

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

Part seven: Lutte Ouvrière and the Fourth International

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The following is the final 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, part five on May 25 and part six on May 26.

Although Lutte Ouvrière (LO) claims to be a Trotskyist organisation it has never joined the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky.

In a brochure published in 1988 on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International, it justifies its stance as follows: “In order to freely pursue and defend a policy which rejects any compromise on the fundamental issue of the political and organisational independence of the revolutionary proletariat, Lutte Ouvrière was constructed independently from the various organisations which base themselves on the Fourth International.” (1)

In a conference resolution last year, LO explains its rejection of the Fourth International by saying: “The various Trotskyist movements posing as an International disguise the fact that, apart from the ridiculous character of such charades, they undertake no attempts to anchor themselves in the working class of their countries—i.e., that they do not strive to construct a revolutionary communist party.” (2)

These statements summarise the world outlook of LO—its deeply rooted nationalism and opportunism.

Marxists understand the “independence of the proletariat” to mean its independence from the ideology, politics and parties of the bourgeoisie and their petty bourgeois offshoots. This independence is the result of a constant struggle against all forms of opportunism, which dominate the national workers’ movement. Such a struggle can only be conducted by means of an international programme and an international organisation. The building of the Fourth International is the basis and the precondition for the political and organisational independence of the proletariat.

LO replaces this political criterion with a sociological one. For it, “political independence” means being physically anchored in the national labour milieu. The fight against the penetration of petty bourgeois ideology is regarded as a purely organisational, “physical” task. Thus in 1966, LO told the International Committee: “Our organisation was born precisely of the necessity to separate physically from the petty bourgeois environment with its Social Democratic practices which made up the Trotskyist organisations, in France at the beginning of the war, to be able to recruit, educate and form cadres capable of putting into practice Leninist and Trotskyist organisational practices, and were not content with ‘Bolshevik verbiage’ covering up opportunist practice.” (3)

LO regards an International as a “ridiculous charade,” which prevents political tendencies from becoming “anchored in the working class of their country,” whereby it understands by “working class” the trade union milieu and the lower ranks of the Communist Party. In this way, in the

name of the “political independence of the proletariat,” it justifies a nationalist orientation standing considerably closer to the political views of Stalinism than to those of Trotsky.

Addressing the Lutte Ouvrières of his day, Trotsky insisted categorically on the necessity for an international orientation and an international party. This was one of the most important teachings he had drawn from the struggle against Stalinism and its nationalist programme. In *The Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky emphasised: “Internationalism is no abstract principle but a theoretical and political reflection of the character of world economy, of the world development of the productive forces and the world scale of the class struggle.” (4) This internationalism finds its organisational expression in the Fourth International. No national organisation, Trotsky repeatedly stressed, can develop and maintain a revolutionary perspective if it does not work within the framework and under the discipline of an international organisation, no matter how loudly it swears allegiance to internationalism.

In an article about the Independent Labour Party in Britain, a centrist party, which like LO subordinated fundamental international questions to the tactical requirements of national work, Trotsky wrote, “The International is first of all a *programme*, and a system of *strategic, tactical and organisational* methods that flow from it.... Without a Marxist International, national organisations, even the most advanced, are doomed to narrowness, vacillation and helplessness.” (5)

He later underlined the same point in a letter to the so-called Lee Group, which for factional reasons refused to give up its independent organisational existence and, together with the other Trotskyist tendencies in England, join the Fourth International: “A revolutionary political grouping of serious significance can only be maintained and developed on the basis of great principles. Only the Fourth International embodies and represents these principles. A national group can only maintain a consistent revolutionary course when it is firmly linked with its co-thinkers all over the world in a common organisation and regularly collaborates with them politically and theoretically. Only the Fourth International is such an organisation. All purely national groupings, all those who reject international organisation, control and discipline are in essence reactionary.” (6)

The origins of Lutte Ouvrière

The Lee Group justified its distance from the Fourth International and its insistence on preserving organisational independence by pointing to its proletarian composition and the effectiveness of its organisational

work—reasons that recall LO’s arguments today. With LO, however, even these reasons are made up afterwards. When LO’s predecessor organisation broke with the French Trotskyists in 1939, such arguments did not play a role. The split was due to purely subjective, narrow clique considerations.

LO attributes its origin to a Romanian named David Korner (alias Barta), who joined the Left Opposition in 1933 in France and was active in the following years in both Romania and France. In 1939, the Daladier government banned all Trotskyist organizations, and shortly thereafter, Barta and three of his close friends left the Parti Ouvrier Internationaliste, one of the two Trotskyist parties that existed at that time in France. He did this “for completely apolitical reasons,” as long-standing LO leader Robert Barcia (alias Hardy) confirmed in his recently published autobiography. (7) He had been falsely accused of stopping the publication of a leaflet and angrily walked out of a party meeting and broke with the party.

One year later, Barta began to accuse the French Trotskyists of nationalist views. These accusations can hardly be taken seriously, in light of the enormously difficult conditions under which they were working—they were being pursued by the Nazi occupiers and the Stalinists, and were nevertheless active in the Resistance and among German soldiers. They strongly recall the ultra-left arguments with which the Spanish Trotskyist Grandizio Munis attacked the behaviour of James P. Cannon and other leaders of the Socialist Workers party in 1942 who were in court in the US because of their opposition to the imperialist war. (8)

Barta’s group hardly developed any political work during the war. One of their principal activities was running reading circles, in which the works of Marx and Lenin were studied. Hardy, who made contact with the group towards the end of the war, said he did not notice at first that he was involved with Trotskyists, regarding them as members of the Communist Party. This did not prevent the group from being persecuted by the Stalinists. Shortly after liberation, one member, Mathieu Bucholz, was kidnapped and murdered by Stalinists.

When the French Trotskyists united in one organisation in 1944 at the first European congress of the Fourth International, which took place under conditions of illegality, Barta refused to participate, arguing that the nationalist mistakes at the beginning of war would first have to be analysed. He founded his own party, the Union Communiste.

LO and the International Committee

LO’s constant objection to the Fourth International is that its social composition is petty bourgeois, which prevents it from becoming “anchored” in the working class.

In the LO brochure on the 50th anniversary of the Fourth International, it states: “But the main weakness of the new International was not its low numbers, but rather the political profile of the members it attracted, i.e. their social and political roots, their past activities, their relationship to workers and the workers movement.... The overwhelming majority were former intellectuals whose political past lay in the ranks of Social Democracy, not in the Communist Parties of the Third International.” (9)

These statements are factually wrong and politically cynical. Similar arguments could also have been made against Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and many other Marxists, who were also former intellectuals. The Fourth International consisted mainly of cadres who remained true to their aims. Among them in France, in the US, in Ceylon and in many other countries were numerous outstanding members of the working class. The Fourth International did not have a mass membership—a result of the devastating defeats that Stalinism had inflicted

upon the working class, including the murder of a whole generation of revolutionaries in the Moscow Trials.

In reality, LO’s hostility is directed not at the social composition of the Fourth International but at the irreconcilable struggle against revisionism it conducted, and which it continues to conduct in its current embodiment, led by the International Committee. In the name of a *physical* delineation from the petty bourgeoisie, LO refuses to fight the *ideological and political* pressure that imperialism exerts on the revolutionary party through petty bourgeois tendencies. This came clearly to light when it participated as an observer in the Third World Congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International in London in 1966.

The Barta group disintegrated in 1949, and was reconstituted in 1956 as Voix Ouvrière (Workers Voice). (It adopted the name Lutte Ouvrière in 1968, after Voix Ouvrière, like all the other supposedly Trotskyist organisations, was banned by the French government.) The work of VO was concentrated on distributing factory newspapers in the Paris area. In 1959, it began to cooperate with the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), the French section of the International Committee. This cooperation was mainly limited to practical questions. Joint factory newspapers were published and distributed. In his autobiography, Hardy, who led the group after Barta left, tells how he regularly took PCI leader Pierre Lambert in his car to political activities. He also reports how they engaged in common defensive battles against the Stalinists, who were notorious for their violence.

In 1966, a Voix Ouvrière delegation travelled to the congress of the International Committee in London. They had decided to participate, because they falsely assumed the International Committee had abandoned its own history. “We believe,” explained the delegation to the congress, “that the main positive thing in the IC declaration is the recognition of the fact that the Fourth International no longer exists and that it is necessary to rebuild it. In the last analysis, it is this recognition which brings us to participate in the IC conference.” (10)

Lambert’s PCI shared some responsibility for this false assumption. During the 1960s, the PCI increasingly placed a question mark over the significance of the struggle against Pabloism. The PCI played only a passive role in the dispute with the American SWP, which had reunited with the Pabloites in 1963. The struggle against the betrayal in Ceylon was primarily led by the British section, the Socialist Labour League, under the leadership of Gerry Healy.

The PCI was also responsible for the formulation “reconstruction of the Fourth International,” which VO found so attractive. The deeper meaning of this formulation consists in proclaiming a general political amnesty. If the Fourth International has failed, then the political struggles it has conducted are of no consequence and the struggle against Pabloism has no real significance. Everyone has made mistakes, let’s forget all the past differences and start again at the beginning!

VO put forward precisely such a view at the congress. “Pabloism, in the form of liquidationism, was but the finished expression of this petty-bourgeois opportunism of *all* sections of the International,” it explained. “Pabloism was not the cause of the failure and the demise of the Fourth International; it was its product.” (11) Only three years after the American SWP had united with the Pabloites on the basis of uncritical support for Fidel Castro, and two years after the historical betrayal in Ceylon, (12) VO maintained: “This importance attributed to Pabloism is pure bluff and not serious analysis.” (13)

If the International Committee had accepted this view, the inevitable consequence would have been its political disarmament and liquidation; and the congress opposed it decisively. At the request of the British delegation, the congress expressly recognised the continuity of the Fourth International. The commission called upon to draft a resolution to this end stated: “The conference affirms that the Fourth International has not degenerated. The historical continuity of the Fourth International founded

in 1938 by Leon Trotsky, reformed in the years 1943-46, which Pabloism attempted to destroy in 1950-53, has been maintained since 1953 by the struggle waged by the Trotskyist organisations grouped within the International Committee.” (14)

Whereupon VO left the congress. It did not want to join the struggle against Pabloite revisionism under any circumstances. Hardy, who had given up his job to participate in the congress, is still resentful 37 years later, writing in his memoirs: “Once again and for the umpteenth time, the groups present that had been invited to the congress put the International Secretariat (of Pierre Frank) on trial. ‘Pabloism’ was made responsible for the failure of the clerical worker’s strike in France in 1953, for the failure of revolutionary struggles in Eastern countries, not to speak of the struggles in colonial countries. All this was Pablo’s mistake. And the whole thing was propped up with apparent theoretical considerations. But not a word about the real roots of the failure of the Fourth International and its incapacity to intervene in social and political developments.” (15)

The third IC congress ended any form of collaboration between LO and the International Committee. Frustrated, Hardy threw himself into the arms of the Pabloites, with whom, as he writes, he now shares “a history longer and richer of micro events” than with the International Committee. It is a history full of “fractures and reconciliations,” whereby LO is “responsible for all the reconciliations, whereas they were responsible for nearly every fracture.” (16)

In 1968, LO suggested, without success, to the Pabloites Pierre Frank and Alain Krivine of the LCR, that they form a united party of the extreme left. In 1969, LO participated as observers in a world congress of the United Secretariat, which decided to pursue a rural guerrilla tactic in Latin America. LO apparently rejected this course; however, this did not prevent it from participating in two further congresses of the United Secretariat and making further unification offers to the LCR as well as conducting joint activities. LO also enjoyed relations with the Argentine MAS of Nahuel Moreno, which had developed its own variant of Pabloite opportunism, and that only ended with Moreno’s death in 1987.

The history of LO has confirmed Trotsky’s warning that “all those who reject international organisation, control and discipline are in essence reactionary.” Faced with the collapse of the post-war class compromise, its anti-internationalism, which is justified by the need to be physically “anchored” in the national workers’ movement, its indifference to political and theoretical questions, and its disdain for the struggle against revisionism and Pabloism drive LO inevitably to the right.

Concluded

Notes :

- 1) Cercle Léon Trotsky, “50 ans après la fondation de la IVe internationale,” 1988, p. 28.
- 2) “Les fondements programmatiques de notre politique,” *Lutte de Classe*, No. 77, Décembre 2003-Janvier 2004.
- 3) *Trotskyism versus revisionism*, Vol. 5, p. 71, London, 1975.
- 4) Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, p. 9.
- 5) *Trotsky’s Writings on Britain*, Vol. 3, pp. 112-113.
- 6) *Documents of the Fourth International*, New York, 1973, p. 270.
- 7) Robert Barcia (alias Hardy), *La véritable histoire de Lutte ouvrière*, Paris, 2003, p. 84.
- 8) David North, *The Heritage We Defend*, Chapter 5.
- 9) “50 ans après la fondation de la IVe internationale,” 1988, pp.19-20.
- 10) *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Vol. 5, p. 75, London, 1975.
- 11) *ibid.* p. 71.
- 12) See part 4 of this series.
- 13) *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Vol. 5, p. 73.
- 14) *ibid.* p. 30.
- 15) Robert Barcia, *op. cit.* p. 200.
- 16) *ibid.* p. 280.



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