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France

Towards a new anti-capitalist party

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In January, a vast majority of the delegates at the 17th national congress of the LCR approved a new political perspective: the building of a broad anti-capitalist party. This decision is intimately related to the analysis of the political situation since the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President.

There are three main reasons:

- * the extremely aggressive attacks of French government and bosses against workers' rights;
- * the failure of the traditional left;
- * the new rank occupied by the radical Left as a whole and, more specifically, by Olivier Besancenot and the LCR.

The electoral victory of Sarkozy can be mainly explained by his ability to convince people from working class and lower middle class that he really cares about their problems and his ability to convince people with a far right background that it was more efficient for them to vote for him rather than for the Front National. That's why during the presidential campaign his central slogan was "work more, earn more". It was a false claim but many people only heard "earn more"!

The most astonishing thing was his success when he endorsed many of the themes that were usually those of the Front National, especially about immigration and "law and order". About a million of Jean-Marie Le Pen's former voters shifted towards a vote in favour of Sarkozy. In return, repression against illegal immigrants has worsened and a lot of new drastic security laws have been passed. Promises addressed to racists and chauvinists have been kept. But promises addressed to popular layers of society have been broken while there have been a lot of very hard attacks: no increase of wages while prices are increasing every month, fiscal gifts for the rich and corporations, as well as new measures against social legislation.

Sarkozy's problem was to change his electoral victory into a social victory. He found that it was not so easy. In November 2007, a new "reform" – or more precisely, a counter reform... - of the retirement pension system of railways workers, tube and buses drivers caused the most important strike of railways workers ever. Of course, the main items of the reforms have been implemented. But, in May 2007, nobody would have forecast such a struggle. Actually the government seems to be stronger than it really is. Its politics can only cause more and more anger and many people are still willing to put up a fight. That is the first reason in favour of a new anti-capitalist party: people really need a party which stands up for their demands as faithfully as the right wing parties are true to bosses. That's the second point – the traditional left can't be that party.

The election of Nicolas Sarkozy was less a victory of the right wing parties than a defeat of Segolene Royal and the Socialist Party. Both the candidate and the SP (as well as its allies, CP and Greens) have been unable to convince people that their election would change something in their day-to-day life. After the election, the situation of the traditional Left became even worse: challenged by the measures passed by the government, they have been unable to be a genuine opposition. During the strikes in November 2007, they have been unable to be a leadership of the movement. The reason for that is obvious: they criticised the form of the measures and reforms; but they agreed with their substance. This situation has two consequences: a deepening crisis of the SP and increasing need and space

for a new independent representation of the working class and social movements.

For the LCR, the perspective of a new party is not completely new. The first debates about it started fifteen years ago, after the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of Stalinism and the intensification of the neo-liberal offensive in the framework of capitalist and corporate globalisation. An additional step was overcome in 1995, with the increasing electoral results of the far left and its significant influence during the big strikes in November and December 1995.

What is now needed is a party able to help the convergence of resistance and struggle. It needs to be able to build a generalised movement to change the relationship of forces and force political power and bosses to step back. Our understanding is that this kind of party must be a useful tool for organising fight and preparing a radical and/or revolutionary change of society.

Will it be a “revolutionary party” according to the traditional meaning of this word? What we intend to build is a party for class struggle, an independent party of the working class, a party mainly focused on mobilization rather than elections, a party for radical and/or revolutionary changes in society and for new politics committed to satisfy social needs rather than private profits, an anti-capitalist party. Most probably many issues related to strategy will remain open. One issue has to be clarified at the beginning of the process: the kind of relationship this party will have with the neo-liberal so called Socialist Party and its allies. The political basis of this party has to be an agreement about a programme of social emergency measures and a clear break-up with all neo-liberal parties, even those which define themselves as left-wing, socialist or social-democrat parties. The Brazilian and Italian experiences show how important it is to build on an open but clear basis.

That clarification was precisely the one that was lacking in 2007 during the debates with the Communist Party and various anti-liberal “collectives” in order to discover if a common candidate was possible for the presidential election. After the success of Olivier Besancenot, both in elections and in the aftermath of election, especially during the railway workers’ strike, we had a major opportunity not only to strengthen the LCR but, also, to give a broader and more ambitious answer to the crisis of the Left. So, in June 2007, the National Leadership of the LCR decided to raise the issue of a new party. In August, during the LCR Summer School, Olivier Besancenot invited everyone who is interested to join what will be a “constituent process”.

During the autumn, in many towns across the country, public meetings were organised to discuss this project. Meanwhile members of the LCR were debating it as the main point on the agenda of the congress. The first balance sheet of these meetings is good. Many people seemed to be interested and found that a new radical left party is a “good idea”. Some problems have still to be addressed... and solved. Many people consider a new party favourably; but are they ready to be personally involved? Some others think that an honest party with genuine left ideas will be sufficient.

Our project is a little more than that: perhaps not a “Marxist revolutionary” party but, at least, a radical anti-capitalist one. Many people are interested at the moment but no other national political movement or party backs our project. So, we have been led to the idea that the beginning of the process will not be a debate or a negotiation with national political “partners” – which just don’t exist – but a process “from below”. Of course, we hope that people or political currents, especially among trade-unionists or activists of the social movements and individuals or tendencies from communist, socialist or anti-liberal background will be convinced by the first results achieved.

Another issue to be thought about is the kind of international relationship the new party will have.

However the main question is this - some people are ready to “build something” with the LCR’s activists but they

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want to build something really different, something that will be their own party, not just a new, enlarged LCR. So, we have to create mutual confidence, to raise the political issues that have to be raised, to propose our politics and, at the same time, to allow people with different political backgrounds - or without any political background – to get involved in the process and to control it.

By the way, one of the major consequences of a successful process will be the dissolution of the LCR, now a forty year-old revolutionary organisation... The LCR national congress has now adopted an appeal. In some towns or workplaces – and in some universities- local appeals have been written and committees for a new party have been created, with LCR and non-LCR members. There are also many common united slates for the March councils elections. The next step will be a national assembly of these committees in June or September to check the progress of the process and decide the agenda, include the date of the congress for the foundation of the party.

Anyhow, everybody is conscious it's an ambitious but uncomfortable, difficult road!

But it's a very exciting experience...

This is the draft for an article to appear in the next issue of Socialist Resistance.