

European Social Forum: French LCR seeks to channel popular opposition to official left parties

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17 November 2003

Over 40,000 delegates gathered in Paris between November 12 and 15 for the second European Social Forum (ESF). The majority were in their teens and twenties, but others were veterans of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The presence of such large numbers at a four-day meeting professing opposition to the neo-liberal capitalist agenda is an indication of major political changes taking place throughout Europe. The first European Social Forum was held last year in Florence and was dominated by anti-war protests. But there was widespread confusion due to the seemingly ambiguous stand taken by the old social democratic and former Stalinist parties on the war in Iraq. Tony Blair's Labour government was acting as the Bush administration's number-one ally, but most of the official left parties—and governments such as that of Gerhard Schröder in Germany—were making a show of opposition to US militarism.

Today, things have changed dramatically. Europe's official left has occupied itself with mending relations with Washington, including backing the occupation of Iraq within the United Nations. They have done this while waging an offensive, where they hold office, against the social gains of the working class, or stifling all opposition to this offensive where it is being waged by conservative governments.

Consequently, the membership and electoral support for the former reformist parties are plummeting. In France, support for the right-wing Gaullist government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin has declined, but there has been no recovery in the electoral fortunes of the Socialist Party (PS) and its allies in the "Plural Left."

This shift provided the context for the discussions at Paris. Delegates participated in 300 meetings, many filled to overflowing, and sat attentively for up to three hours at a time without a break. The mainly young people have made their formative experiences in the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war or anti-capitalist protests against the exploitation of the oppressed nations by the imperialist powers and the transnational corporations. From these experiences, many have become bitterly hostile not only to the neo-liberal right that has to this point been the *bête noire* of the "alternative globalisation" movement, but also to the social democrats who have adopted the agenda of the political ideologues of the "free market."

This development has thrown the groups leading the ESF into disarray. Those like the French ATTAC group conceived of the forum as a cross between a left think tank and a pressure group working to convince Europe's social democrats to readopt certain limited forms of economic regulation to curb the worst excesses of the market.

ATTAC, set up under the auspices of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, is closely connected to the French Socialist Party and opposes any political challenge to the PS's domination of the working class. It saw the ESF as a convenient tool for its political project, because it began as an adjunct of

the World Social Forum (WSF), which first met in Brazil in January 2001, under the auspices of the Brazilian Workers Party.

The Workers Party had aims complementary to those of ATTAC and a number of non-governmental organisations that wanted to give themselves a measure of bargaining power by reaching out to the anti-capitalist protests that had developed in opposition to the impact of International Monetary Fund (IMF) restructuring policies on the world's poor.

The protests that took place against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) beginning in Seattle in 1999 anticipated the far broader social opposition that is developing to capitalism all over the world. But the last thing the WSF and ESF leaders wanted was for this social movement to get out of control and threaten the old parties and governments with which they have sought to build relations.

To this end, the WSF leaders imposed a "charter of principles" that barred political parties and military organisations from participating in the forum. They used the disgust and alienation felt by many towards the old parties to justify the position that the WSF and ESF should stand "above politics," deemed by its very nature to be corrupt. The ban was justified as a means of ensuring that power within the forum would be in the hands of the "social activists."

This was never more than a convenient fiction that allowed the unelected and unaccountable leadership of the WSF and ESF to politically dominate the movement and direct it along politically harmless channels.

The ESF became a pole of attraction to a number of left radical groups such as the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) in France, which claims to be Trotskyist, and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain. Both were happy to abide by the ESF's "no politics" pretence. It meant they could participate in the ESF through various front groups and build support without conflicting with the old bureaucratic leaderships of the labour movement to which they have historically oriented themselves.

At the Paris conference, this cosy political arrangement began to come unstuck due to the growing recognition amongst working people and those active within the ESF of the need to build an alternative leadership to the old and degenerated workers' parties.

Immediately before the forum, the LCR formed a pact with Lutte Ouvrière (LO) to stand in next year's European elections and French regional elections. They will stand against the candidates of the PS, the Greens and the French Communist Party (PCF).

In a similar vein, the SWP has fielded candidates against Labour in a coalition with other radical groups, called the Socialist Alliance, and is now championing the creation of an "anti-war party" with recently expelled Labour MP George Galloway at its head.

But while they have been reluctantly forced to distance themselves from their previous endorsement of the social democrats, the LCR, SWP and company have no intention of politically mobilising workers on a socialist

program against the old parties. Their aim is to fill the political vacuum created on the left by the rightward lurch of the social democrats and Stalinists with an all-encompassing protest party pledged to a minimum program of reforms, but which reaches out to the old organisations in the name of “left unity.” They hope this will enable them to continue to suppress and discipline opposition within the working class, while strengthening their hand in their ongoing political horse-trading with the old labour bureaucracies, above all in the trade unions.

The PS and the Stalinists are also organised within the ESF, and, together with ATTAC and other non-governmental organisations, are hostile even to such a purely organisational show of independence. They are being forced to accept that the political ban may have to go, but are vehemently opposed to the ESF proclaiming its opposition to either the social democrats or governments in general, even when they are of an openly right-wing character.

In a recently published book, the founder of ATTAC, Bernard Cassen, bitterly denounced elements within the forum that would put the movement “on the extreme left and outside of the framework of the traditional parties or government—that is, of institutional politics.”

The resulting political manoeuvres were played out openly in Paris in two meetings focussed on a discussion of the relationship between social and citizens’ movements and political parties.

The leader of Italy’s Rifondazione Comunista (RC), Fausto Bertinotti, was the most high-profile speaker at the first meeting, and his party was cited by Alex Callinicos of the British SWP as the type of party that must be created everywhere. This speaks volumes about the unprincipled character of the political manoeuvring of radical groups such as the LCR and SWP within the ESF.

The attraction of the RC for them is that it emerged out of the break-up of the Italian Communist Party. It continues to champion an entirely reformist program, but has recognised that to give itself any credibility it must formally distance itself from its Stalinist heritage. It has done so by opening its doors to a number of left groups claiming to be Trotskyist. Livio Maitan, an Italian co-thinker of the LCR, has sat on the RC’s central committee for years and acts as an adviser to Bertinotti.

The radicals hold up the RC as proof that supposedly left sections of the old labour bureaucracy can still provide a political alternative to the right wing. But despite its left demagoguery, the RC has acted for more than a decade as the main political prop of the Italian social democrats. There were numerous occasions in the 1990s when the centre-left “Olive Tree” coalition government survived due to the parliamentary support of the RC. It was the attacks on the working class imposed by the centre-left, with the RC’s connivance, that paved the way for the victory of Silvio Berlusconi’s right-wing Forza Italia.

At the Paris meeting, Kader Arif of the French PS and the Green Party’s Noël Mamère were invited speakers. They sought to ensure that any acceptance of political parties was conceived of as a general amnesty. They spoke of being part of a left family, and maintained they were merely obliged to admit to a few mistakes in order to secure the ESF’s continued support.

Things were made even clearer at a follow-up meeting the next evening, which demonstrated that the radicals were concerned with rehabilitating, rather than challenging, the social democrats, Greens and Stalinists.

The LCR’s 2002 presidential candidate, Olivier Besancenot, shared the platform with Elio Di Rupo of the Belgian Socialist Party and the leader of the French Communist Party, Marie-George Buffet, amongst others. Buffet heads a party that has been massively discredited by its years of propping up the PS government and that has seen its share of the vote plummet to a historic low of under 5 percent—less than half the 10 percent won collectively by the so-called “far left” parties—the LCR, the LO and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT)—in the presidential elections of May 2002.

In the second round of that election, Besancenot called for a vote for

Jacques Chirac, thereby joining the stampede of the official left parties—the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens—behind the leader of the conservative bloc and consensus candidate of the French bourgeois establishment. This campaign of the “left” for Chirac was justified on the grounds that Chirac’s opponent in the second round was Jean-Marie Le Pen, the head of the fascistic National Front.

At the Paris meeting, Besancenot made a demagogic speech that sounded like an election address, but said remarkably little against the Plural Left government that had preceded Raffarin and nothing against the PCF. In their speeches, Di Rupo and Buffet again spoke of “mistakes” made in the past and stressed the need for “left unity.” Both had brought contingents of their supporters who clapped dutifully, but the hostility of large sections of the audience was palpable. There was booing, and a number of speakers from the floor came forward to oppose any relations with the social democrats or the PCF. Besancenot’s response was to ignore criticisms from the audience and use his closing remarks to again appeal for unity.

The LCR has been wooing the PCF for years, and there is a faction within that Stalinist party that favours a merger between the two groups along the lines of Rifondazione in Italy. As recently as October 15, a joint meeting was held between the LCR and the PCF to discuss a united campaign for a referendum against the European constitution. The LCR issued a statement reaffirming “its desire to continue the public debate at all levels between the two organisations.”

The opportunist role of the ESF was demonstrated by the proceedings at the conference as well as by the continuing efforts made to cultivate the ESF not only by the PS, but also by the Gaullist French president, Chirac.

There is an old saying that he who pays the piper calls the tune, and behind the scenes the business of *realpolitik* was proceeding. The Paris city administration gave over many facilities gratis to the ESF, and the PS mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, opened the event by sounding a friendly warning to delegates: “Yes, let’s be utopian, in order to arrive at concrete results. But we should be clear about who our enemies are. If we are not able to get together, liberal [capitalist “free market”—ed.] globalisation will have a bright future.”

Former PS economics minister and possible candidate for the 2007 presidential elections, Laurent Fabius, breakfasted with José Bové, the farmers’ leader, on the opening day of the ESF.

Most revealing of all, Chirac made €500,000 available to help fund the ESF. In his efforts to build bridges to the alternative globalisation movement, he sent his special envoy, Jérôme Bonnafont, to follow the proceedings.

Chirac’s relations to the movement are of long standing. This summer, he praised the work of the Evian “counter-summit” to the G8 summit of major industrialised nations and invited the non-governmental organisations that organised the counter-summit to the presidential palace. He made use of these organisations to provide an ideological cover for French imperialism in its conflict with the United States, particularly in relation to France’s interests in Africa.



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