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France

The New Anti-Capitalist Party, a promising birth

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On February 5, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) politically dissolved itself and the founding congress of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) took place immediately afterwards, over the next three days.

At the moment of its founding, the new party had 9,123 members, spread over 467 local branches throughout Metropolitan France. Approximately 5,900 members took part in the various local congresses which prepared the national congress, a sign of the active character of the new party. To complete the picture, it as should be mentioned that there exist equivalents of the NPA outside Metropolitan France, in particular on the island of Reunion and in the French West Indies.

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

The founding of the new party was an event both in France and for very many anti-capitalists across the world. All those who were afraid that it would just be the LCR under another name were proved wrong by the congress of the NPA. We really are seeing a change of nature and of scale, but the NPA is also the continuation in other forms of the same combat for the emancipation of humanity.

A project that was the fruit of long preparation

It is not superfluous to re-examine here the reasons which resulted in launching the process of building a new party and doing something that is not so common, by dissolving an organization, the LCR, with forty years of existence and which, in terms of its accumulated political capital, its membership, its political, social and electoral audience, had never been in such good shape.

Fundamentally, it was the imbalance between, on the one hand, the political situation, the scale of the class struggle in France, including its expression on the electoral terrain, and on the other hand the weakness of the organisational reality of the anti-capitalist and revolutionary Left, which led us to take such an initiative. It was a question of starting to readjust this imbalance and at the same time offering a political perspective on a clear orientation that measures up to the upheavals taking place.

Without going too far back, since 2002, practically every year we have had the concrete expression of a deep-seated rejection of capitalist policies, and manifestations, diffuse though they were, of the search for a political alternative.

– 2002: The presidential election, almost 3 million votes, 10 per cent, for the candidatures of Arlette Laguiller (Lutte Ouvriere) and Olivier Besancenot of the LCR.

– 2003: A long strike (up to three months in certain sectors) by civil servants against the reform of the pension system. In spite of the silence of a Socialist Party (PS) which basically supported the reforms and in spite of the conduct of the majority of the trade-union leaderships, this strike really almost turned into a general strike. In fact, to prevent the convergence between the struggles that were taking place and their generalisation, it was necessary for the principal French trade-union confederation (the CGT) to break the beginnings of a full-scale transport strike.

– 2005: The rejection by 55 per cent of voters of the European Constitutional Treaty, in a context where after a unitary, militant campaign, the ‘no’ from the left played a decisive role.

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– 2006: The victorious strike against an attempt to impose a low-wage work contract on young people (the CPE, First Job Contract). The mobilization was primarily organised by youth, but it was backed up at key moments by the entire workers' movement through one-day strikes and mobilizations.

To all these elements should be added the evolution taking place in the Socialist Party, its increasingly complete conversion to social-liberalism and the extent of its integration into bourgeois institutions, whether national or international (in particular, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, presided over respectively by the French Socialists Pascal Lamy and Dominique Strauss-Kahn).

For the LCR, the period from 2002 to 2007 was one of reinforcement, one might say of primitive accumulation. Faced with the broadening of our audience, from 2002, we made the choice of opening wide the doors of our organization. That was not always easy, our old ways of doing things were sometimes shaken up, but really, above all, that prepared us to do what we are doing today, to move on to bigger things. Because if for us, going from 1500 to 3000 members during this period was a real success, it appeared quite flimsy in comparison with the political space that we were occupying.

Faced with the possibilities expressed in the social mobilizations, considering the 1.2 million, then the 1.5 million votes that we won at the presidential elections of 2002 and 2007, there really was too much of a difference between what we were and what we represented. This contradiction could only be transitory and without an initiative on our part, it is our audience which would have been brought down to our reality, not the reverse.

The catalyst was the result of the presidential election in 2007. The election of Nicolas Sarkozy marked a turning point in the political situation. He was elected with nearly 53 per cent of the votes, but above all he won after a campaign conducted that was very far to the right and which openly hunted for votes from supporters of the far-right National Front. For its part, the Socialist Party, which had been absent from the second round of the presidential election in 2002, made full use of the reflex of the 'useful vote' and in the person of its candidate, Segolene Royal, failed to take up the key issue of this election, the question of purchasing power. We obtained a relative success with 1.5 million votes (4.1 per cent). Above all, the other candidates to the left of the PS took a hammering, with 1.9 per cent for the candidate of the Communist Party and 1.4 per cent for Lutte Ouvriere.

Under these conditions, taking into account the social and political context and because we had the best result, we, the leadership of the LCR, had a particular responsibility.

The experience of Lutte Ouvriere is also eloquent. Twice, in 1995 and 2002, its candidate crossed the threshold of 5 per cent of the vote ...and then nothing. After a certain point, the expectations that have been aroused must find the beginnings of an answer, failing which you will pay a heavy price. However to stay the course, you need an alternative project, a collective force to lead it, in short a party.

And this party could not be the LCR. Because of its historical identity, Trotskyism, because it was the product of a certain conception dating from the 1970s of what a far-left organisation should be, the LCR, even though it had changed a lot, was not the answer that measured up to the scale of the challenge.

In June 2007, during the meeting of our National Leadership, we took our responsibilities by launching an appeal for the constitution of a new anti-capitalist party.

An appeal

The will to build a new party is not new. Since 1992, synthesized in the form "new period, new programme, new

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party”, we had had this project. But the perspective remained rather abstract. In particular, the search for partners as a preliminary to any real step forward remained, to say the very least, unfruitful.

By launching this appeal, we made a daring choice which in its modalities probably has very few precedents.

First of all in the content of the project, because the appeal was situated on a clearly anti-capitalist orientation. From then on our project was really to create the conditions to bring together within the same party those who had not lost the will to overthrow the system. To put an end to this system of exploitation, domination and destruction of the resources of planet, that was the delimitation that we laid down. Other projects certainly exist to the left of the Socialist Party, but over and above the programmatic aspects, it is really the question of alliances and of taking part or not in running bourgeois institutions along with the social liberals which is the core of the problem.

Indeed, the corollary, the practical translation one might say, of this anti-capitalism is strict independence with respect to the Socialist Party. That implies in particular the refusal of any agreement to govern within the framework of bourgeois institutions with the PS. At the governmental level obviously, but also at the intermediate levels like the departments or the regions.

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

This position is, as we know, a *casus belli* for many organizations which affirm their anti-liberal positions. This is the case in particular with the French Communist Party (PCF). Admittedly in 2009, for the European elections it will run a list along with the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon [1], on quite insufficient axes, moreover. But a year ago, in order to preserve its municipal positions it sought a systematic agreement with the PS even if that meant accepting in many cities an agreement with the Modem [2]. And it is already announcing that it is seeking an agreement with this same PS for the regional elections in 2010. It should be mentioned that it participates in the regional executive, in a subordinate position, in 17 regions out of 22.

In the light of international experience, as in Brazil and in Italy, or quite simply in view of the disastrous balance sheets of the various governmental alliances in France (Union of the Left 1981-84, plural Left 1997-2002...), this independence with respect to the PS is an absolutely essential safeguard. But it is true that this precondition has a consequence: in the political field to the left of the Socialist Party there do not exist in France national partners to carry out this project along with the LCR. Either because of dependence on the Socialist Party, as in the case of the PCF, or from sectarianism in the case of Lutte Ouvrière. The positioning of this organization in recent years has been quite extraordinary. After having displayed the most unbridled opportunism at the time of the municipal elections of 2008, with the sole aim of getting councillors elected, and sometimes accepting agreements with the very worst in French social democracy (the first-round agreement to be on the Guérini lists in Marseilles, for example), the orientation laid down for the European elections consists of affirming a revolutionary Marxist current. There is however one constant theme: above all, have nothing to do with the LCR yesterday and the NPA today.

This absence of partners is not something we wish, and in many ways, the existence of another organization ready to commit itself would have made things simpler for us. In particular, as regards the not always well-intentioned reproach of only wanting to build a new version of the LCR, that would have been an asset. Convinced of the political urgency and the possibilities of taking a step forward, we decided not to make the launching of the process conditional on the existence of an agreement with this or that organization, by initiating a process of building from the bottom up.

This approach is unquestionably a change of tack with respect to the past policies of the LCR aimed at finding a way out of the crisis of the workers' movement. But it also relates to an evolution on our part as to the relative place, between the old and the new, between the recomposition and the rebuilding of the workers' movement. It is not a question of making a clean slate of the past, and many political, trade-union and associative sectors can be points of

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support for building an anti-capitalist party. On condition of course that organisational inertia does not prevent us from moving forward and that the old does not suffocate the new. And to do something new, it is also necessary to have new forces... That was the meaning of the appeal that we launched.

The mobilizations of the last several years showed that there were forces that were ready to commit themselves, that there was a radical new layer of activists and new layers of the working class. With our appeal, we made it possible to advance concretely towards the construction of a first political alternative.

First experiences, and a large consensus in the LCR

The period which opened in June 2007 and which went on until the Seventeenth Congress of the LCR in January 2008 was marked by the emergence of a broad consensus within the LCR and by the first experiences of committees for a new party.

The first challenge after the appeal of the National Leadership was to win the widest possible support among the members of the LCR for this project. A very broad agreement took shape within the DN, comprising four of the five currents that there had been at the previous congress in January 2006. It remained to ensure that the organization was thoroughly convinced by the launching of the process. To carry forward such a project, such an ambition even, a comfortable majority is not enough, it is necessary to obtain the broadest possible backing, for the membership to be enthusiastic. Although it was not always easy, and it took time to debate and to convince, in January 2008 nearly 83 per cent of the members of the League supported this orientation.

Parallel with this, the development and the success of the first experiences on the ground showed us that we were not taking a wrong turn. The support for the idea of building a new party that we had felt was there was confirmed, sometimes beyond our hopes.

It is not possible to describe the process in detail here, but it is useful to read François Coustal's book on the subject [[3](#)]. But these first experiences already concentrated all the elements which would make for the success of the committees for a new party.

The first element was the broadening of the social implantation, which was without common measure with what the LCR had been able to do. From the beginning, trade union cadres, including some with responsibilities at the Departmental level, committed themselves to the process. This was in particular the case in Marseilles, where the LCR took the initiative for the process, but also in the region of Mulhouse (in the Haut-Rhin department) where, it has to be said, it took place completely independently of us. In both cases, the project of the NPA found an echo in the concerns of local groups and currents with very different trajectories, but which took up the appeal launched by the LCR.

The second element, which was confirmed everywhere, was the emergence of concerns that could be described as ecosocialist. There was an ecology commission in the LCR which had been working and producing quite serious material over the last several years. But the place that this ecosocialist dimension occupied, not as an afterthought but as something that was present in all domains, was clear from the start.

The third element, even though at present it is still embryonic, though real, was a development of our implantation in the popular neighbourhoods. From this point of view, although the work that has been accomplished remains fragile, it represents a real break with the sociological reality of the LCR, even though the League was conscious of the problem.

An irreversible choice

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With the assembling of a very broad majority of 83 per cent, and on the basis of successful first experiences, we decided at the LCR congress in January 2008 to throw all our forces into the battle. Above all, by fixing a date for the foundation of this new party, at the end of 2008 or the beginning of 2009, i.e. by fixing a date for the dissolution of the League, we were making an irreversible choice and we knew it.

2008 was the year that the process really developed, but also when there was a gradual shift away from the LCR and towards the NPA. Once the municipal elections, which were a real success for the LCR, were over, dozens of new committees sprang up all over France. But it happened so quickly that when there were between 300 and 350 local committees, the only national structure that existed to direct the process remained the leadership of the LCR. That is why we propose a first national meeting of the committees at the end of June 2008.

The aim was to make possible the first contact between the different committees, with a double objective: on the one hand, to have an appeal which was no longer just the appeal of the LCR but of an assembly of committees for the NPA, of a party that was in the process of being established; on the other hand, to set up a national structure whose role would be to lead all the committees until the founding congress.

The gamble largely paid off, and to tell the truth it exceeded our expectations. 800 delegates from between 330 and 350 committees adopted a new appeal and set up the National Organizing Collective (CAN) which from then would organise and coordinate the national activity of the committees, until the founding congress. Let us note in passing that the LCR made the choice of being a minority within the CAN.

This National Organizing Collective had a lot on its plate. It met for the first time at the beginning of July, then again during the LCR summer school in August, and it had to create the conditions to produce the first draft documents and to organize a democratic discussion among the members and the committees.

Then a real constituent process was put in place, with an ongoing dialogue between the CAN and the committees. Hundreds of amendments were produced; a national meeting of the committees that was organized in November made it possible to reach a new synthesis of the three documents which then set off again towards the committees... and led to hundreds more amendments. This approach, because it enabled all those who were taking part in the process to really appropriate the documents, made it possible to cement, around a common project, different histories, trajectories and experiences.

This took place around the documents, but also through common practical activity. As an activist party, the NPA progressively, as it developed, built up its different interventions. Gradually the militant activity of the LCR was replaced by the activity of the various committees for a new party. In fact, during the autumn, many sections and cells of the LCR ceased to have a political intervention, and their meetings discussed nothing other than the preparation of the congress of dissolution, which was rapidly approaching.

The Founding Congress

After the LCR congress on February 5 which voted to dissolve the League by a very large majority, 87 per cent, the congress of the NPA opened – the culmination of a long constituent process. The serious and attentive character of a meeting of more than 1000 people, including more than 650 delegates, was widely remarked on. The way in which the various commissions dealt seriously with the hundreds of amendments on each of the three documents (founding principles, statutes, orientation), was experienced as an exercise in direct democracy with few equivalents.

It is not possible to recall here all the decisions that were taken by the founding congress of the NPA. All the documents that were adopted, as well as a number of videos that were made in the course of the three days of the congress, can be found on the site of the NPA [\[4\]](#). But let us remain traditional, since a party is first of all a programme, and deal briefly with some of the elements which figure in what we called the “founding principles”.

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The NPA does not define itself as a revolutionary party, but as a party wanting “to revolutionize society”. Some people wanted to see there just a semantic trick, but the reality is very different. In fact behind the term of revolutionary party are concealed several ways of understanding it. For some, and this is probably on a large scale the meaning most commonly shared, behind the word revolution, there are the experiences of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, even the experiences of June 1936 and May 1968. For the revolutionary Marxist current to which the LCR belonged, the definition was narrower: a revolutionary party is a party which has a programme and a strategy to make the revolution. Under these conditions, and taking into account our project, to revolutionize society makes it possible to define a camp, consisting of those who have not abandoned the idea of bringing this system down, without advancing any further concerning the strategic hypotheses for achieving this end.

On the other hand the founding principles are clearly of Marxist inspiration, including in their relationship to such a crucial question as the nature of the state. Our programme indicates that the state and its institutions are instruments of the bourgeoisie, that they cannot be put at the service of a political and social transformation, and that consequently they must be overthrown.

The NPA is also a party which fights for socialism: our founding principles indicate that “the only answer to the globalized crisis of capitalism, the battle on which the future of humanity depends, is the battle for a socialism of the 21st century, democratic, ecological and feminist”. After some hesitations between “socialism”, “ecosocialism” and “socialism of the 21st century”, it is the latter which was retained, after a vote. But the ecological dimension is strongly present, with the fundamentally correct approach that there can only be a battle for socialism if the planet continues to exist...

The NPA, internationalism and the Fourth International

The New Anti-capitalist Party, faithful to its founding principles, will have his own policies and its own international relations. But because it is a party that is really internationalist, because it knows that there cannot be the development of the anti-capitalist forces in France without equivalent developments in Europe and in the world, the NPA carries a project of regrouping anti-capitalist forces. Moreover, the conclusion of our founding principles is explicit on the subject: “Our party seeks to link itself to all the forces in the world which fight against capitalism. That is why the NPA will engage in dialogue and political collaboration with other anti-capitalist and revolutionary forces in the world with a view to the constitution of a new International”.

Obviously, it has to be understood that in its practical concretization, in its choices, in its method of construction, there are elements which are very deeply related to French social and political reality, to the way that the political landscape in France is made up. So the NPA is not and cannot be any kind of model.

It is true that concerns have been expressed both in the ex-LCR and in the rest of the Fourth International. The choice of the LCR to dissolve, considering its importance in the International, is not without consequences. The NPA is not and does not have a vocation to be the French section of the Fourth International. However with the NPA, even after the dissolution of the League, there is much more space, more influence for the Fourth International.

The large number of foreign delegations at the founding congress is enough to demonstrate this: there were more than 100 people, coming from 70 organizations, from 45 countries on the five continents. Such a force of attraction was possible because the project of the NPA carries within it a dynamic which interests many organizations and currents throughout the world. But without the existence of the Fourth International and its networks, none of that would have been possible.

What are the perspectives prospects from now on?

The founding congress was a big success. With more than 9,000 members, the NPA is already a force to be reckoned with on the French political scene. But although the congress was an important stage in the process, it was

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really only one stage in the construction and the development of our project. The dynamic continues, and in the three weeks which followed the creation of the NPA, we received more than 3,000 contacts and applications to join. The reality of this new party, its dynamic and the developments of the crisis of capitalism must lead to new processes of crystallization and differentiation within certain sectors of the French workers' movement.

Above all, in the face of the gravity of the international financial, economic, food and ecological crisis, in the face of the extent of the disastrous social effects that the world recession is generating, the level of social exasperation can only increase. Already important mobilizations are developing: 2.5 million people in the streets on January 29, the ongoing strike of the personnel of higher education and of course the general strikes in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

At this moment, at the beginning of 2009, the newly-born NPA is developing an extremely active united front policy. It was on its initiative that a common statement of 11 left organizations was published, calling for the continuation of the mobilization after the success of the demonstrations of January 29 and in support of the struggle in Guadeloupe. One of the most urgent tasks of the hour for the NPA is to be an effective instrument supporting the broadest unity. But in parallel, the NPA defends its own positions, and in particular the demand for an across-the-board wage increase of 300 euros, which is having an increasing echo.

The exemplary strike led by the LKP in Guadeloupe shows not only that such demands are necessary and that they can find a broad echo at a mass level, but that partial victories are also possible.

The next European elections in June 2009 are also an important date. In the first place because these elections will be dominated by the gravity of the social effects of the capitalist crisis.

Faced with the sharp rise in unemployment and with the lay-offs that are in the pipeline, it is necessary to defend a project that represents a break with what European construction has been since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, a clear and consistent break with the capitalist system. There cannot be one electoral tactic for even years and another for odd years. It is not only derisory in comparison with the depth of the social and political crisis; it encourages reactions of despair and prevents the emergence of a real political alternative. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly possible with these elections to begin to build an alliance of anti-capitalist forces in Europe.

An alliance that will no doubt be partial and limited at this stage, but which would already represent a first step forward.

Anti-capitalist sentiment and the search for a political alternative to this absurd system are developing in this country. However, we are approaching this period full of uncertainties with a new instrument which by its programme and its positioning can bring together part of the aspirations for a radical break with the system. So are we able, with the NPA, to answer all the political questions of the day? The answer is obviously no. The perspective remains that of a mass anti-capitalist party capable of building a different relationship of social and political forces. That will undoubtedly take time, even though elements of acceleration are far from being excluded given the situation.

But let us pose the question differently: have we, with the constitution of the NPA, crossed an important threshold, and even entered a new stage in the realization of this objective? Unquestionably, this is the case. To amplify the dynamic around the NPA, to be able to incorporate new traditions coming from the French workers' movement, above all to encourage, by our practical activity and our demands, the coming mobilizations; that is the challenge. The task will undoubtedly not be easy but it fills us with enthusiasm and we are ready for it.

[1] The Left Party (PG) was launched on November 12, 2008 by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (senator) and Marc Dolez (deputy in the National

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Assembly), who left the PS and joined, both in the National Assembly and in the Senate, the parliamentary groups organized by the PCF.

On November 18 the PG constituted with the PCF a "left front for another Europe, democratic and social, against the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon and the present European treaties", for the European elections of June 2009. Two other independent parliamentarians, Jacques Desallangre (deputy and mayor of Ternier) and François Autain (senator) joined the PG, which held its launch meeting on November 29 in the presence of Oskar Lafontaine (Die Linke, Germany) and from January 30 to February 1, 2009 its launch congress (with 600 delegates), which had on its agenda the adoption of a constitution, emergency measures in response to the economic crisis and a decision on electoral strategy.

A congress which will discuss the program of the PG has been announced for autumn 2009.

[2] The Democratic Movement (Modem) was created in 2007 by Francois Bayrou (who was up until then president of the Union for French Democracy, UDF), following the presidential election in which Bayrou stood against Sarkozy. The Modem defines itself as centrist, social-liberal and Europeanist and consists of that part of the liberal Right which refused to join Sarkozy's party, the UMP.

[3] François Coustal, Incroyable histoire du Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, Editions Demopolis, Paris 2009.

[4] <http://www.npa2009.org>