

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

Part six: the demoralised politics of Lutte Ouvrière

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The following is the sixth 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, part three on May 19, part four on May 22 and part five on May 25.

The Thirty Third Congress of Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle—LO), held in December 2003, reaffirmed the organization’s decision to put up joint lists of candidates with the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR).

The resolution on this issue speaks volumes about LO’s fundamental outlook. (1) Behind its revolutionary rhetoric lie scepticism, pessimism and a large degree of fatalism. According to LO, the electorate is demoralized and would be even more demoralized if the “extreme left” put up separate lists. The words “demoralized” and “disappointed” appear several times in the short text of 10 paragraphs.

The resolution begins by expressing doubts about the polls from the previous autumn, which gave the lists of LO and LCR a similar percentage of votes as the total won in the presidential elections of 2002—about 10 percent. While it was “impossible to predict the reaction of the electorate to the development of the situation in the 2004 elections,” the resolution states, “political considerations” led the party to expect a result of around 3 percent.

“It may appear paradoxical, but these considerations led us to propose an electoral alliance with the Ligue last June,” the resolution continues. “Let’s not kid ourselves about the fact that the electorate is demoralized. This is a result both of the social and economic situation as well as the open attacks and the cynical talk of the Chirac-Raffarin government.”

Under these conditions, the resolution states, two factors could come into play: “First, the vote for the National Front [FN] will remain the same or even rise, so that, with maybe 20 percent of the votes or even more in individual areas, the party will certainly reach the second round of the regional elections almost everywhere.” Many of the poorest workers, embittered toward both the left and the right, would vote for the FN.

The second possible factor was a strengthening of the Socialist Party (PS). The present government, LO writes, was so hated that “many voters might conclude that it had been a mistake to vote for the lists of the Communist Party, the Greens or the extreme left during the first round of the presidential elections, because this splintering of votes caused Jospin’s downfall. Therefore, there might be a strong tendency for voters to cast ballots for the PS, in order to deliver a blow to the right wing and return the Socialists to power.”

Only one possibility was definitely ruled out by LO: any growth in its own vote. The two phenomena mentioned above, it stated, “threaten to flatten the extreme left.”

The electoral alliance with the LCR was then justified as a defensive

measure to limit the damage. Separate from the LCR, the LO would “doubtlessly not receive a fewer number of votes...but if this number was small, many of our supporters, while having voted for us, might say that because of our disunity we disappointed them and lost a lot of our electorate... However, if we stand together, our poor result will be seen as an objective fact and not as a result of our own behaviour.”

One should not forget, the resolution goes on to warn, “that a bad result—especially if it seems to be due to our disunity—will further contribute to the demoralisation of our own voters, because it might induce them to conclude that nothing can be expected either from the official left or the extreme left, for whom they voted against all odds.”

Just in case there remained some enthusiasm for the election campaign of LO, despite all these bleak scenarios, the resolution concluded by putting a final damper on the reader’s spirits: “Our position is not inspired by the hope of getting mandates, but, on the contrary, of fending off an extremely negative result.”

The culture of opportunism

This resolution is remarkable in two respects. First, its assessment of the mood within the working class is grossly off the mark. Second, it displays a lack of any political initiative. LO is convinced that its own activity is without significance, that there is nothing that can be done, and that further “demoralization” can be prevented only by joining ranks with the LCR—whose opportunist character is obvious to LO.

The claim that the working class is demoralized and leaning towards the right is clearly false. In recent years, the French workers have repeatedly demonstrated that, despite the vile role of the trade unions and the parties of the official left, they are prepared to fight the attacks of both left- and right-wing governments—beginning with the strike movement of November-December 1995, up to the latest such movement in the spring of 2003.

Furthermore, the three million votes cast for the candidates of the “radical left” in the presidential elections of 2002 can hardly be interpreted as a sign of demoralization. Even the result of this year’s regional elections, despite the LO’s defeatist stance, was much more favourable than the LO had anticipated. The joint election lists of LO and LCR received more than a million votes, which totals a national average of 4.6 percent. This was despite the fact that, due to the new 10 percent hurdle, the LO-LCR candidates had only a minimal chance of reaching the second round and actually winning mandates.

The demoralization so profusely described by LO prevails not so much

in the working class as in the milieu of the trade unions, the Stalinists and the Social Democrats, whose hopes are dashed by the eruption of open class struggles. This is the milieu towards which LO is oriented. In this respect, LO does not differ from the LCR, even if LO's opportunism takes somewhat different forms.

Outwardly, LO touts its "closeness" to the working class, engaging in a virtual cult of workerism. The form of address, "Travailleuses et travailleurs" ("Working brothers and sisters"), with which LO leader Arlette Laguiller opens every one of her speeches has all but become the organization's trademark. Many LO members gave up their university studies and have worked in factories for decades in order to stay "close" to the workers.

This orientation to the factories has been accompanied by an adaptation to the most primitive forms of trade union consciousness. The factory newspapers and leaflets, the production and distribution of which has formed the essence of LO's work for 50 years, rarely address any political issues. They consist of information about the particular factory and a general editorial by Laguiller. This editorial usually explains to the workers, in an indignant tone, that they are being exploited by the bosses and betrayed by the government, which—scandal of scandals!—stands on the side of the bosses. International events or political issues that lie beyond the immediate horizon of the "world of labor" are rarely mentioned.

Lutte Ouvrière, the organization's official weekly paper, doesn't go much further. Most articles are written in a banal language and hardly ever attempt to comprehensively explore a particular topic. Workers who are seeking in depth information in order to form their own political opinions will find nothing of use in this paper.

One searches in vain for any criticism of the unions in LO's publications and statements. During the strike movement of November-December 1995, David Walsh, cultural editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, had the opportunity to witness the conduct of LO activists at several strike rallies. While the trade union bureaucracy worked to stifle the strike movement, the LO supporters acted as their loyal assistants. As one of them explained to Walsh: "The workers do not go beyond the immediate issues. The unions are ahead of the workers; they're in the lead."

Walsh summarized his impressions of the LO and other organizations of the radical left at that time with the words: "A truly remarkable feature of these circles is what might be called the culture of opportunism. One did not meet with a single member of the LO, the LCR or their periphery who could imagine raising an issue or standing on a principle that was not already in the air and more or less accepted by most workers." (2)

This was confirmed several years later by Laguiller in an interview with the WSWS prior to the 2002 presidential elections. When we asked her why LO had not gone onto the political offensive and taken up the WSWS' proposal for a campaign for an active boycott of the second round of the elections, she replied: "We always put forward proposals that we think are in line with the relationship of forces and with what the working class is prepared to do in a given country." (3)

This formula amounts to the canonization of existing relations. An organization that restricts itself to those demands already accepted by the majority of workers is not revolutionary, but rather, in the strictest sense of the word, conservative. LO does not believe that a courageous, forward-looking perspective can ever find a response in the working class and thus change the objective situation. It invariably justifies its own inactivity and passivity with the alleged immaturity of the masses. "The relation of forces is unfavorable," "there is no mobilization of the working class in the form of struggles," "our organization is too weak"—these are LO's answers to questions about their own initiative.

Trotsky had nothing but contempt for references to the "relation of forces" as justifications for one's own passivity. In an article dealing with such arguments, he stated: "The development of the revolution precisely

consists of the incessant and rapid change in the relationship of forces under the impact of the changes in the consciousness of the proletariat, the attraction of the backward layers to the advanced, the growing assurance of the class in its own strength. The vital mainspring in this process is the party, just as the vital mainspring in the mechanism of the party is its leadership. The role and the responsibility of the leadership in a revolutionary epoch is colossal..." (4)

The LO totally rejects the role and responsibility of the leadership. This is the red thread that runs through the entire history of this tendency and is reflected in many of its documents.

Thus, a resolution on the "programmatic foundations of our policies," passed by the party's congress in December 2003, explicitly rejects the call for the building of a "workers' mass party," and justifies this position in the following manner: "A party that advocates the revolutionary transformation of society could only become a mass party in connection with a revolutionary upswing, if the working class itself is convinced of the necessity to take political power... During normal times, the majority of workers are not revolutionary. On the contrary, the masses are reformist, and the necessity of a radical political change takes hold of them only during critical periods. Outside of such periods, one can win only a minority of labor to revolutionary ideas." (5)

Again, things are stood on their head and the party's own responsibility is denied. The living process of revolution is replaced by abstract speculation about the absence of a "revolutionary upswing," the party's own passivity is justified with the "reformist" thinking of the masses. LO rejects the perspective of a revolutionary mass party by pointing out that the working class is not yet convinced of the necessity to take political power. But how can workers ever understand this necessity if a revolutionary party does not openly work for it?

LO, of course, declares its commitment to "revolutionary ideas." It advocates a socialist society without exploitation, oppression and war and, in contrast to the LCR, formally upholds the "dictatorship of the proletariat." But there is no inner connection between this maximum program and its daily activities. Socialism is a perspective for the far future, while the party's daily work is based on the presumption that "the masses are reformist" and that only those demands are acceptable "which the working class is prepared to follow"—that is, demands of a purely trade unionist, reformist nature.

The futility of this perspective is emerging ever more clearly and is demonstrated by the general decline of the trade unions and reformist organizations. The contradictions of world capitalism, most sharply expressed in the eruption of American imperialism, have all but eliminated the capacity of the capitalist system to enact social reforms. Workers, above all in the private sector, are less and less prepared to fight for limited economic demands because the small chances of success do not justify all of the sacrifices and risks bound up with such struggles, and because they do not trust the trade unions. However, they are all the more ready to adopt more far-reaching political initiatives, a phenomenon that was clearly expressed in the large numbers participating in demonstrations against the National Front and against the Iraq war.

LO, whose conception of the class struggle is restricted to its most limited economic forms, interprets this development as demoralization. It blames the masses for the failure of reformism, not the reformist parties and trade unions, which paralyze and sabotage mass struggles. This is the source of LO's pessimism. When it speaks about the demoralization of the voters, it is speaking about its own demoralization. The end of class compromise has undermined the political support for its opportunist conceptions.

Advances toward the state

Along with the LCR, LO reacts to the failure of social reformism and the breakup of social compromise by making advances towards the state. This is expressed most clearly in its position towards a question that has dominated domestic politics in France for the past several months—the newly enacted law forbidding Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in schools.

LO explicitly supports this law. In several articles and editorials it came out in favor of the ban and even accused the government of inconsistency in its implementation. On March 6, International Women's Day, Laguiller marched in a demonstration against the headscarf alongside Nicole Guedj, a member of the right-wing UMP who is an official in the Raffarin government and served as advisor to Chirac on youth issues in the 2002 election campaign.

The law against the display of “ostentatious” religious symbols in schools, which passed the National Assembly by a large majority in February 2004 and takes effect in September, strengthens the repressive powers of the state and curtails freedom of religion.

The government presents the law as a measure to protect the principle of secularism, i.e., the separation of church and state. This attempt is ridiculous, not least because the government is actively engaged in strengthening religious institutions as an instrument of social control. Last year, interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy, himself an active Catholic, called into being the National Muslim Council, (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman), in order to more closely integrate the Islamic religion into the structures of the state. The Catholic Church, which dominates private educational institutions, enjoys the full backing of the government.

The reactionary nature of the law becomes most obvious, however, when one analyzes the social issues lying behind the conflict over the headscarf. The desperate conditions in the suburbs, where many immigrants live, and the fact that these have been all but abandoned by the official workers' organizations, have caused a section of youth to turn towards Islam, which they mistakenly regard as a radical alternative to existing society. Some of these youth have attempted to force young girls to adopt reactionary Islamic behavior and dress rules. If they refused to wear a headscarf they could be subjected to intimidation and violent attacks—a fact much publicized during the headscarf debate.

However, such backward religious prejudices cannot be overcome by repressive measures of the state, much less so if these come from a government that bears the main responsibility for the terrible social situation prevailing in the suburbs. Amongst youth who are confronted with police harassment and state repression every day, a discriminatory law will have the opposite effect. Religious backwardness and prejudice can be overcome only in the context of a socialist offensive by the working class.

At any rate, the real concern of the government is not the fight against religious chauvinism. It makes use of the headscarf law to divert attention from its own reactionary social policies and divert opposition into different channels, namely, against the Muslim population. In this, it has been partly successful.

In the National Assembly, almost all Socialist Party and many Communist Party deputies voted in favor of the law, in a resurrection of the “republican front” that had secured Chirac's overwhelming presidential election victory in 2002. Outside of parliament, several liberal and feminist groups supported the government's draft with the justification that it supposedly protected women's rights. LO was prominent among these groups.

In September 2003, an article in its party newspaper declared: “The issue here is not the ‘right’ of some to wear a headscarf, but the right of thousands of young girls and young women to make use of the ban on the headscarf in order to oppose the reactionary restrictions that their environment tries to force upon them.” (6)

Over the following month, LO expressed concern that a law limited to a

ban on “conspicuous” religious symbols might not go far enough: “However, what is a ‘discrete’ headscarf? Even a ‘small headscarf’ that does not cover the hair and the ears is a symbol of the repression of women.”

LO insisted on a total ban: “Indeed, the wearing of headscarves at schools must be forbidden.” The law, it said, should guarantee that “the wearing of headscarves, even if they are ‘small’ or ‘discrete’, be banned on the premises of all school institutions,” with teachers compelled to enforce it. LO wrote: “All teachers would then have to make sure that the ban is respected, and the instruction would have to explicitly insist on this obligatory enforcement.” (7)

There could be no clearer expression of support for the Chirac government and its repressive law!

LO's reaction to the resistance of the Iraqi population to the American and British occupation is similar to its position on the headscarf debate. While growing popular resistance has thrown the governments in Washington and London into a deep crisis, LO has denounced one of its symbols, the Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr, as the “worst enemy” of the Iraqi people. The policy of imperialism, LO wrote, was “to drive the masses into the arms of a reactionary Imam like al Sadr, i.e., their worst enemy.” (8)

This same theme runs through all of LO's statements on this issue. The occupying powers and the resistance against it are equally condemned. The main accusation LO raises against the occupiers is invariably that they strengthen Islamic fundamentalism. One article states: “Whether or not the Western occupation is continued, the Iraqi masses risk being caught between two fronts—between the armed gangs of imperialism and its fundamentalist opponents.” (9)

This reaction to the Iraqi resistance reveals more about the political orientation of LO than all the lip service it pays to socialism. The Iraqi people have reacted to the criminal imperialist war by putting up heroic resistance to the occupation. In doing so, they have employed the ideological and political means at their disposal. Given the decades long despotic rule of the nationalist Baath regime and the treacherous role of the Iraqi Communist Party in supporting it, the domination of the most radical wing of the Shiite clerics comes as no surprise.

LO's reaction to this development is not that of revolutionaries, but of frightened liberals. Revolutionaries support the Iraqi resistance, they call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the imperialist occupiers, they mobilize the international—including the American—working class for this aim, and in this way undermine the influence of the Islamists, whose position is, of necessity, inconsistent and half-hearted.

LO, on the other hand, reacts to the growth of violent resistance by denouncing its leaders and proclaiming that it makes no difference to the Iraqi masses “whether the Western occupation is continued or not.” While not going so far as to demand the replacement of the present occupying forces by UN troops, LO comes very close to such a position.

This same outlook of the frightened liberal characterizes its position in the headscarf debate. In reaction to the explosion of social antagonisms in the suburbs—which takes contradictory and partly reactionary forms, given the miserable roles that the Socialist Party and, particularly, the Communist Party have played there in the past—the LO calls for a strong state. In this respect, Laguiller's united front with the UMP politician Guedj was symbolic. Here, too, a courageous political offensive would undermine the influence of Islamism, which can offer no answer to the social crisis.

The move of LO to the right is no accident. Just as in the case of the LCR, its social and political physiognomy has developed over many decades. This will be dealt with in the last and concluding part in this series.

To be continued.

Notes:

(1) "Motion: Elections 2004, pour des listes communes LO-LCR", *Lutte de Classe* No. 77, Décembre 2003-Janvier 2004 (<http://www.union-communiste.org/?FR-archp-show-2003-1-515-2740-x.html>)

(2) *French Workers in Revolt*, IW Books, 1996, Pp. 50,55

(3) An interview with *Lutte Ouvrière* leader Arlette Laguiller and comment by Peter Schwarz, *World Socialist Web Site*, 10 May 2002,

(4) "Class, Party and Leadership", August 20, 1940

(5) "Les fondements programmatiques de notre politique", *Lutte de Classe* No. 77, Décembre 2003-Janvier 2004, (<http://www.union-communiste.org/?FR-archp-show-2003-1-515-2735-x.html>)

(6) "Port du voile: une pression réactionnaire", *Lutte Ouvrière* No. 1833 du 19 septembre 2003 (<http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/article.php?LO=1833&ARTICLE=2>)

(7) "Une loi pur interdire le port du voile? " *Lutte Ouvrière* No. 1838 du 24 octobre 2003 (<http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/article.php?LO=1838&ARTICLE=6>)

(8) "Irak: l'occupation alimente l'escalade intégriste", *Lutte Ouvrière* No. 1862 du 9 avril 2004 (<http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/article.php?LO=1862&ARTICLE=35>)

(9) "Irak—La montée de l'intégrisme, sous-produit d'une sale guerre", *Lutte Ouvrière* No. 1861 du 2 avril 2004 (<http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/article.php?LO=1861&ARTICLE=40>)



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