

Larzac anti-globalisation conference throws French left into crisis

Alex Lefebvre
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The massive turnout at the Larzac anti-globalisation conference in August—perhaps as many as 300,000 people—highlighted the isolation of the French government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The right-wing regime, elected by a comfortable majority last June, faces growing popular opposition on many fronts.

The massive attendance has also brought the crisis of the official French left to a boil. The gathering exposed for all to see the political vacuum that exists to the left of the French Socialist Party (PS), yet the conference's organisers have rapidly begun to abandon their positions or signal a turn to the right.

The Larzac conference was organised primarily by two left organisations, the anti-free market group Attac and the Confédération Paysanne (Farmers' Confederation) headed by the activist José Bové, who became famous for taking down a McDonalds restaurant in Millau, France. It attracted hundreds of thousands of attendees to a remote plateau in central France, revealing the gulf that exists between the French government and the population. One organiser said: "People are visibly anxious to get together and take stock of what happened and prepare the end of the August vacation period and the beginning of the school year."

Recent events in France—the government's careless and penny-pinching response to the heat wave, which resulted in roughly 10,000 deaths, as well as its decision to increase pay cuts for teachers who struck at the end of the 2003 school year—have further intensified this mood. The center-left daily *Le Monde* wrote, "The spring's social tensions have not been snuffed out, far from it."

However, the Larzac conference agenda and anti-government sentiment not only threaten the French right, but also the Socialist Party, which pursued a reactionary privatisation and austerity agenda in 1997-2002, when Lionel Jospin was prime minister. The PS rarely showed its face during the massive strikes and demonstrations of May and June 2003 against the Raffarin pension cuts, and when PS representatives did appear they were loudly booed. At the Larzac conference, this sentiment found expression when a group of conference attendees tore down the PS stand and literature table.

This event merely exacerbated the Socialist Party leadership's fears that an organised movement, or "radical force," would emerge on its left. On August 11, the official head of the PS, François Hollande, applauded the Larzac conference for "contributing to the renewal of the left" but criticised the Confédération Paysanne for "dangerous populist or Poujadist excesses." This was a reference to the 1950s right-wing populist demagogue, Pierre Poujade, whose movement of farmers and shopkeepers staged violent protests. However, the comment was widely interpreted to be an attack on Bové and his "civil disobedience" tactics.

Other prominent PS officials ranging across the spectrum of the party's internal politics—the right-wing free-marketers Henri Weber and Gaëtan Gorce, the centrist Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, and the more "left" Vincent Peillon, to name a few—made statements or gave interviews to major papers attacking political groups left of the PS. *Le Monde* commented: "The political goals of the Socialists are now clear: anchoring themselves inside the 'social movement' [of protests against the Raffarin government's austerity politics], while keeping at bay any radicalisation coming from the far left."

While the PS cannot seriously anchor itself inside the social movement, as the latter is the expression of popular hostility to the austerity politics that both the right and the PS have pursued, it has for some time been openly concerned about the emergence of a mass party on its left.

An article in the August 2 issue of the right-wing daily *Le Figaro* contained the following remarkable comment, regarding the Socialist leadership's attitude towards the Communist Party (PCF): "The PCF's survival is for the Socialists the best defense against the emergence of a 'radical group' around the far left. 'By its situation, the PCF prevents the emergence of a structured group, durably hostile to the PS,' mused Jean-Christophe Cambadélis." From this, Cambadélis, the originator of the concept of the Plural Left [the PS-PCF-Greens coalition that formed the government during Jospin's 1997-2002 premiership], deduces the importance of 'never losing the PCF.'" The decline in the fortunes of the French Stalinists, who have been reduced to a rump in the National Assembly, is a matter of concern to the entire political establishment. For the French ruling elite and its political agents, the construction of a new "left" barrier to the independent mobilisation of the working class is a pressing task.

The immediate response of the various radical groups that the PS views as a threat—Attac, the Confédération Paysanne and the pseudo-Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League)—has been to make conciliatory noises to the right-wing social democrats.

One such move has been the consistent distancing of Bové from leadership positions in the Confédération Paysanne and Attac, despite the fact that his popularity massively contributed to these organisations' ability to capitalise on opposition to the Raffarin government.

On August 10, the last day of the Larzac summit, Bové announced that he would step down in 2004 as spokesman of the Confédération Paysanne. Aside from a predictable reference to fatigue, *Le Monde* explained Bové's departure by the Confédération Paysanne's "hostility to the cult of personality, the corollary of a media-heavy approach that they mistrust." It is hard to reconcile this statement with

reality, as the Confédération Paysanne has largely relied for publicity on Bové's headline-grabbing attacks on McDonald's restaurants and genetically modified crops and the French press's cultivation of Bové's image as a resolute defender of the little man.

No one has advanced a credible explanation for the Confédération Paysanne's sudden decision to ditch its most prominent political representative, but it can hardly be unrelated to the fact that the PS views him increasingly as an undesirable.

On August 18, Attac president and former PCF member Jacques Nikonoff published an article in the daily *Libération* in which he attacked "the verbosity, the violence, the gesticulation, the sectarianism which mark the tradition of the far left." On the heels of this statement, which Attac members viewed as a criticism of Bové and of Attac personnel who are also LCR members, Attac announced that Bové, a founding member of the organisation, would not attend its summer school, to which he had previously been invited.

Nikonoff's August 18 statement in *Libération* and his August 22 interview with *Le Monde* are part of a move to bring Attac closer to the PS, and more generally to try to discredit any serious opposition to capitalist austerity politics carried out by the right or the bourgeois left.

Nikonoff made it clear that for him Attac has to keep PS electoral support from sinking too low by not raising too many social demands, which would inevitably discredit the Socialists since they would be unable to accommodate them. In his August 22 interview with *Le Monde*, he said: "It is a paradox, but by our activity, we reinforce the public's expectations of the political class, including the left. These expectations are then systematically left unsatisfied. By showing sympathy for the anti-globalisation movement, [right-wing president] Jacques Chirac is, in fact, trying to create the conditions to weaken the PS over the long term. [...] This is also a political reality which we must take into account."

Nikonoff told *Le Monde* that he wanted Attac to "stay independent and change an overly 'left-leaning' image that does not correspond at all to who we really are." In his *Libération* article, Nikonoff attacked those who took apart the PS literature table at Larzac, ominously calling for Attac to "set up a system of internal safeguards to discourage small groups from manipulating" Attac members or supporters.

When *Le Monde* asked Nikonoff's view of the anti-pension "reform" strikes of the late spring, the Attac leader repeated the right-wing line according to which the walkouts failed because the strikers did not immediately accede to the government's demands. He blamed their failure in part on bad publicity from the teachers' "threat not to grade the bac" [*baccalauréat*—the important exam at the end of high school that determines admission to higher education]. However, the decision by the teachers' unions to push their members to grade the bac, thus abandoning the main weapon the teachers had against the government, was in fact a turning point after which movement began to weaken.

Nikonoff made a further statement indicating that leading circles in Attac realise that the central plank of their program—bolstering the ability of national governments to carry out reforms by insulating them from the global economy through the taxation of international financial transactions—is hopelessly utopian. He told *Le Monde*: "We must ask ourselves if a government, today, even if it were animated by the best intentions and adopted our propositions, would have any real freedom to put them into practise." He noted cases—François Mitterrand's Socialist government in 1981-1983 in France and the

current Workers' Party government of Lula in Brazil—where parties elected on nationalist reform platforms failed to implement them.

If Nikonoff's statements indicate that leading members of Attac are consciously pushing for a capitulation to the PS, the response by leading members of the LCR to Nikonoff's statements and the general "anti-far left" offensive indicates their fundamental lack of seriousness and political bankruptcy.

Christophe Aguitton, a member of both Attac's international commission and the LCR, made the revealing statement in *Le Figaro* that Nikonoff's *Libération* article was "not politically well-founded," as that right-wing diatribe did not make clear "what principled difference he has with the far left." The "far left" designates the three pseudo-Trotskyist parties in France—LCR, Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers' Struggle), and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT, Workers' Party). LO and PT have chosen not to participate in Attac.

Leading members of the LCR responded to the PS's verbal offensive with attempts at conciliation. Olivier Besancenot, the LCR presidential candidate in the 2002 elections, told *Le Monde* that "We don't want to be the left's nightmare. [...] Today we need to tell the PS: your problem isn't the far left, but a powerful right wing that is on the offensive." Alain Krivine, the political leader of the LCR, gave the PS advice on how to weaken support for his party: "The PS has only itself to blame if the far left is becoming more popular; all it has to do is change its politics."

These statements indicate the extent to which the LCR, and more generally the French "far left," is willing to surrender political initiative and seek an accommodation with the PS. They also promote a stunningly simplistic and distorted view of French politics. Besancenot's statement—according to which the discredited Raffarin government, riding over the bitterly divided right-wing UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) party that controls the legislature, is a "powerful right wing"—totally ignores the true state of public opinion in France. In fact, if the right wing appears powerful it is only because no one in the trade unions, the political "left" or the "far left" can consistently rally popular opposition to it.

There is a profound objective significance to the reaction of the various "left" groups in the face of the powerful popular response to the Larzac conference. They are on a different political trajectory from the masses of French working people. Despite the growing unpopularity of the PS, revealed by its April 2002 electoral rout and its estrangement from the social movement, the "far left" takes actions primarily aimed at preserving good relations with this discredited leadership. At the same time, the attempt by the "far left" to reconcile this position with their "left" participation in the social movement becomes ever more difficult. The aftermath of the Larzac conference is a serious warning to the French working class: between the discredited "left" establishment and the discontented population, anxious to drive Raffarin out, the radical "left" has chosen.



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