are the fundamental reasons for our rejection of any alliances with the PS leadership.

We want a radical break with the neoliberal policies that have been implemented by left and right in the last twenty years. The PS doesn't and the PCF subordinates anti-liberal measures to its agreements with the PS.

It is from this point of view that we constitute an alternative, with a consistent anti-neoliberal stance based on the mobilisation of youth and workers. This stance has undoubted support in the population. For several months, the opinion polls have indicated an unquestionable popularity of Olivier, an employee - a postman - a young person, an anti-capitalist militant with whom millions of people can identify, a reference point that can make it possible, even on a very distorted electoral level to rebuild a perspective and a class consciousness against employers and the neoliberal capitalist system. The polls give Olivier Besancenot between 4 and 6 %, 3 to 4% for Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière and only between 2 and 3% to the PCF candidate Marie George Buffet. In this situation, can we understand better all the efforts of the PCF leadership to eliminate Olivier's candidature, but without success until today.

Of course, we are not fooled, and we do not confuse opinion polls with votes. The pressure for a "useful" vote for the PS will be very strong. Our campaign will be very difficult. But we think that in the current situation, with the hardness of the neoliberal attacks and the adaptation of the traditional left to neoliberalism, it is essential to build a strong alternative that can resist the pressure and counts in building the necessary balance of forces. We do not know if there is also a "French exception" in the weight that the revolutionary left has in the situation. In any case it is worth the effort to continue to defend this "exception".

Visit the [Olivier Besancenot campaign site](#).

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sabado-3-2.jpg>]