

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

Part three: The Fifteenth World Congress of the Pabloite International

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The following is the third part of a seven-part series on the politics of the so-called “far-left” parties in France. Part one was posted on May 15, part two on May 17.

The political conceptions articulated by the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) in its appeal for an “anti-capitalist left” can be traced back, down to specific formulations, to the decisions and resolutions of the Fifteenth World Congress of the Pabloite “Fourth International,” of which the LCR is the official French section.

The congress took place in February 2003 in Brussels. As we will see later, the roots of the Pabloite International go back to the year 1953. For a long period, the organisation went under the name of the Unified Secretariat, and its best-known representative was, until his death in 1995, Ernest Mandel.

In 1953, a number of sections broke with the programmatic foundations of the Fourth International that had been established by Leon Trotsky in 1938. Under the leadership of the secretary of the Fourth International in the early 1950s, Michel Pablo, these sections began increasingly to orient to Stalinism as embodied in the Kremlin bureaucracy.

The Fifteenth World Congress of the Pabloites—the first to held in eight years—declared itself in favour of the construction of a “new mass International” that represented a break with everything that even remotely recalled the Marxist traditions upon which previous internationals had been based. An official report on the work of the congress by François Vercammen emphasised precisely this fact.

Vercammen, who is a member of the Pabloite executive bureau, wrote: “This new International, or at least a first step on the road to its construction, will emerge from the current movements and mobilisations. It will not resemble any of its predecessors, and certainly not the revolutionary Marxist party-based internationals. It will be the massive ‘spontaneous’ response to the current historically unprecedented global despotic reign of capitalism, and its anchor will be its internationalism and intuitive anti-capitalism, but also its very great heterogeneity. It will certainly be different from its five predecessors: the Internationalist Communist League of 1848, the First International (1864-1876), the Second International (1889-1914), the Communist (or Third) International (1919-1943), the Fourth International (founded in 1938).” (1)

By the “movements and mobilisations” that are to form the basis of the “new mass International,” Vercammen means the critics of globalisation and the movement opposing the war in Iraq, as seen in the big demonstrations against international trade and security meetings that began in Seattle in 1999, the World Social Forums of Porto Alegre and

Florence, and the world-wide demonstrations against the Iraq war in February 2003.

These movements reflected the growing opposition of broad layers of the population to exploitation and repression, and against US plans for world domination. Together with veterans of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, layers of workers and, in particular, young people began to intervene actively in politics, largely independently of the old reformist labour bureaucracies.

Politically and organisationally, however, these movements were dominated by groups—such as Attac or the Brazilian Worker’s Party (PT)—which reject a revolutionary perspective and work towards channelling the protest movements back into the orbit of established bourgeois organisations. It is no secret that Attac had close links to the former French government led by Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin and includes amongst its registered membership many deputies of the Socialist Party. For its part, the Brazilian PT, which sponsored the Social Forum in Porto Alegre, has since taken power in Brazil and won the praise of the International Monetary Fund for its policies.

It would be wrong to simply ignore or write off these movements on the basis of their bourgeois or petty-bourgeois leadership, as does, for example, Lutte Ouvrière (LO). However, it would be equally wrong to uncritically adapt to the dominating political tendencies and hope that the spontaneous development of the movement, in and of itself, will bring about political clarification.

The priority for Marxists is to initiate a process of political differentiation and clarification in relation to these movements. The aim is not the unification of the “left”—a concept that embraces every type of opportunist and petty-bourgeois tendency—but rather the unification and mobilisation of the broad masses of working people, whose living conditions are in irreconcilable conflict with existing capitalist relations.

This requires a tireless political struggle against all tendencies, such as Attac, the Brazilian PT and many others, that stand with either one or both feet in the camp of the bourgeoisie and seek to divert popular opposition and direct it behind left-wing or liberal bourgeois politicians. The half-hearted policies of these tendencies—their readiness to adapt to official bourgeois opinion, their efforts to suppress all “extreme demands” that could scare off their allies in the camp of the bourgeoisie—inevitably means that they are not only unable to reach the broad oppressed masses, but end up repelling them. A genuine unity of the broad masses of the exploited and oppressed can come about only in a political struggle against the paralysing influence of these tendencies.

The Fourth International was founded in 1938 after a five-year struggle against various types of centrism—the Spanish POUM, the British

Independent Labour Party, etc.—as well as in struggle against the Popular Fronts that sought to sacrifice the interests of the working class through an alliance with the left wing of the bourgeoisie.

“There is not and there cannot be a place for the Fourth International in any of the People’s Fronts. It uncompromisingly gives battle to all political groupings tied to the apron-strings of the bourgeoisie,” insisted the founding programme of the Fourth International. (2) Its entire aim consisted then, and remains today, of enabling the working class to intervene in political life as an independent and revolutionary political force.

The Pabloites categorically reject such an objective. Their call for a “new mass International” is directed at political groups that are, in Trotsky’s words, “tied to the apron-strings of the bourgeoisie.” Politically, Pabloism is directed towards centrist, opportunist and openly reformist tendencies; socially, it is directed towards sections of the middle class and the bureaucracies of the old workers’ organisations.

It is worth noting that the Pabloites make a clear distinction between the “working class” and the “radical left.” The Congress resolution on the “Role and Tasks of the Fourth International” states: “The working class is still in a position of weakness, on the defensive, but the radical left is recovering and regaining the political initiative on a grand scale.” (3) Another resolution goes so far as to claim that worldwide the broad masses of the population are moving to the right. The political and military offensive by US imperialism and interventionism on the part of repressive state apparatuses, it says, “encourage the growth of reactionary, chauvinist currents in the population. This development is affecting the whole planet, country by country.” (4) Accordingly, the basis for the “new mass International” is not to be the working class, but rather “the radical left.”

The new International, Vercammen writes, “can only be a gathering of all the forces of opposition, all the radical political currents, in a new political formation (party, movement, coalition, alliance).... In such a formation, revolutionary Marxists do not practice ‘entryism’ with a secret or avowed goal of passing as quickly as possible to a vanguard ‘revolutionary party’ equipped with a revolutionary program. They are the co-initiators, co-organisers, co-leaders of this broad party. They aim to share the experiences of the current struggle and progress together towards a mass anti-capitalist party capable of fighting for socialism.”

In another passage, the same author writes: “Our objective is not to make a short-term political-organisational raid on the global justice movement, along the lines of fracture already perceptible in it, so as to impose on it a political organisation. On the contrary, we must build it, strengthen it as a combat movement *sui generis*, and realise all its potentialities on different levels: as socio-political movement, as forum for discussion and elaboration, as bearer of various autonomous campaigns (the Tobin tax, cancellation of Third World debt, defence of public services, the fight against modern slavery), as umbrella for social movements (unions, unemployed, ecologists), as single world front (the anti-war mobilisation).”

Rebuilding the trade union movement

Among the “radical left” that is to constitute the basis for a “new mass International,” the Pabloites count not only a multitude of radical protest movements—“women’s, youth, anti-war, ecological, anti-fascist and anti-racist movements”—but also the trade unions and parts of the old Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies.

They are forced to concede that there has been a general shift to the right by the trade unions as well as the social democratic and Stalinist

organisations. But they make absolutely no effort to analyse the objective roots of this degeneration—i.e., the bankruptcy of social reformist programmes in the face of globalisation. Instead, they insist that the revival of the working class must take place through the agency of these organisations.

According to the resolution on the “Tasks of the Fourth International”: “The rebuilding of the trade union movement is a crucial task.” Somewhat further below, it says: “In major federations with long histories in countries with high unionisation rates and a major trade-union tradition, remobilisation will certainly go through these organisations.... In countries where mass trade unionism was born a century later (COSATU in South Africa, the CUT in Brazil, etc.), it will remain more permeable to rank-and-file sentiment.”

Experience over the past few years has demonstrated exactly the opposite. “In countries with a major trade union tradition”—apparently, Germany and Great Britain are being referred to—the big trade union federations constitute the most important prop for the right-wing, anti-working class policies of the social democratic governments. In particular, the trade unions, which often seek to pose as militant and even organise a few protests, play a key role in heading off popular opposition so as to prevent at all costs the downfall of the government. In Germany, the big IG Metall and Ver.di unions have worked out and signed numerous agreements that have resulted in a massive decline in the wages and living conditions of their members.

With regard to COSATU and CUT, which both came into being in the course of a potentially revolutionary crisis, they have become the most important props of bourgeois rule in South Africa and Brazil. The leader of the South African miners’ union and co-founder of COSATU, Cyril Ramaphosa, is today one of the richest businessmen in South Africa. Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva, the most prominent leader of the CUT, now occupies the post of president of Brazil.

These experiences demonstrate the correctness and far-sighted character of Trotsky’s remarks made on the trade unions in 1940, shortly before his death: “There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organisations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power. This process is equally characteristic of the neutral, the Social Democratic, the Communist and ‘anarchist’ trade unions. This fact alone shows that the tendency towards ‘growing together’ is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such, but derives from social conditions for all unions.” (5)

Trotsky characterised the stance of the trade union as follows: “In the eyes of the bureaucracy of the trade union movement the chief task lies in ‘freeing’ the state from the embrace of capitalism, in weakening its dependence on trusts, in pulling it over to their side. This position is in complete harmony with the social position of the labour bureaucracy, who fight for a crumb in the share of super profits of imperialist capitalism. The labour bureaucrats do their best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the ‘democratic’ state how reliable and indispensable they are in peacetime and especially in time of war. By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new: it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism.”

The period of boom after the Second World War created conditions whereby the trade unions were able to achieve a certain improvement in the living standards of their members. However, these days are long past. The last two decades have thoroughly confirmed Trotsky’s estimation of the trade unions. Everywhere, they have been transformed into organs of the state. A prerequisite for a revival of the worker’s movement is a rebellion against these conservative, fossilised apparatuses. This is something the Pabloites are determined to prevent at all costs, as expressed in their insistence that a “remobilisation” must take place through these organisations.

Despite negative experiences with British Prime Minister Blair, German Chancellor Schröder and Jospin, the Pabloites are also determined to stand by the social democratic parties. “Though well aware of the negligence of organisations under social-democratic leadership in terms of defending elementary demands, we still do not give up on the possibility of involving them in mass action,” says the resolution on the “Tasks of the Fourth International.”

With considerable regret, the resolution notes the decline of the Stalinists: “The large ‘surviving’ Communist parties are approaching their end; their stands against neo-liberalism have not led to an anti-capitalist political project and a democratic, pluralist mode of functioning, and no left-wing, non-Stalinist, nationally structured tendency has emerged.” But also, in this respect, the Pabloites have not completely given up hope.

As a praiseworthy exception, they name the Refounded Communists (Rifondazione Comunista—RF), which emerged from the decay of the Italian Communist Party. For years, the Italian section of the Pabloite International has operated as an integral part of Rifondazione. In the 1990s, Rifondazione supported the Italian centre-left government in parliament—a policy that paved the way for the coming to power of the right-wing coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. Recently, RF declared its readiness to put up candidates for the next election as part of Romano Prodi’s Olive-Tree alliance, and to take up ministerial posts in a future centre-left government.

The peasant movement

The resolutions of the Pabloite world congress also include “peasant movements” among the “important players in the anti-capitalist mobilisation.” Together with peasant movements in India, Brazil and Bolivia, the Mexican Zapatistas and the French Confédération Paysanne led by José Bové are named as part of a new mass International.

In their attitude towards peasant movements the Pabloites have swept aside more than a century of experience made by the Marxist movement on this question. The peasants and, in particular, the poorest and most oppressed layers in the countryside—farm workers and landless peasants—are important allies of the working class in the struggle for a socialist society. However, on its own, the peasantry is unable to develop a consistent anti-capitalist policy. This inability is directly related to the social status of peasants as small-scale producers.

“The peasant follows either the worker or the bourgeois,” Trotsky wrote in his book *The Permanent Revolution*. The “petty bourgeoisie’s lack of economic and political independence and its deep internal differentiation” constitute “an insurmountable obstacle on the road to the creation of a peasants’ party,” he added. (6)

A revolutionary alliance of workers and peasants was possible only under conditions in which the workers led the peasant masses, Trotsky insisted. The Russian revolution of 1917 confirmed this standpoint. At the high point of the revolution, the biggest peasant party, the Social Revolutionaries, allied itself firmly with the forces of bourgeois reaction, while the broad masses of poor peasants aligned themselves with the proletariat and the Bolsheviks. Experiences since then—in China, India, Latin America and many other regions of the world—have repeatedly confirmed Trotsky’s assessment. The peasantry has never proved capable of developing an independent revolutionary policy.

The organisation favoured by the Pabloites—the Mexican Zapatistas—is a case in point. They first came to public attention in 1994 after they had carried out armed battles with the Mexican army in the destitute Mexican province of Chiapas. Led by the former university lecturer Sebastian

Guillen, alias Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas were able to win support for their guerrilla war from layers of the desperate Indian peasant population in the region.

Seven years later, Subcomandante Marcos marched into Mexico City, where he was welcomed by Mexican president and former Coca Cola executive Vicente Fox and then fobbed off with a deal awarding some autonomy for native inhabitants. This agreement did absolutely nothing to alter capitalist market relations in Mexico, the country’s dependence on US imperialism, or the bitter poverty suffered by Mexican workers and peasants, including the Indian native population. Nevertheless, Subcomandante Marcos was greeted jubilantly by the petty-bourgeois left in Europe and America as a new source of hope.

Politically speaking, the French peasant leader José Bové presents an even more wretched figure. The former student radical, who had switched to farming and cultivating Roquefort cheese, came to public attention in 1999 when he demolished a McDonald’s restaurant in order to protest against American “junk food.” Since then he has been groomed and cultivated as a celebrity and welcome partner in talks with politicians—from socialists such as Francois Mitterrand and Lionel Jospin through to Jacques Chirac and the right-wing Gaullist Charles Pasqua, with whom he carried out a public debate shortly after the McDonald’s affair. Bové has taken up the concerns of French farmers in a manner that is entirely compatible with the defence of French trade interests—in particular, against the US. His stance, however, has nothing in common with a socialist perspective.

Overcoming “neo-liberalism”

Programmatically, the Pabloites have extensively adapted to the petty-bourgeois tendencies that they seek to recruit for a new “mass International.” In the documents of the Fifteenth World Congress, the struggle against “neo-liberalism” is continuously described as the central strategic task. The resolution over the “Tasks of the Fourth International” states: “The fight to defeat ‘neo-liberalism’ is at the heart of our political struggle.” Another part of the document refers to “the strategic task of defeating ‘social neo-liberalism.’ ”

In this way, the struggle against a certain form of capitalist economic policy is elevated to the central strategic axis, leaving open the possibility of supporting other types of capitalist economics—as is, in fact, done in practice by many of the candidates selected by the Pabloites for inclusion in their mass international.

The Pabloites make no attempt to examine the objective reasons for the expansion of neo-liberal economic policy into every corner of the world. The switch from the post-war Keynesian policies aimed at relative social equilibrium to a monetarist neo-liberal policy took place at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The move is closely linked to the names of Paul Volker, who in 1979 was nominated by US President Jimmy Carter to chair the US Federal Reserve Bank, Margaret Thatcher, who in the same year took over as prime minister in Great Britain, and Ronald Reagan, who took over from Carter as US president in 1981. Volker, Thatcher and Reagan, as well as the bourgeois elite who elevated these figures, were reacting to a profound crisis of the capitalist system.

The crisis had already begun by the end of the 1960s. It was expressed in falling rates of profit, growing indebtedness and rising inflation. The crisis led to the eruption of militant struggles by the working class that, combined with student protests and the movement against the Vietnam war, led to the downfall of right-wing governments in a number of countries.

The bourgeoisie reacted initially with social concessions that only

worsened the economic crisis. At the end of the 1970s, the bourgeoisie went on the offensive. To undercut the demands of the working class, Volcker deliberately precipitated a recession through a massive increase in interest rates. Thatcher and Reagan deregulated international financial markets in order to facilitate the transfer of capital to cheap-labour markets and create new areas for exploitation and a revival of profit rates.

The reformist organisations were unable to pose any alternative. Following his election to the post of president of France in 1981, François Mitterrand attempted to introduce a series of social reforms. These, however, rapidly foundered following an adverse reaction by international financial markets.

Trade unions organised one defeat after the other, by either openly betraying or isolating strike actions. In 1981 Reagan was able to impose a devastating defeat on the air traffic controllers' union, PATCO, which was abandoned by the US trade union federation, the AFL-CIO. The major strike in Europe, the one-year British miners' strike (1984-85), also ended in defeat because other trade unions and the Labour Party rejected an open confrontation with Thatcher. For his part, the leader of the miners, Arthur Scargill, a former Stalinist, avoided any political challenge to the trade union and labour bureaucracy.

The history of the last 20 years is littered with the political corpses of organisations and politicians who have promised the working class they would replace neo-liberalism with a more humane form of capitalism—and have failed miserably in the effort. The casualties include Lionel Jospin, Oskar Lafontaine (the architect of the current Social Democratic-Green Party coalition in Germany) and the Italian post-communists, as well as the German PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor party to the ruling Stalinist party in the former East Germany). The latest example is the government formed by the Brazilian Worker's Party (PT), in which the Pabloites have their own minister.

It has become increasingly clear that it is impossible to repulse the offensive launched against the working class without challenging the basis of the capitalist system. The claim that there is an alternative to "neo-liberalism" other than socialism only serves to feed illusions, divert working class resistance into a dead-end, and reconcile workers to bourgeois institutions. The disillusionment arising inevitably from such false policies is frequently exploited by right-wing organisations.

Against "avant-gardism" and "sectarianism"

While the Pabloites welcome with open arms opportunists and petty-bourgeois charlatans in their "mass International," they declare uncompromising war against "avant-gardism" and "sectarianism." They agitate in hysterical fashion against "dogmatism," "infallible leadership" and "revolutionary answers," without ever mentioning the names of the organisations they have in mind. This theme reoccurs persistently throughout the dozens of pages of resolutions and decisions of the Fifteenth World Congress.

The resolution on the "Tasks of the Fourth International" opposes "the conception of an enlightened, arrogant vanguard that parasites on or subjugates the movement." It warns against "sectarian radical currents that latch onto young people seeking strong revolutionary answers and a militant involvement." There are dozens of similar formulations to be found in the text.

By sectarianism, Marxists understand passive abstentionism and the inability to relate abstract principles to practical political tasks and struggles, combined with a lack of understanding of the real development of the class struggle. In the final analysis, sectarianism is the reverse side of opportunism. While the opportunist renounces theoretical propositions

and principles and swims with the prevailing political stream, the sectarian appeals to his abstract principles and refuses to enter the water. This is why, as Trotsky remarked vividly in an article on sectarianism, the sectarian "generally does not want to go swimming so as not to wet his principles. He sits on the shore and reads lectures on morality to the flood of the class struggle. But sometimes a desperate sectarian leaps headlong into the water, seizes hold of the centrist and helps him drown." (7)

The Pabloites interpret sectarianism in a very different sense. For them, it is the defence of principles and programmatic clarity, the refusal to subordinate one's politics to the level of political consciousness of the spontaneous movement, an irreconcilable hostility to opportunism—in short, everything characteristic of a revolutionary Marxist organisation.

Vercammen writes: "The choice for an organisation which claims to be revolutionary Marxist becomes very simple: to open up to the outside and to give a free rein to the internal dialectic (with its inevitable batch of heterodoxy, doubt and fragmentation), or to crush debate through the 'dogmatisation' of analyses and theory, to impose the 'correct' political line, to reinforce activist discipline, to crystallise an 'infallible leadership'."

The member of the Pabloite executive bureau turns everything upside down. It remains his secret how defending a correct political line can serve to "crush" debate. Anyone with some experience in the bureaucratic apparatuses of social democracy, Stalinism and the trade unions will be aware that the profound abhorrence towards any sort of principles on the part of these organisations is closely bound up with a systematic suppression of genuine democratic debate. The congresses of these organisations are inevitably characterised by bureaucratic manoeuvres, unprincipled tactics behind the scenes and attempts to intimidate, under conditions in which the bureaucracies are neither willing nor able to look reality in the face and honestly own up to their political intentions.

An "infallible leadership" will certainly never emerge in a Marxist organisation, but the political authority of its leadership is its most important asset. Such authority grows to the extent that the leadership is able to demonstrate its capacity to correctly assess political developments and foresee their consequences, to the extent that the leadership refuses to make—to quote Trotsky once again—"easy" and "comfortable" decisions, which deliver from cares today, but prepare a catastrophe on the morrow." (8) Vercammen's scorn for an infallible leadership is a cynical attempt to equate political clarity with the methods traditionally employed by Stalinists, who demonstrated their "infallibility" not with arguments but through the torture chambers of the KGB.

One thing, at least, is clear from the resolutions of the Pabloite International: while preaching openness and tolerance towards all sorts of opportunist currents, they know no such tolerance towards Marxist revolutionaries. One should not just interpret this as a hollow threat. It is a historical fact that the People's Front of the 1930s was bound up with the Moscow Trials and the persecution of Marxist revolutionaries across the globe. While the Stalinists, and eventually the anarchists and POUM, took up positions of responsibility in the bourgeois state in Spain, the Stalinist secret police was working in the background to eliminate anyone who threatened their reconciliation with the bourgeoisie through excessive demands or courageous acts—including members of the anarchists and the POUM.

The Pabloite Fifteenth World Congress took place against the background of a deep crisis of world capitalism. The Iraq war is in no small part a response to the deep social polarisation of US society, for which the ruling elite has no answer.

In Europe, the response of the bourgeoisie to the aggressive actions of the Bush government has been to develop its own programme of rearmament, while increasing its attacks on the working class and thereby intensifying the social crisis.

In earlier periods, the bourgeoisie was able to rely heavily on the

reformist workers' organisations in such crises, but today these have been largely discredited. Under these conditions, the Pabloite initiative for the construction of a new "mass International" constitutes an attempt to create a new mechanism to neutralise growing opposition from the working class and youth. Open to every sort of opportunism, the Pabloites declare unrelenting war on "sectarianism"—i.e., revolutionary Marxism.

The Pabloites are prepared to go to great lengths to defend bourgeois rule. This was clearly demonstrated in fresh fashion at the Fifteenth Congress. It was opened with fraternal greetings to Miguel Rossetto, a member of the official Brazilian section who is also a minister in the cabinet of President Lula and bears full responsibility for government policy. To the great relief of the Brazilian bourgeoisie and the International Monetary Fund, the Lula government has been able to temporarily diffuse the danger of revolutionary upheavals. These developments will be addressed in a further article.

To be continued.

Notes:

- 1) "Fifteenth World Congress of the Fourth International" by François Vercammen, *International Viewpoint*, 349, May 2003 (<http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2003/IV349/IV349%2006.htm>).
- 2) Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme*, New Park Publications, 1980, p 58.
- 3) "Role and Tasks of the Fourth International," *International Viewpoint*, 351/2, Summer 2003 (<http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2003/IV3512/IV3512%2006.htm>).
- 4) "A New World Situation," *International Viewpoint*, 351/2, Summer 2003 (<http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2003/IV3512/IV3512%2002.htm>)
- 5) Leon Trotsky, *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, New Park Publications, 1972, pp. 5-6.
- 6) Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, New Park Publications.
- 7) "Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International," *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935-36)*, New York 1977, p. 154.
- 8) *ibid.*, p. 152.



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