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France

The NPA - a balance sheet

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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This contribution is by three members of the Gauche Anticapitaliste (Anticapitalist Left) which left the NPA in July 2012 Myriam Martin, Flavia Verri and Sébastien Ville.

A period marked by the question of left unity

In France, unity of the anticapitalist and anti-neoliberal left in day-to-day struggles as well as on an electoral level, in order to build a credible alternative to the right, the far-right and the social-liberal 'left', has been on the agenda for a number of years.

Unity was a prime reason for the victory of the 'No' camp in the 2005 referendum on the European constitutional treaty. During the joint campaign of anticapitalist and anti-neoliberal groups for a 'No' vote on a left-wing basis hundreds of local committees were formed, uniting various forces. This posed the question of building a permanent social and political front. However, the movement was divided over how to relate to the social-liberals. On the one hand, some groups, including the LCR, correctly defended the idea of complete independence from the Socialist Party in the coming elections, while others such as the Communist Party took the opposing line. This difference acted as a brake on the development of the slowly-emerging social and political front, but it clearly placed the subject of whether or not to form an alliance with the social-liberals right at the heart of the debate. This period of 'unitary' work led to profound changes in the political scene on the radical left.

In the 2007 presidential election, three candidates who had campaigned together during the united 2005 referendum campaign competed against each other. Of the three, the NPA's Olivier Besancenot came out on top. The LCR did not wish to be dependent on the refusal of the other political forces within the front to take part in a process leading to a new party, and took the initiative of launching the NPA "from below".

However, within a short space of time there also took place the foundation of the Left Party (a left split from the Socialist Party), followed by the creation of the Left Front, an electoral coalition originally composed of the Left Party, the Communist Party and Gauche Unitaire (the first group to split from the NPA).

The founding of the NPA

The NPA project had both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, there was a young and popular spokesperson, the attempt and the temptation to create a political organisation of a new kind, and the victory of our side in 2005 against the European constitutional treaty.

On the other hand, we were isolated : no other significant and comparable political force from a non-Trotskyist tradition wished to join with the LCR in the project of forming what we called a 'broad' party ; we had few roots in the social and trade union movements ; our founding principles were vague in certain fundamental areas (something which led to deep divisions in the NPA in the debate on secularism, religion and women's rights).

Despite these handicaps, with the capitalist system entering its most serious crisis in decades, the anticapitalist perspective seemed promising, and capable of making up for the lack of partners. The beginnings of the NPA saw an

influx of activists who were in revolt against capitalism, and the party was able to attract sections of workers and young people on the basis of a radical ideological rejection of the system. However, the first mass struggles which took place in 2009, then more significantly in 2010, ended in failure. In this phase, which is still continuing, the rolling-out of the crisis led to a worsening of the balance of class forces, including phenomena such as the progression of racist ideas. This development made it even more important to work towards a regrouping of the radical left, with independence from social-liberalism an essential condition. The NPA did not grasp in time the political and social mechanisms which were reinforcing this necessity. The weakening of the NPA started to appear quite quickly after its foundation, and soon accelerated.

At the founding conference of the NPA, 15% of the delegates nevertheless declared themselves in favour of an electoral alliance with the Communist Party and the Left Party for the coming elections for the European Assembly. The majority decided to test the electoral impact of our new organisation. Two competing campaigns coexisted with similar programmes, with no question of an alliance with the social-liberals. Our electorate began to prefer a 'unitary' approach to the isolation of the NPA.

Now, instead of rethinking our electoral tactics and forming an alliance with the Left Front for the regional elections, the NPA took the decision to take no decision. As a result, some regional sections of the NPA formed alliances, while others did not. The results left no room for doubt. In those areas where the NPA joined in with the Front, it gave an impetus to the alliance, helping to turn it into a force which could not be ignored. In those areas where it decided to go it alone, the NPA's self-imposed isolation increased, with deadly effect. None of the joint NPA-Left Front lists formed an alliance with the Socialist Party.

The fight for hegemony

The debate within the NPA, which might have appeared to be about tactics, turned out to have strategic implications. What exactly was the NPA for ? Was it a far-left party pursuing a propagandist perspective in the trade unions and workplaces ? Or was it an attempt to create a political party capable of rivalising for hegemony with the social-democrats and their allies ? Without doubt, we opted for the latter orientation, which was supported by a minority of the NPA. It followed that, in order to challenge the social-liberals for hegemony, it was necessary to develop a political perspective based on unity, and to consider the NPA political project as a transitional stage, and a lever to help form further alliances. When the Left Front was created, we (the NPA) had committed the error of thinking of it as a rival, rather than as a potential partner.

The NPA crisis accelerates

The next episode was the decision of Olivier Besancenot not to be the NPA's candidate in the 2012 presidential election. By pulling out, he removed the superficial political cement which held the NPA together: a young, articulate, spokesperson, who was a worker, and capable of attracting and uniting his sympathisers around his candidacy. By standing down a few months before the election and just after the first national conference of the NPA, he obliged the party to engage in a painful, but necessary internal clarification.

Despite the fact that the NPA had just chosen two women spokespersons, both white-collar workers, the leadership of the NPA looked for, and found a male candidate from the ranks of the industrial working-class, and presented this choice as quintessentially representative of the working class. For those who defended the idea that the proletariat of the 21st century was different from the icons of the 19th and 20th centuries, this decision was a real political regression.

The second regression, resulting from the conditions required to stand a candidate in the French presidential election, was that for months, the NPA had to base its campaign on its right to be present in the election, at a time when a 'unitary' candidacy of the Left Front was really taking off. This candidacy brought together not only the three founding members of the Left Front (the Communist Party, the Left Front and Gauche Unitaire) but also new affiliates such as the Communist Workers Party of France and the Federation for a Social and Ecological Alternative, and others who supported the campaign without joining the Front, such as the Alternatifs. It was during this period that a second group, the comrades of Convergences et Alternative, broke away from the NPA.

In order to justify its independent campaign, which was based on a programme of demands similar to that of the Left Front, the NPA had to emphasise the differences (some of them real) - an approach which seemed sectarian to the mass of ordinary people. So, the NPA's candidate was a factory worker, while the Left Front was standing a professional politician. The Front, it was claimed, was an electoralist project - we contested the very basis of universal suffrage. The Front's objective was to overtake the Socialist Party - we only wanted to get across our ideas.

The presidential election marked the beginning of the marginalisation of the NPA, while with the LCR we had made it possible to refresh the political discourse of the revolutionary left and begun to give it a mass audience. Facts are cruel: our voters of 2002 and 2007 massively switched to the Left Front.

Nearly 6,000 members took part in the vote for delegates to the first conference of the NPA; the figure for the second conference, in February 2013, was a mere 1,700 - fewer than when the LCR voted to dissolve itself. At the second conference, the main tendency, with just over a simple majority, was closely followed by two other factions which both theorised the strategy of isolation: in their opinion, the politics of the NPA must be independent of ... that of the Left Front.

In reality, these simple facts - sharp electoral decline and loss of members - are representative of a more general phenomenon: the considerable and rapid shrinking of the NPA and of its influence. Four years later, what is left of the membership of more than 9,000 who took part in the founding process of the NPA? What is left of the presence, the influence and the recognition which the members of the LCR still enjoyed, 5 or 6 years ago, in the social movement, and especially in the more militant sectors of the trade unions?

Convinced that all that was left of the project were the documents for debate and the declarations, we decided to found the Anticapitalist Left (Gauche anticapitaliste) and join the Left Front.

Foundation of Gauche Anticapitaliste, unitary current for ecosocialism

Gauche Anticapitaliste (GA) is a political current born on 5-6 November 2011 in the NPA in opposition to the isolationist course being followed by the majority of the organisation. After unsuccessfully proposing that the NPA enter the Left Front, GA decided on 8 July 2012 to join as an independent current. At the same time, the vast majority of its members decided to leave the NPA. GA considered at that moment that the political condition that it posed - that the Left Front refuse to participate in the Hollande government or to support its line - had been met.

Since we joined, the Left Front has grown to include the Alternatifs. It is now composed of nine organisations (French Communist Party, Left Party, Gauche Unitaire, FASE, République et Socialisme, PCOF, Convergences et Alternative, GA and the latest arrival, the Alternatifs), three of which (GU, CetA and GA) come from the tradition of the LCR and/or NPA.

At the present time, after rejecting the idea of participating in the government set up by Hollande, the Left Front represents a potentially credible opposition to the Socialist Party.

Within the Left Front, we have two important tasks in order to help our class gain political hegemony and implement a programme which can lay the foundations of an alternative society to capitalism. The first is to convince our partners of the need to combine the defence of an alternative programme to capitalism within the framework of universal suffrage (which is necessary for us in France and Western Europe) with specific demands which can be usefully applied in the class struggles which are taking place in these countries. In other words, neither the 'revolution in the ballot box' alone, nor the general strike *sui generis* will satisfy the need for a working-class political strategy, but a combination of the two - and it is this line that we defend in the Left Front.

The second, which follows on from the first, is to convince our partners that the policies defended by the Socialist Party are incompatible with those of the Left Front. In other words, we are resolute advocates of a politics which is independent of the social-liberals, both in terms of practical class collaboration (negotiations without struggle between employers' organisations and unions) and electorally. Unfortunately for the dynamic of the Left Front, the upcoming local elections will complicate our relations with the Communist Party, which is hesitating to commit itself fully to go along this path.

The French political situation

Hollande has set himself the objective of unprecedented cuts in public spending, and the deregulation of labour laws which would allow redundancies without judicial safeguards and generalise precarity and flexibility. And in order to defend France's imperialist interests, he decided on military intervention in Mali in the pure tradition of France's neo-colonial relations with Africa.

The crisis of the main right-wing party, the UMP, does not mean that the ideas of the right have lost ground. On the contrary, the more reactionary sectors have been able to make a demonstration of force against same-sex marriage, not even hesitating to march alongside the far right. The far right and its party, the Front National, is in a position to capitalise on all - or almost all - the crises of the moment, at a time when the traditional right is hesitating over whether to modify its strategy to make it possible to form alliances with it.

In this complex political situation, our ability to launch mass movements, and the need to build a political alternative in France and across the European Union, are two key - and intrinsically linked - questions.

Those groups of the population who are in the front line of the attacks have violently and legitimately expressed their anger, in the industrial field, with the sackings in the automobile industry, and in the environmental field, with the struggle against the grandiose and unnecessary airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. For the moment, they are almost completely isolated, as a section of the trade union leaderships has taken a wait-and-see attitude, or even decided to negotiate with the government and the employers' organisations in a situation where the balance of forces is heavily weighted against our class. The situation is beginning to change for another section of the trade union leaderships, because some unions, as CGT, Force Ouvrière and Solidaires, are opposing the latest agreement.

In this context, the Left Front represents the possibility and the hope of a left-wing politics which is capable of offering coherent alternative political propositions. Its pluralist composition corresponds to our immediate needs.

Problems relating to its attitude to the government have made its profile less clear. The choice of the Communist

Party's members of parliament not to vote against the budget in the National Assembly and the Senate handicapped the Left Front in October and November 2012. This political problem is compounded by the tendency of its two largest forces, the Communist Party and the Left Party, to prioritise their own party-building at the expense of proposals for the Left Front as a whole.

Having said that, the Left Front is generally moving in the right direction: it is seen by broad sectors of the population as being in opposition to François Hollande and his policies. The campaign which has just been launched under the slogan 'An alternative to austerity is possible!' can be used to give the Front a real political purpose.

Progress in regrouping forces within the Left Front

Since joining, we have tried to encourage the regrouping of forces within the Front, with the aim of consolidating it, making it more democratic and moving past the stage of a simple cartel of organisations. The aim of this regroupment is to be a force which proposes initiatives.

Several member organisations have agreed on a text which has formed the basis for local meetings and the setting-up of a national liaison committee. The aim is to set in motion a process of increased collaboration between the Alternatifs, Convergences et Alternative, Gauche Anticapitaliste, Gauche Unitaire, the Federation for a Social and Ecological Alternative (which includes the Communistes Unitaires) and République et Socialisme. This process is taking place at both national and local levels, and is intended to lead to the signing of a founding charter. Beyond the purely theoretical verification of this new force, we believe this process should be tested in practice through national political campaigns, allowing us to verify the possibility of regrouping our forces through common activity. With this in mind, joint work over the next six months through the Left Front and its campaign for an alternative to austerity will be a first test. We think this campaign should be an inclusive one, involving all the social and political forces which refuse policies which merely accompany austerity. An agreement in the first six months of 2013 on a common national position for the 2014 local and European elections will constitute a further important test.