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France

Notes on the French situation after the local elections and the 12th April demonstration

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1) The last municipal elections represent a new worsening of the political balance of forces for the left and the labour movement. 150 cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants swung from SP or CP-led to the right or far right.

Of course, after years of social-liberalism where the SP took its distance from the labour movement, a defeat of the SP at the polls no longer automatically indicates a defeat of the workers' movement.

These workers, who do not feel represented by the parliamentary left any more, do not feel the bankruptcy of the Socialists to be theirs, fortunately. They even abstained massively (between 50 and 60 % of the registered voters in the popular suburbs or regions).

2) But when such defeat at the polls of SP leaves the space to the right and far right, when what remains of "historical municipal socialism" is falling apart, when the CP loses a third of its local councils, in particular in the "red suburbs", and these retreats are not compensated for, far from it, by victories of the radical left, this can only weigh negatively on the power relations between the classes.

This took place in an economic context marked by plant closures and governmental attacks which can provoke struggles or partial mobilizations, but that are not strong enough to block the austerity policies or to force the government to retreat. Years of reorganization of the workforce force, casualization and unemployment have shaped a workforce that is now paralysed by the crisis. Especially as here too, the trade-union leaderships directly support the government's "pacts" with the employers or position themselves as "accompanying" them.

3) The last demonstration of this turn to the right was the nomination of Manuel Valls as Prime Minister.

In the SP primary elections that decided on the candidate for the 2011 presidential election, Valls represented the right within a Socialist Party that is already itself well to the right. He stood as a candidate against the 35-hour week, against an economic redistribution policy, for the privatization of the public services, and for reduction of the social security contributions, which aimed at new attacks on the Social security system. He identified loud and clear with the "policy of offer" based on a reduction of labour costs and subsidies for businesses – opposed to a policy of restarting the economy by demand. He got only 5% of the votes in this election, which proved that even for a very rightwing SP Valls was too much.

Two years, later, Valls' policy is being openly applied, by Hollande, by the government and the SP. Stark result: 30 billion of subsidies to business, 50 billion of budgetary "savings" which will result in severe cuts in the public budget and social security. Already announced: the closure of ten hospitals, non-refunding of certain prescriptions, fall in wages of state employees. In Europe that is in a deep and lasting crisis, and where growth rate is around 1 %, such a policy can only plunge the country into the infernal spiral of austerity, unemployment and precarity.

But isn't this precisely the desired goal, a radical modification of the social and political balance of forces? To undermine what remains of the "European social model" by eliminating a series of social gains, and align Europe in world competition.

4) The problem is that these socio-economic choices sap the social bases of the traditional parties, both of the right and left, and provoke political crises.

As regards social democracy, these parties are “less and less working-class and increasingly middle-class”. They are not bourgeois parties like the others, because the system needs their specificity to ensure alternation. But the relationships of these parties to the labour movement no longer express their history and their politics no longer have much to do with the classical policies of social democracy. They are neoliberal policies. For ordinary citizens and salaried workers Hollande-Valls are on the same line continuity as Sarkozy not only on social and economic questions, but also in the repression of the undocumented or communities like the Roms. Valls is not offended by being considered the Sarkozy of the left.

But will the neo-liberal evolution of the SP not put into question the very existence of these parties? In southern Europe, the Portuguese SP or the Spanish PSOE have not shared the historical catastrophe of the Greek PASOK, even if they have been weakened. The French SP is still a major party, but these elections shook one of its fundamental pillars: its bases... If it continues its policy, other electoral failures will follow: with the forthcoming European election, in the regional elections and cantonal and one does not see how the SP could claw back its support before the next presidential and parliamentary elections in 2017. A total collapse cannot be excluded.

The drop in support for the PCF is of another nature, that of the historical decline of post-Stalinism, but it represents also this worsening of the balance of power, in particular in a series of cities where the right has replaced the PCF elected representatives in the councils.

5) It is in this situation, with record abstention, that there was the swing to the right and the Front National, the latter gaining control of about ten big cities. The right has been strengthened in spite of contradictions on a series of questions: Europe, relations with the Front National, its leadership given the possible “comeback” of Sarkozy. Its activist base and its electors are under pressure from the ultra rightwing or the far right. As for the FN, it has confirmed its popular base, and the fact is that it increasingly attracts part of the working and popular electorate. Like the parties of fascist origin, it combines social questions and racism in its programme, but how, in this situation will it manage contradictions between its fascist origin and leadership and the pressures that will arise from its integration in the institutions?

Admittedly, we are not in the 1930s, the ruling classes have chosen integration in capitalist globalization and not protectionist nationalism, but there can be “political accidents”, swing moments, where there would be a desynchronization between the fundamental socio-economic choices of the capitalist classes and the irruption of authoritative political solutions with the coming to power of (direct or indirect) coalitions of the right and the far right. The growth of the far right throughout Europe and the acceptance of governments like that of Orban in Hungary show the possible dangers for democratic freedoms and the popular movement.

In France as in many Europe, the balance is tipping towards the right, but fortunately there is also a social and political fightback.

6) The day of demonstrations on Saturday 12 April 12 in Paris and throughout the country testifies to this resistance. Several tens of thousands of demonstrators answered the call of more than 200 leaders of campaigns, trade unions or political parties to fight against the right and the far right and to oppose the austerity plans of the Hollande-Valls government.

The origin was a call by Olivier Besancenot for a weekend of revolt by the left against the successive demonstrations of the extremist right and the governmental policy. This was followed by statements along the same lines from Front de Gauche leaders. Then there were several weeks of work on a united-front call and preparatory meetings. The nomination of Valls gave an additional impetus to this mobilization. What made the success of this demonstration was its unity, its radical nature and its diversity. As well as the political organizations, tens of campaigns in particular for the right to housing, and sectors of the trade union movement were mobilized. In the CGT, a significant number of

federations and local sections called for the mobilization against the position of the confederal direction. We should also note the significant contingents of PCF and the NPA in the Parisian march. This demonstration showed that, despite of the results of the municipal elections, there is a leftwing in France that does not accept the government's policy and resists, and goes well beyond simply the parties of the radical left.

7) One of the key questions is: how to continue, how to express politically this dynamic of partial but significant mobilization, in this context of downturn?

The questions of unity of action, of radicality, and the fight against the governmental policy, the right and the far right are a guiding line for anticapitalists.

First in day-to-day social resistance, the fights against redundancies, budget cuts, strikes or mobilizations for social rights. The demonstrations for 1st of May are the next occasion. Without broad social mobilization which blocks austerity plans, wrests some partial victories, makes it possible to give back confidence to the workers and social movements, there will not be the beginning of change of the balance of forces. It is decisive.

But this must also be expressed politically by united action in struggles and in electoral battles. Already in the local elections, the NPA presented or supported 87 lists including 55 unitive ones, on an anti-austerity programme independent from the SP in the first and second round of the elections. Beyond, the radical left presented several hundreds of lists which marked a certain resistance, with appreciable results – unlike the rout of the SP.

After the municipal elections and the preparation of the 12 April demonstration the question existed of a unitive proposal for the European elections. It is on this basis that the NPA sent a letter to the Front de Gauche, to LO, to Alternative Libertaire to discuss the possibility of a united list for the European elections. There are, of course, different positions on this question: the Party of the European Left is for refounding the European Union which seems to be an attempt at reform, whereas the anticapitalists fight for a break with the European institutions; Mélenchon can make ambiguous statements against “German Europe” or for “interdependent protectionism”, whereas we defend an internationalist policy without concession to nationalism. But for the “general public”, both will seem to be opposed to governmental austerity policies and the European Union and will propose another social and democratic Europe.

We this it is regrettable that the conditions could not exist to reach an agreement. The hesitations on both sides had an impact, but the tensions which paralysed Front de Gauche did not allow for a true discussion. It was, moreover, only at the last minute that the components of Front de Gauche finally reached an agreement on their own lists.

But beyond this agreement for the Europeans, the Front de Gauche is deeply divided on the relations to have with the SP. In the majority of large and medium-sized cities the PCF was allied with the SP. The other components of the Front de Gauche refused this alliance for the first round of the local elections. The result was that the Front de Gauche exploded on a key question that the NPA has raised for years: relations with the SP, then with the government. Although the NPA has been violently criticized for having put this question at the centre of the debate and has been accused of looking for excuses not to make the unity, many FdG activists recognize today that in fact the divergences on this point led to the explosion at the time of the municipal elections. Many things will depend on the next election results, in particular the Europeans, but the formula of Front de Gauche launched in 2010 is null and void today, it is necessary to discuss again unity and the basis for unity.

Indeed, unity is needed, and the anticapitalists must redouble efforts to deploy a unitive policy, but with the stepping up of the neo-liberal attacks by the SP in government, electoral alliances with this latter are impossible, support for SP parliamentary majorities or governments even more so. This is why the policy of Mélenchon to build an “ecologist popular front” with the leadership of the Greens (EELV) would lead to a new dead end, especially as the majority of

the EELV group supports the Valls government.

The objective, in the weeks and the months to come, it is to broadcast loud and clear the voice of a left opposition to the government. A broad unitive opposition but a true opposition and, in this sense, we cannot build a left opposition with forces that support or take part in the government. This is unfortunately the case with the “left” of the SP and the EELV...

For the anticapitalists, in this difficult situation we have to combine unity social and political action with a policy of clear independence from the SP, and an anticapitalist programme that defend the social needs of the workers and the population as a whole.

In a situation where the old left is rejected, it is necessary to rebuild the labour movement by redefining a unitive perspective which integrates the organizations but invents new forms and new programmatic content. It is by fertilizing “the unity in action” with anticapitalist content that the revolutionaries will be useful in rebuilding.

The unity achieved on 12 April and suggested for the Europeans is a good indication for the orientation of the NPA in the months to come.

18 April 2014