

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

Part one: the LO-LCR electoral alliance

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The following is the first of a seven-part series on the politics of the so-called “far-left” parties in France. Part two will be published on Monday, May 17.

At the end of last year, the LO and LCR decided to participate in the elections in 2004—the regional elections in March and the European elections in June—with a joint slate.

This is not the first time that the two organisations have stood on a common platform. Their sporadic cooperation goes back to the 1970s. In 1999, they stood a joint slate in the European elections, and for the first time exceeded the 5 percent vote requirement necessary to place representatives in the European Parliament. Since then, they have had five deputies in the Parliament. In the 2002 presidential elections, Arlette Laguiller stood separately as a candidate for LO and Olivier Besancenot for the LCR, each receiving around 5 percent, considerably more than the Communist Party (PCF) candidate Robert Hue, who received 3 percent.

One might have expected that the new electoral alliance would be preceded by a careful discussion of the experiences of recent years, the changed political situation, and the aims of the joint campaign. However, that did not happen. The letters that were exchanged between the governing bodies of the two organisations resemble the haggling in a bazaar. (2) They know each other, they distrust each other, and each tries to gain the advantage over the other. But neither makes any effort to clarify questions or convince the other, let alone develop broad political concepts.

Long passages in the letters read like the bickering of an aging married couple who fight from noon till night—only to remain together in the end. Thus, LO accuses the LCR of supporting the conservative bourgeois Jacques Chirac in the second round of the last presidential election. The LCR writes back indignantly, “You call us ‘Chirac traitors,’ revealing your total inconsistency, for how, as a communist proletarian tendency, can you discuss possible common actions with ‘Chirac supporters’?”

Of course, this was meant to be rhetorical, but it hit the nail on the head. LO has never answered the question. Elsewhere, LO complains, “We would like to note, nevertheless, that we never expressed even the smallest criticism of the LCR or their candidate during the presidential election campaign. The same cannot be said of you.”

This tone, which continues throughout the entire exchange of letters, throws a characteristic light on the morbid character of the entire enterprise. There is no serious attempt to clarify fundamental questions of political orientation. LO criticises the LCR for joining the “republican front” and calling for Chirac’s election in 2002, and at the same time stresses that it “never expressed even the slightest criticism of the LCR.” It draws no conclusions from the conduct of the LCR, and immediately lets the issue drop—as if the fact that an allegedly revolutionary

organisation supported a right-wing bourgeois politician were a mere trifle.

Anyone who has ever read Trotsky’s writings—the care with which he discussed matters of political principle, his untiring fight against the Popular Front in France and Spain—would see immediately that this has nothing to do with the traditions of the Trotskyist movement.

The 2002 presidential elections

The actions of the LCR were far more than a trifle. The true character of a political tendency always comes most clearly to light in situations of crisis. The conduct of the LCR during the 2002 presidential elections leaves no doubt about the real orientation of this organisation.

The result of the first ballot on April 21, 2002, revealed the crisis in bourgeois rule. The two parties—the Parti Socialiste (PS) and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF)—that had formed the government and occupied the president’s office for the majority of time since 1981 proved to be largely discredited. PS leader Lionel Jospin, supposedly a left-winger, who had taken over the government just a year after the massive strike movement in the autumn of 1996, but who soon proved to be a reliable executor of bourgeois interests, received only 16 percent of the vote, less than the right-wing extremist NF candidate Jean Marie Le Pen. Robert Hue polled just 3 percent, the worst result in the history of the PCF. Moreover, the vote for the conservative bourgeois candidate Jacques Chirac was miserable. With just 19 percent, his was the worst result ever for an incumbent president.

The French elite could have easily come to terms with the candidacy of Le Pen, who entered the second ballot as the challenger to the Gaullist incumbent. For decades, this right-wing demagogue has been a component part of the political establishment, enjoying close relations with the mainstream right-wing bourgeois camp. Since 1999, the FN has officially supported conservative regional governments in several parts of France. It was also clear that Chirac could not be seriously threatened by Le Pen as long as the latter received no real support from big-business circles, the media or the conservative establishment.

What worried the French elite far more than the 17 percent vote for Le Pen in the first round were the reactions to the election result. The initial computer forecasts had hardly been made when the first demonstrations began. In the ensuing days, millions took to the streets throughout the entire country. In large cities and small provincial towns, members of all social classes demonstrated. Countless school pupils, who were not yet old enough to vote, marched for hours in the capital, expressing their

anger at the racism of the FN. It rapidly became clear that any further accommodation to Le Pen could unleash civil war conditions, shaking the foundations of the Fifth Republic.

Under these circumstances, the political establishment depended upon the support of the “radical left” to bring the situation under control. The LCR and LO, which had obtained a combined total of 10 percent of the vote, were placed under tremendous pressure. While the official left (PS and PCF) called for a vote for Chirac in the second round, praising the incumbent president, who was up to his neck in corruption scandals, as the guarantor of “republican values,” the press—above all *Le Monde* and *Libération*—denounced any deviation from this line as sectarianism and support for Le Pen.

It did not take much to draw the LCR into the bourgeois camp. It tried to cover up its surrender to Chirac with the slogan “Stop Le Pen on the Streets and at the Ballot Box.” But under the existing conditions, the call to stop Le Pen “at the ballot box” could only mean voting for Chirac—something the leading LCR representatives openly admitted.

At a time of deep crisis in bourgeois institutions and parties, when an independent movement of the working masses was within reach, the LCR placed itself on the side of the Fifth Republic and thereby contributed to consolidating the grip of the bourgeois camp. Three weeks after the first round, Chirac, largely unchallenged, won the second, deciding ballot with a record result of 82 percent. This right-wing politician, whose future had been in doubt a few weeks earlier, sat firmly in the saddle once again, and the mechanisms of bourgeois rule remained, for the time being, intact.

The LCR never considered the possibility of fighting for an independent orientation of the mass movement that had developed in reaction to the first round. In an open letter to the three “radical left” parties, the *World Socialist Web Site* proposed advancing the policy of an election boycott. (3) An organised election boycott would have denied any legitimacy to the election, which offered as the only alternative a choice between two right-wing candidates. Such an active boycott would have provided the working class with an independent political line and prepared it for future struggles.

The LCR did not even think this proposal worthy of consideration. Instead, it functioned as the left wing of the bourgeois regime. As we will see, this was neither a coincidence nor an aberration.

LO’s role was no better. It remained completely passive. Although 1.6 million votes were cast for Arlette Laguiller, LO did not advance any initiatives that would have enabled the working class to intervene actively and independently in the crisis. It rejected the call by the WSW for an organised working class boycott. For several days it avoided making a clear statement, only to call in the end for voters to cast a blank ballot. This was nothing more than a “political gesture,” as LO admitted at the time.

Both the LCR and LO shared essentially the same position: they accepted the bourgeois constitutional framework. They considered the authoritarian constitution adopted by de Gaulle in 1958 to be sacrosanct.

A joint election platform

In view of the conduct of the LCR and LO during the presidential elections, it is no wonder that there was no serious dispute concerning the content of their current election alliance, apart from some superficial exchanges. Neither the LCR nor LO can afford to draw an honest balance sheet of the previous years. After three months of bickering, they finally agreed on a joint election platform that excludes all important political questions. The agreement was recorded in a protocol and an election statement. (4)

Both documents are characterised by their superficiality and meagre content. Neither is much longer than two sides of a single sheet of paper. They provide an evaluation of neither the present situation nor the most important political experiences of recent years.

There is not a single mention of the Iraq war, the most important international event of the new century. There is not even a rudimentary attempt to draw the political lessons of the presidential elections and the decline of the “official left” (PS and PCF). One searches in vain for any serious rationale or political objective in their joint intervention in the elections.

The joint election declaration starts by listing a number of social and political evils—sackings, unemployment, falling wages, cuts in welfare and social provisions. Accusations follow against the capitalist social order: “Those responsible in the state and economy are plundering and ruining society in favour of the profits of big business. The capitalist organisation of the world economy condemns millions of humans to misery, so that a minority can accumulate fantastic wealth”.

Finally, a number of “emergency measures” are demanded—a ban on sackings in profitable large-scale enterprises; higher tax contributions from the wealthy to create public sector jobs; a halt to privatisation and an expansion of the public sector; the construction of subsidised low-rent public housing, kindergartens and other social amenities; higher taxes on profits from speculation and a lowering of indirect taxes, which hit the poor the hardest; and the opening up of the books of large enterprises and banks.

It is obvious that the implementation of these or similar measures requires a revolutionary transformation of society. No bourgeois government—whether of the left or right—would undertake such measures. The experiences of recent years have clearly shown this throughout the world.

In France, the last significant social reforms occurred in 1981, when the Socialist Party won the presidency for the first time in the Fifth Republic. These reforms did not threaten the framework of the capitalist economic system in any way. Nevertheless, one year later, under the pressure of the international financial establishment, President Mitterrand carried out an abrupt about-face. Since then, in France as in all other Western industrialised countries, the broad mass of the population has experienced a continuous fall in living standards. Hopes for a revival of social reforms, which awoke following the election success of the PS and PCF in 1998, were soon dashed. Despite efforts to lend itself a left-wing image, the Jospin government continued the policy of social cuts.

The reason for the bankruptcy of social reformism is to be found in fundamental changes in world economy. The reforms of the 1960s and 1970s were possible because the national market was regulated and could be shielded, to a certain degree, from the turbulence of the world economy. The globalisation of production and finance has made this impossible. The strike weapon is blunted in the face of transnational corporations that can shift production and investment to other countries. High taxes to pay for comprehensive social reforms lead to an outflow of finance, without which no national economy can survive.

The social democratic parties reacted to these changes by bending themselves to the requirements of finance capital in an endless cycle of social cuts. The trade unions have also adapted to this development. Robbed of the possibility of social compromise, they became the enforcers of capital. They collaborate closely with the governing elite and knife every labour struggle in the back—when they are unable to prevent it breaking out in the first place.

The working class cannot take a step forward without freeing itself from the paralysing effect of these bureaucratic apparatuses. This understanding must form the starting point of every revolutionary orientation. The French working class has repeatedly proved its readiness and ability to fight for its democratic and social rights in the past. But an independent

political orientation cannot develop spontaneously out of these struggles. This is why political life remains caught in the interplay between the right and the left bourgeois camps. At one point, the right wing seizes the rudder, because the left has been discredited by its anti-working class policies. At the next point, the right wing is punished and the left comes back into power—without having changed its anti-working class policies.

It is the task of Marxists to break through this cycle. Participating in elections offers a Marxist organisation the possibility of explaining its programme to a broad public and raising the general level of the political discussion, thereby creating the conditions for the building of a broad, independent and politically conscious movement of the working class, without which all talk of socialism and revolution remains empty twaddle.

There is no hint of such tasks being set out by the LCR and LO. They state in all seriousness that the emergency measures they demand can be forced through by union action. Specifically, their election statement reads, “These emergency social measures will be forced though by collective struggle. Those who went on strike and demonstrated last spring have shown the way.”

More than 70 years ago, Leon Trotsky warned about such attempts to limit the class struggle to trade union action in his book *Whither France*. He wrote, “However, every worker knows that with two millions of partially or wholly unemployed, the ordinary trade union struggle for collective bargaining is utopian. Under present conditions, in order to force the capitalists to make important concessions, we must *break their will*. This can be done only by a revolutionary offensive. But a revolutionary offensive, which opposes one class to another, cannot be developed solely under slogans of partial economic demands. We have here a vicious circle.... The general Marxist thesis, ‘Social reforms are only the by-products of the revolutionary struggle,’ has in the epoch of the decline of capitalism the most immediate and burning importance. The capitalists are able to cede *something* to the workers only if they are threatened with the danger of losing *everything*.” (5)

The reference by LO and the LCR to the spring 2003 strike movement is characteristic. This movement ended in a defeat. Despite weeks of strikes and demonstrations against the government’s pension plans, the National Assembly (parliament) passed the relevant laws without any amendments. It was able to rely upon the trade unions, which held the movement in check and ensured that it did not endanger the government.

The minister responsible, François Fillon, expressed his appreciation of the “conscientious attitude” of the CGT union, which led the protests against the laws outside the National Assembly. “The employment minister owes his thanks to the trade union for endeavouring to prevent a general expansion of the movement, which ran the risk of getting out of control,” commented *Le Monde*. (6)

The LCR and LO undertook the task of covering up the CGT’s treachery by recasting the defeat as a moral victory. “Those in government know that they lost the battle for consciousness,” announced the LCR. According to LO, the failed protest wave represents “a dreadful disavowal of the government.” Their joint election platform does not contain a single word of criticism of the trade unions.

However, the LCR and LO cannot avoid making some acknowledgment of the highly visible right-wing turn of the reformist parties. The election statement reads, “The will to put a stop to current policies cannot be expressed by casting votes for those parties that supported the Jospin government, since they want to continue the same policies they carried out while in power. Gifts for the employers multiply, sackings are accepted, public services are denationalised.”

But these “radical left” parties do not develop any initiatives that would enable the working class to intervene independently in political events. They present their election candidacy not as a step towards building a new, independent party of the working class, but merely as a “gesture” aimed at encouraging union action. The election statement reads, “By

voting for our slate, you can make your ballot a political gesture, to encourage the struggles and all those who stand for workers’ rights and want to prepare an end to the tyranny of the large shareholders and the stock exchange.”

The glorification of the union struggle forms the lowest common denominator upon which the two organisations can agree. Both reject, from different standpoints, any independent political perspective for the working class. LO thinks any challenge to the reformist organisations offers no prospect for success, since it believes that the working class is completely demoralised. The LCR orients itself not to the working class, but to the scattered groups within the petty-bourgeois protest movement—the anti-globalisation movement, the environmental movement, the women’s movement, etc.—which it seeks to fuse with the ruins of the old reformist organisations to create a new centrist formation.

This will be dealt with in greater depth in ensuing parts of this series.

To be continued.

Notes

2) This exchange of letters is documented in the theoretical magazine of Lutte Ouvrière, *Lutte de Classe* No. 75, Octobre 2003 (<http://www.union-communiste.org/?FR-archp-show-2003-1-505-2626-x.html>).

3) “No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election: An open letter to Lutte Ouvrière, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and Parti des Travailleurs” (<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2002/04/open-a29.html>).

4) “Protocole d’accord Lutte Ouvrière Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire pour la présentation de listes communes aux élections régionales et européennes” (<http://www.union-communiste.org/?FR-archd-show-2003-1-515-2747-x.html>); “Profession de foi commune Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire - Lutte Ouvrière pour les élections régionales”

(<http://www.union-communiste.org/?FR-archd-show-2003-1-515-2746-x.html>).

5) Leon Trotsky, *Whither France*, Marxists Internet Archive (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1936/witherfrance/01.htm>).

6) A detailed analysis of the strike movement can be found in “After the mass protests and strikes: What way forward for working people in France?” (<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2003/07/fra-j15.html>).



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