

An encounter with Lutte Ouvrière: the political physiognomy of centrism in France

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In the first round of the French parliamentary election, held June 9, the left-wing organization known as Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) ran candidates in every constituency in France. The organization held meetings in each district to explain its positions to the voters. This reporter attended a meeting June 7 in a union hall in La Courneuve, an industrial suburb northeast of Paris, a few miles from the Alstom plant where the LO candidate Michel Jouannin works, and where the WSWs had interviewed workers a few days earlier [French factory workers discuss upcoming parliamentary election].

Lutte Ouvrière (LO) is one of several organizations in France claiming adherence to the ideas and traditions of Trotskyism. It is a national grouping that has always rejected membership in the Fourth International (FI), the international party founded by Trotsky in 1938. LO criticized the “petty bourgeois” character of the FI leadership and argued that implantation in the French working class was all that mattered.

The principal public representative of Lutte Ouvrière, Arlette Laguiller, has become something of a national figure in France, particularly since the first round of the presidential election in 1995, in which she won 5.3 percent of the vote. In the first round of this year’s presidential vote, held April 21, Laguiller received 5.7 percent of the national total, or 1.6 million votes. That election produced a number of shocks: 10 percent was cast for the “far left” parties (including 4.25 percent for Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire [LCR]), and the candidate of the neo-fascist National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, obtained nearly 17 percent of the vote and finished in second place, ousting Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin from the second round run-off.

Faced with a new situation—a substantial vote for the socialist left and a massive mobilization of youth in protest against Le Pen—the LO leadership was called on to respond in a revolutionary manner.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and *World Socialist Web Site* addressed an open letter to LO, the LCR and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT—the organization headed by Pierre Lambert), urging them to join forces in a public campaign for a working class boycott of the second round of the presidential election. The WSWs open letter argued for workers and young people to reject an electoral fraud in which they faced two reactionary defenders of capitalism, and use the boycott as a means of preparing to do battle against whomever emerged as the victor.

Such a campaign would have brought the working class forward as an independent force against not only Le Pen, but also the official political establishment, including the Socialist Party (SP) and Communist Party (PCF), which were calling for workers to vote for the incumbent Gaullist president, Jacques Chirac, the consensus candidate of the French corporate elite.

Neither LO, the LCR nor the PT supported the call for a working class boycott. Instead, in somewhat different ways, they adapted themselves to the official campaign for Chirac. The LCR’s presidential candidate announced that he was voting for Chirac, the PT declared it had no policy to advance, and LO equivocated.

LO eventually arrived at the position, nearly a week after the first round vote, of calling for individual voters to go to the polls and cast a blank or spoiled ballot in the second round. Rather than carry out a public campaign for the rejection of the election—organizing press conferences, public meetings, demonstrations—and educating as many people as possible in the process, LO retreated. Intimidated by the adverse reaction to its position in “left” media and trade union circles, the organization argued that the decision to vote or not to vote, and for whom, was essentially up to the individual. Laguiller wrote in an editorial: “Mind you, everyone should do what he regards as right, but he should also consider the future consequences of his vote.”

The June 7 LO election meeting which this reporter covered was sparsely attended. It began with reports by the LO candidate for *suppléant* (alternate deputy), Cécile Duchêne, and the party’s main candidate, Michel Jouannin. Duchêne, an office worker and long-time LO member, spoke briefly, describing the deteriorating conditions in the area. She said that many big firms were leaving the area and that increasingly there was no future for the sons and daughters of workers in La Courneuve. The municipality, because of its shrinking tax base, could hardly clean the streets or fix the roads.

Jouannin, in his somewhat longer opening remarks, referred to the first round of the presidential election, which had been “out of the ordinary.” He lamented the ensuing pro-Chirac campaign, which had sucked in “even, unhappily, a fraction of the far left” (i.e., the LCR). He added quickly and defensively, as though he were concerned about encountering opposition from the people in the room, all of whose faces, but mine, he must have known, that LO could “understand the feelings of those who wanted to oppose Le Pen” by voting for Chirac.

The speaker criticized the Socialist Party coalition government of Lionel Jospin, which had carried out a series of measures against working people. He referred to layoffs at Alstom, a company receiving generous subsidies from the state. Jospin had continued the policies of the right-wing administration of Alain Juppé in the mid-1990s. The left and the right have the same policies, Jouannin argued. This had discouraged voters, creating a situation in which the SP and Communist Party, between them, lost four million votes.

Jouannin suggested that the pro-Chirac campaign had given “momentum to the right.” He explained that LO had said “vote blank.” In noting this position, he again added defensively, “even if we were a bit isolated” and attacked by the media, LO maintained “the flag of the workers’ camp.”

No matter which party gets elected, Jouannin continued, big business and the big shareholders will come first. We need our own politics, he said, citing the LO program calling for measures against layoffs and the opening of the corporations’ books. He said that LO was aiming to build a party like the SP and PCF “in the past,” and concluded with an appeal for the biggest possible vote for his party’s candidates.

A few things should be noted about these opening reports, aside from

their generally routine character: the remarks, for the most part, could have been delivered ten or twenty years ago. Not a single word was devoted to events beyond the borders of France—under conditions of an ongoing war in Central Asia, bitter conflict in the Middle East, the threat of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan, and the generally unstable and volatile world situation. Neither speaker made a single reference to the fact that his or her own party had just received more than a million and a half votes in a national election. LO, however, is an organization wedded to the notion of its own insignificance.

In the question-and-answer period that followed, one woman asked about the promise by the interim right-wing Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to cut taxes by 5 percent if the right-wing bloc gains a majority in the National Assembly.

Jouannin responded by speaking further about the importance of a vote for the LO. It would encourage people, he said, especially the militants in the unions, who were discouraged; it would restore “coherence” to the working class.

This reporter then asked: Why did you not call for an active boycott of the second round of the presidential election? Jouannin asked if that were my position, and I replied that it was.

A discussion, lasting an hour and a half, ensued.

In the course of the evening several different answers were offered in reply to my question. The first, which we have heard frequently in France over the past seven weeks, made reference to the unfavourable “relationship of forces.” Duchêne stated that LO was not yet in a position to affect events, because when Arlette Laguiller spoke, the people did not rise up.

The “blank vote” proposal, she acknowledged, was an “alliance” with those who did not agree with LO positions; in other words, an adaptation to the political difficulties which presently prevail or which are presumed to prevail. With a note of sarcasm she said I must have assumed, in raising the call for a boycott, that France was in an “insurrectionary situation.”

Jouannin revealed another part of the story. He complained about how “the media treated us,” i.e., the latter’s hostility to LO’s blank vote appeal. Why a supposed Marxist should expect friendly treatment from the capitalist press was never explained.

Jouannin said there had been “an enormous pressure” to go along with the pro-Chirac camp. He asked if I had been present on May Day and noted that the LO contingent had been booed and hissed, although he was obliged to admit that this had been done by middle-class SP types.

In point of fact, supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWP were present in Paris on May 1, standing in the middle of the crowd and distributing a leaflet headlined, “No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election.” We encountered hostility from a few enraged petty-bourgeois elements, but, in general, found a serious and interested response to our statement.

Lutte Ouvrière was intimidated by the media and the “left” reaction, and politically fled the field. As I indicated to Jouannin in the discussion, involved here was not a question of personal courage, but political perspective. Oriented to the Stalinist trade union bureaucracy and similar forces, LO can only draw the gloomiest conclusions about the political situation.

Jouannin suggested that it would have been difficult for PCF militants to understand a boycott, and described a violent argument with a feminist who upbraided him for his party’s abstentionist position. He acknowledged that in the factory where he worked it was different, that there was little enthusiasm for Chirac. The appeal for a blank vote was a “gesture.”

Duchêne chimed in, observing once again that LO was not a genuine party. “To be understood, we have to be everywhere. The Communist Party has militants everywhere,” she added, introducing another of the evening’s themes, the obsession of LO with the French Communist Party.

At this point I asked: what was LO’s analysis of the world political situation. Jouannin rolled his eyes, sheepishly grinning, as if this were the most outlandish question. I interjected, “What is your international perspective?” He jumped on this, explaining that his party’s position was that society needed to be changed everywhere. “Capitalism has existed for a long time,” he noted, since at least the eighteenth century. The capitalist system exploits people everywhere. We want “communist parties” in every country, so workers can make revolution in many countries. “We are far from there. We are building a party in France.” LO’s strategy, Jouannin implied, is to build a big party in France that will be emulated in other countries. This was the sum-total of his analysis of world events.

Duchêne returned to the question of LO’s insignificance. “We think we are a little group,” she said. “A real party is something other than what we are.” I asked her what she meant by a “real party,” since she had referred only to the quantitative aspect of the problem, not the qualitative.

She responded that a real party exists when workers listen, reflect and act in response to what you say. A party, like the PCF, which has militants everywhere—“That’s a real party. We don’t have an instrument.”

I suggested that a party had to be built on great principles, whether they were popular at any given moment or not.

At this point two working class people in the audience began pointing out that many former PCF voters were now voting for the National Front. A woman said she knew of such people personally.

No, Jouannin cut in, it wasn’t the case that true PCF militants were now supporting Le Pen. “The militants are not racists,” he said, and continued on that theme.

There you had it: the LO intervening to defend the honor of the French Stalinist party against working class criticism!

The name Trotsky never passed these people’s lips during the entire evening. Wandering in from the street and not knowing which organization was assembled, one could easily have concluded that it was a meeting of some “left” current within the Stalinist camp. Indeed, such is LO’s essential political character.

At one point, Jouannin expostulated on another aspect of the LO outlook: the glorification of backwardness. “We don’t put forward the best speakers, the people who know the most, we put forward workers,” as if being a worker and being someone who knew “the most” were mutually exclusive.

We want simple workers, he continued, not the most educated or cultivated; in fact, we prefer workers who are not too cultured, Jouannin said. One was reminded of Marx’s outburst against Wilhelm Weitling, the spokesman for “crude,” anti-intellectual communism: “Ignorance never helped anyone!”

Another LO member returned to the question of “great principles,” explaining that the party had been loyal to its ideas and its program for decades. There is “no reason to change the program,” she suggested. People complain, she commented, that “Arlette” always says the same thing—we think this “is a strength.” She went on, “The Communist Party dropped the flag, and we picked it up. We are honest in saying that we are not a party.”

There is one “great principle” that was never discussed: internationalism. What LO has remained loyal to is a national program of trade union militancy, a program that was always at odds with Marxism, but has now been rendered even more obsolete and unviable by the development of a globally integrated economy. Lutte Ouvrière is indissolubly attached to the French Stalinists and the trade unions. Far from deriving any confidence from the death agony of the old labor bureaucracies, LO is thrown into crisis and despair. They feel they are on a ship that is going down.

Duchêne and Jouannin returned one more time to the past greatness of the French Stalinist party. The candidate for *suppléant* stated: we are trying to reach the Communist Party base because these are the people

with principles, we need these people. Jouannin added, we find this consciousness of the class struggle in the Communist Party base, it is natural with them, they have a “sense of class.” These are the workers who defend principles, he declared.

Even from a thoroughly bankrupt organization, such remarks were astonishing. In the past the PCF had attracted many serious and socialist-minded workers, but elements of this same Stalinist “base,” with whom Jouannin and Duchêne are so enthralled, made it a practice to go after Trotskyists, including members of Lutte Ouvrière, with rocks and baseball bats.

Moreover, the PCF’s base of socialist-minded militants had long since eroded, leaving an increasingly disoriented and dwindling section of workers, whose political consciousness had been corrupted by the opportunist and nationalist prejudices relentlessly instilled by the Stalinist leadership. If there had been any doubts on this score, the Stalinists’ electoral collapse of recent weeks should have resolved them. LO, however, for all its supposed links to the “real world” of the workers, seems to live in something of a fantasy world.

The meeting concluded on this note of Stalinophile nostalgia. The LO members seemed on the whole sincere and well-intentioned; many of them have evidently been slogging away at the organization’s brand of trade unionist activism for decades. They look like people determined to grit their teeth and bear it. Good intentions alone, however, as Lenin observed many years ago, are not to be taken seriously in political life. One must have a correct appreciation of society and of political and historical events, and a program that can attract and win the most advanced workers, young people and intellectuals.

It is possible to summarize a number of the ideological tendencies of the Lutte Ouvrière group: (a) a thoroughly national, if not narrowly provincial and parochial, outlook; (b) an obsession and, indeed, admiration for Stalinism; (c) a lack of understanding of its own objective role and a lack of appreciation of the role of ideas and consciousness in the socialist struggle; (d) an unwillingness to make any analysis of contemporary events and a general satisfaction with the barest truisms about capitalist society; (e) the glorification of backwardness, which has more in common with populism and other forms of petty-bourgeois radicalism than Marxism; and (e) as a consequence of all the above, a deep pessimism and fatalism about the prospects for the socialist revolution.

Lutte Ouvrière, in sum, is a grouping whose social being is essentially petty-bourgeois and whose politics are nationalist and centrist. From the activities of this organization nothing progressive can emerge.



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