

The politics of opportunism: the “radical left” in France

Part two: The LCR assembles the “anti-capitalist left”

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The following is the second part of a seven-part series on the politics of the so-called “far-left” parties in France. Part one was posted May 15.

The LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) only reluctantly agreed to participate in an electoral alliance with LO (Lutte Ouvrière—Workers Struggle). At the LCR’s party congress in November 2003, only 70 percent of the delegates supported the resolution authorising the alliance. The remainder were of the view that an exclusive alliance with LO would be too “sectarian.” LO had insisted that no other political organisation or tendency participate in the alliance.

Considerably more votes were cast at the LCR congress for another resolution, entitled “Assembling the Anti-Capitalist Left.” (1) It was supported by 82 percent of the delegates. It called for the building of a broad, collective movement, embracing sections of the traditional left as well as the anti-war and anti-globalisation movements. From this, a “new political force” was to arise that would be “broad and pluralistic, radical, anti-capitalistic and resolutely democratic.” It further talked about a “new anti-capitalist, feminist and ecological political force that fights against all forms of oppression.”

This resolution demonstrates the real orientation of the LCR. The electoral alliance with LO was just a temporary move it felt compelled to undertake, given the rapid electoral decline of the official left and the relatively high vote for LO spokesperson Arlette Laguiller. The LCR hoped ultimately to incorporate the reluctant LO, or at the very least fragments of it, in its “anti-capitalist alliance.”

As opposed to the common election programme, the resolution on the “Anti-Capitalist Left” also talks about an alternative government. One paragraph states: “Together, we refuse to allow our struggle and hope for a new coalition government to be wasted on an alliance with the social-liberal left or on a perspective that is dictated by the capitalist economy and institutions. The alternative to the right wing, the National Front [the neo-fascist party in France] and Medef [an employer’s organisation] is a government that is based upon the mobilisation and democratic organisation of the population, a government that implements an emergency programme of social measures.”

Another passage talks about the “aim of a government of workers, based upon the mobilisation of the population, which undertakes a radical social transformation that would make possible the satisfaction of social needs and undertake the abolition of private ownership of the economy and place it in the hands of all.”

However, this “government of workers” lacks any kind of clear programmatic base. The LCR—through decades of experience—has mastered the art of concealing its real programme behind a fog of radical and revolutionary-sounding phrases—a task that is not too difficult in a

country where the revolutionary traditions of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries still play a role, where the Stalinist PCF (Communist Party of France) was once the strongest party in the land, and where the oldest bourgeois party still calls itself the Radical Party.

One look at the various political tendencies and social groups that the LCR wishes to include in its “regroupment into a single party” makes clear that its goal of a “government of workers” has nothing in common with a workers’ government as hitherto understood by Marxists. It is not about a government that is independent from the bourgeoisie and based upon the mobilisation of the working class. Rather, the LCR wants to build a thoroughly diffuse, heterogeneous social and political movement that can fill the gap left by the decline of the official left-wing parties and would be ready, in an emergency, to enter into a bourgeois government.

The majority of the tendencies and groups addressed by the LCR in its appeal identify in no way whatsoever with a socialist perspective.

The first is the anti- or alternative-globalisation movement, which the congress resolution alleges is the most important part of the “anti-capitalist left.” The spokesmen of this movement do not oppose capitalist social relations as such. Rather, they oppose a certain form of capitalist economic policy, so-called “neo-liberal capitalism.”

Some would like to see a return to the nationally regulated capitalism that predominated in the 1960s: advocating the erection of trade barriers and other protectionist measures—reactionary demands, whose logical outcome is the development of trade and military wars. Others in this movement believe that they can cure the evils of modern society with a magical cure that leaves capitalist property entirely intact (e.g., the Tobin Tax). (2)

The second pillar named in the “anti-capitalist left” is the anti-war movement. Here, one also finds the most varied kinds of political tendencies. One wing supports the foreign policy of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac (about which the LCR is significantly silent). Another holds pacifist positions and relies on moral appeals to the powers-that-be.

For Marxists, in contrast, opposition to war is based on an understanding of the causal connections between capitalism, imperialism and war. The struggle against war is inseparably bound up with the struggle against capitalism.

Finally, the ecological and feminist movements, likewise included in the “anti-capitalist left” by the LCR, have no trace of an anti-capitalist orientation, as the fate of the German Greens has clearly demonstrated. Arising 25 years ago—and acclaimed at the time by LCR’s German co-thinkers—the German Greens waved the flags of ecology and feminism, along with grass-roots democracy and pacifism, and are today a right-wing, bourgeois party just like any other.

The LCR resolution is also explicitly aimed “at communist, socialist and

green voters and members,” as well as “at elements that have arisen out of the traditional left.” It remains, however, completely unclear on which basis these members and ex-members of reformist parties are to be brought together in the new coalition movement. Just because they are disappointed with their old parties does not mean that they have also broken from these parties’ reformist conceptions, or have understood the causes for their decline and drawn the necessary political lessons.

It is quite obviously not the intention of the LCR to clarify these political issues. Instead, it wants want to unify these diverse and conflicting political tendencies under one roof. Its orientation is not just to the rank-and-file members of these organisations, but also to their leaderships. That’s why, for example, the LCR meets for regular rounds of discussion with the leadership of the Communist Party. Should the PCF so decide, the LCR would welcome it as a body into its “anti-capitalist left” grouping.

It is evident that such a formless and heterogeneous organisation like the one the LCR is cobbling together would in no way be able to withstand the ideological and political pressures that bear down upon every political organisation in times of social crisis. If the LCR reacted the way it did on April 21, 2002 (after the first round of the French presidential election), when it waved the flag of the “Republican Camp” of Chirac, how would an utterly heterogeneous mishmash of groups such as the “anti-capitalist left” react in an even deeper crisis?

Such crises develop out of the law-governed inner contradictions of the capitalist system, but their development and consequences are not predetermined. Numerous experiences of the twentieth century show that the success or failure of the proletariat in such crises depends on the preparation, political maturity and tenacity of its leadership. The founding programme of the Fourth International, of which the LCR claims to be the French section (with which right, we will later see), begins, not accidentally, with the words: “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” (3)

The LCR does not consider resolving this crisis to be its responsibility. Otherwise, it would take pains to clarify its political perspective and in the process differentiate itself from reformist, centrist and petty-bourgeois radical tendencies. It explicitly rejects this as “sectarian.” To do so would cost the LCR too many friends in the ranks of the bureaucratic apparatuses, the liberal intelligentsia and the middle-class protest movement. A bold, clear and uncompromising perspective would attract fresh forces full of energy, who are tired of left-talking claptrap, of empty protests without results, and strikes without success—forces who are looking for a courageous, far-sighted orientation. However, this is not the aim of the LCR.

The “left” all-embracing movement for which they are striving would act as an additional barrier to the development of a genuine socialist movement. In the event of a French October, the LCR would support Kerensky, not Lenin and Trotsky. (4) The ruling classes, in times of acute crises, often use such diffuse, centrist organisations in order to confuse, paralyse and demoralise the masses until reaction is sufficiently strong enough to fight back. Such a role was played by the popular front movements in France and Spain in the 1930s, as well as in the Chile of Salvador Allende.

In France, the ruling elite has long used the pseudo-revolutionary left as a recruiting ground for its political personnel. The most famous example is Lionel Jospin of the Socialist Party, who from 1997 to 2002 led the majority left government. Jospin was, from the middle of the 1970s right through the 1980s, a secret member of the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), the predecessor of Parti des Travailleurs (PT, Workers Party), and in this capacity climbed to the top of the Socialist Party. (5)

Jospin is, however, not the only example. Edwy Plenel, for 10 years a

member of the LCR in the 1970s and now chief editor of the leading French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, wrote in his book *Secrets of Youth*: “I was not the only one: we surely numbered in the tens of thousands who, after our engagement in the—Trotskyist or non-Trotskyist—extreme left in the sixties and seventies, renounced the militant lessons of the past. We look back today, partly critical of our illusions back then, without, however, losing our original sense of anger and without concealing our debt to the education we received.” (6)

Jospin took over government after the insurgent movement in 1995-1996 exposed the extreme fragility of the ruling elite. Five years later, Jospin’s left-wing aura had been dissipated, as was proven in his defeat in the presidential election. In future crises, the ruling elite will need new props on the left. To this end, the LCR offers its “anti-capitalist left.”

Farewell to the “dictatorship of the proletariat”

It was not accidental that the congress last November decided to remove the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” from the LCR’s statutes. Of course, no Marxist organisation is compelled to use this particular formulation in its statutes, which, as with many other Marxist conceptions, is subject to widespread misunderstanding resulting from its decades-long misuse by Stalinism. Nor is a Marxist organisation obliged to carry it around like a sacred artifact. Its content, however, relates to a basic political question that cannot be avoided: the attitude toward the capitalist state.

On the eve of the October 1917 Revolution, Lenin carefully re-evaluated the Marxist understanding of the state and thereby brought out the meaning of the Marxist phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat.” (7)

The term “dictatorship,” in the first instance, simply recognises the fact that every state—whether democratic or authoritarian—is an instrument of class rule. “According to Marx, the state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another; it is the creation of ‘order,’ which legalises and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the conflict between classes,” wrote Lenin. (8) The task of the socialist revolution, therefore, consists of the replacement of the capitalist state (“the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”) with a workers’ state (“dictatorship of the proletariat”).

Lenin makes clear that the working class cannot seize the state from within and simply take over its apparatuses—its army, police and state bureaucracy. Based on the experiences of the 1871 Paris Commune, Marx and Engels had already reached the conclusion that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”

The old state machine, “bound by thousands of threads to the bourgeoisie and permeated through and through with routine and inertia” (Lenin), does not change its class character when a socialist minister stands at its head. The state must be broken up and replaced with a new one. On this issue, according to Lenin, rests the most important difference between Marxism and all forms of opportunism. It is at the heart of acknowledging the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Lenin’s writings, like those of Marx and Engels, leave no room for doubt that every form of “dictatorship of the proletariat” would be incomparably more democratic than any capitalist state and, with the transition to socialism, would completely wither away. “Under capitalism, democracy is restricted, cramped, curtailed, mutilated by all the conditions of wage slavery, and the poverty and misery of the people,” he wrote. Further, “Under socialism much of ‘primitive’ democracy will inevitably be revived, since, for the first time in the history of civilised society the mass of population will rise to taking an independent part, not only in voting and elections, but also in the everyday administration of the state. Under socialism all will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing.” Hence, Lenin’s conception of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” leaves no room for justifying the despotic, bureaucratic

Moloch, which later arose in the Soviet state under Stalin's leadership.

The Communist Party of France had the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" in its programme up until 1976, even though in practice it had long before rejected it and loyally supported the capitalist state. When it finally separated itself from the phrase, it caused substantial furor. It was a political signal of the PCF's readiness to enter into a capitalist government—which it actually did five years later.

The LCR has been at pains to deny all parallels between its current actions and those of the PCF. The party's newspaper *Rouge* reassured its readers, in the December 11, 2003, issue, that the removal of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was solely a "formality; the content will be retained.... Our organisation stands for the socialist revolution, for workers power." It would be wrong, it continued, "to justify this new formulation on the basis of any real or supposed errors made by Lenin and his comrades." (9)

Notwithstanding these denials, an intensive discussion is currently taking place within the LCR over its relationship to the capitalist state. In the course of this discussion, it is not only raising and discussing the mistakes supposedly made by Lenin, it is openly considering supporting the French (bourgeois) republic.

In November, an article appeared in *Rouge* by François Ollivier, one of the leading international representatives of the LCR, in which he combined an attack on the "dictatorship of the proletariat" with emphatic criticism of Lenin and Trotsky.

"One has to return to the errors of the Russian revolutionaries," wrote Ollivier. "In the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat, understood as a peculiar form of government under special circumstances, Lenin, Trotsky and many other Bolshevik leaders took a series of measures that suffocated democracy within the new revolutionary institutions: the displacement of soviet democracy by the power of the party at the expense of the councils and committees; the refusal to call a new constitutional assembly; and, finally, the ban on factions within the Bolshevik Party itself. Exercising the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, even between 1918 and 1924, led to the amalgamation of state and party and gradually to the suppression of all democratic freedoms. This dramatic historical experience has invalidated the use of this phrase." (10)

Ollivier's argumentation is simply the latest variation of an old theme, whereby the degeneration of the Soviet Union is presented as the inescapable consequence of the conquest of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917. The responsibility for this degeneration is attributed not so much to Stalin, but to Lenin and Trotsky.

To save face, Ollivier dates "the errors of the Russian Revolution" from 1918 onwards. However, if these "errors" were a result of "exercising the dictatorship of the proletariat," then the greatest "error" would logically have to be the establishment of the dictatorship itself in 1917. Ollivier's conclusions are a complete repudiation of the entire heritage of Marxism, including Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. This theory has insisted, since 1906, that the democratic tasks of the Russian Revolution could be resolved only through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Another leading member of the LCR, Christian Picquet, stands for supporting the French republic and making its values the central, strategic axis of the programme of the LCR. This is the primary message in his book *Republic in Turmoil: Essays for a Left of the Left*, which was published last year. (11) In it, Picquet generalises the attitude of the LCR during the 2002 presidential election, when the LCR joined the "republican front" of Jacques Chirac.

Picquet justifies his approach by claiming that left-thinking people in France have a unique relationship to the republic. Whereas people in other parts of Europe oppose the threat of right-wing extremism by demonstrating against hatred and racism, and for democracy and human rights, these values were, for historical reasons, expressed in the ideal of the republic in France. According to Picquet, during the restless days

between the two ballots in the 2002 presidential election, people came onto the streets of France in the name of the republic.

What follows is a distorted account of French history: "The Phantom [the republic] has the characteristics of a spectre haunting the propertied classes for more than two hundred years. Every time they felt threatened by counter-revolution, when reaction or obscurantism threatened to take back what they thought was theirs, we witnessed an uprising of innumerable masses of people. From 1789 to 1796, from 1830 to 1848, from the Paris Commune to the Dreyfus Affair, from the popular front to the Résistance, from the liberation to the struggle against the coup d'état in Algeria, from the defence of public schools, whose very existence was placed into question many times in the Fifth Republic, to the struggle against the National Front, from the ceaseless solidarity with the Sécu [social insurance scheme], to the refusal to allow the public service to be broken up—what was common to every large movement was that they constituted different variations of the 'republican gathering.' "

In his republican ecstasy, the author overlooks the fact that the French Republic, from the First to the Fifth, was always, and remains, an instrument of bourgeois rule. The illusions of the masses in the republic that he so enthusiastically describes have been systematically fostered by the social democrats and Stalinists to prevent revolutionary uprisings threatening capitalist rule. It was just such a role that the Popular Front of the 1930s played, ending for the workers in a devastating defeat.

Even *Rouge* felt itself compelled to point out certain indisputable historical facts. One critic of Picquet's book draws attention to the republic being a "terrible trap for the workers movement." It has been the "basis for all kinds of holy alliances between the ruling class and the reformist movement."

In the name of the republic, colonial expeditions have been led against the peoples of North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia, and a policy of oppression and forced assimilation justified. "From the first experience with 'Ministerialism' (the entry of a Socialist, Alexandre Millerand, into the ministry of a bourgeois government in 1899) to the beginning of the 20th century, through to the Popular Front, which channelled the dynamic power of the general strike into an alliance with the radical parties, to the reconstruction of the capitalist state in 1944-45 (under the crook Charles De Gaulle, and with the disarmament of the Résistance), all took place under the cover of the republic, which, identified with the institutions of the capitalist state, repeatedly disarmed social movements." (12)

The very fact that the LCR is openly discussing support for the capitalist state shows that it no longer has any inhibitions in this respect. It is in this context that its dissociation from the "dictatorship of the proletariat," like that of the PCF before it, gives the clearest signal of its willingness to become a capitalist government party.

To be continued.

Notes

- 1) *Rassembler la gauche anticapitaliste*, <http://www.lcr-rouge.org/appelanticap.pdf>.
- 2) The "Tobin tax," after the American economist James Tobin who first advocated it in 1972, is the guiding policy of the French organisation Attac (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), founded at the end of 1997 and now comprising a number of affiliates in Europe and internationally. The Tobin tax is a tax that would be charged on all international currency transactions. See "Globalisation, Jospin and the political programme of Attac," 10 September 2001, <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/09/att-s10.html>.
- 3) Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme*, Labor Publications, 1981, p.1
- 4) Alexander Kerensky was the leader of the bourgeois Provisional Government that replaced Tsarist rule in Russia after the Tsar abdicated in February 1917. His government was subsequently overthrown in the

October 1917 Revolution, led by V. I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky.

5) See also: "Lionel Jospin and Trotskyism," 27 June 2001 <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/06/josp-j27.html>; "Leader of the French OCI acknowledges past relations with Prime Minister Jospin," 13 November 2001 <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/11/jos-n13.html>.

6) Edwy Plenel, *Secrets de jeunesse*, Éditions Stock 2001, p. 21-22.

7) V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, August 1917.

8) Ibid.

9) *Le pouvoir des travailleuses et travailleurs*, Rouge 2043, 11/12/2003.

10) *Et la dictature du prolétariat?*, Rouge 2040, 20/11/2003.

11) Christian Picquet, *La République dans la tourmente. Essai pour une gauche à gauche*, Syllepse 2003.

12) Pierre-François Grond and François Sabado, *Révolution et République*, Rouge 2051, 12/02/2004.



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