

Lutte Ouvrière festival in Paris

Silence on the Iraq war and defence of the headscarf ban

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Lutte Ouvrière (LO) held its annual festival on May 28-30 on the outskirts of Paris. The organisation, which claims to be Trotskyist, is one of the main radical left tendencies in France. In 2002, its presidential candidate Arlette Laguiller received 6 percent of the vote. LO is standing a joint slate in the European Union (EU) elections on June 13 with the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR).

The three-day event, which attracts several thousand LO members and supporters, is held in the park of a small chateau in the Oise Valley and is mainly dedicated to recreation. The site is dominated by food stalls with specialities from different regions, rock concerts, cultural meetings and other entertainments. Just one corner is reserved for political debate. Here various other political organisations are allowed to have stalls. In three forums, one-hour debates are held on various topics, organised either by LO or invited groups.

Each afternoon, all activities are interrupted for half an hour for Arlette Laguiller to deliver a speech from the central stage. This forms the political high point of the festival, and of LO's European election campaign. On Sunday, when Olivier Besancenot of the LCR spoke alongside Laguiller, several television and radio stations sent outside broadcast teams to cover the occasion. The press was also there in force.

Remarkably, the speeches delivered by Laguiller and Besancenot did not take up any current political questions. In particular, they did not make any mention of the Iraq war, which has dominated international headlines for more than a year. Both speeches did not go beyond what an average union official might say at a May Day rally.

Laguiller's first speech was limited to complaints against the employers and the government. "Above all, we want to condemn the situation that employers have forced upon working people, and successive governments, who act on behalf of the big employers," she said.

The only remedy, concluded Laguiller, was an intensified social struggle. "To stop this offensive [of the employers] far more is needed than casting a ballot," she said. "What is necessary is that workers again take up a social struggle. It is necessary for them to use their considerable collective strength. What is necessary is a broad struggle, big strikes, general strikes, which unite all the living forces of the sphere of labour, beyond the individual

employment sectors and enterprises."

If one follows Laguiller's argument, then nothing is standing in the way of a return to a policy of social reforms—except the working class's lack of readiness to fight. "Who is supposed to believe that all these companies, whose profits are booming, are unable to increase the purchasing power of workers?" she asked. "They could do it, but they will only do so when they are forced to." Later, she stated, "Business makes enough profits to prevent mass sackings."

Laguiller only dealt with Europe at the end of her speech. All she had to say on the topic was that workers everywhere confront the same problems and had to struggle more: "On a European level, as in this country, the key to the future is the ability of the working class to regain its self-confidence, to again find its fighting courage to take away the employers' uncontrolled power over the economy."

In her speech on Sunday, she repeated the same ideas, saying, "All this [unemployment, poverty, etc.] will only stop if workers resist through collective action. There are no other means against the employers' offensive, there are no other means to stop the government's anti-working class measures than collective struggle."

Laguiller is 64 years old and has been politically active since her youth. Thus, her efforts to limit the fight against the attacks of the government and the employers to trade union struggles cannot be dismissed as naïveté. She consciously tries to prevent the working class making a political development.

In light of recent experiences, her statement that a "social" offensive could overcome the problems of poverty and unemployment is patently absurd. For years, workers' attempts to defend their rights and achievements have encountered two fundamental obstacles: the international character of the modern enterprises, which prove increasingly insensitive to national trade union pressure, and the treacherous role of the official workers' parties and the trade unions. In France, especially, there is no lack of social struggles. Millions of workers have demonstrated their readiness to defend social rights and achievements. But the official left parties and the trade unions have consistently led strikes and protests to defeat, boycotted them, or taken them down a dead-end road.

A political break with these reformist organisations is therefore

the precondition for any successful offensive. The working class needs an international, socialist strategy; there is no other way of effectively opposing the mounting attacks of capital. LO and the LCR try to prevent such a political break. Laguiller's statement that the employers' offensive can be prevented through "social" (i.e., purely trade union) struggles amounts to rehabilitating the reformism of the trade unions and the official left wing parties—no matter how much she criticises the "neo-liberal politics" of the former government of the left.

During the big strike movements of recent years, LO and the LCR always stood loyally behind the trade union bureaucracy and blocked any criticism of its course. Last spring, when millions took part in strikes and demonstrations against the pension reforms of the conservative government, LO vehemently rejected the demand for a general strike.

This attitude also explains the strange situation in which neither Laguiller nor Besancenot mentioned the Iraq war, although the whole world is talking about little else. The changed world situation that lies behind this war—the hegemonic strivings of the US; the reemergence of open colonialism; the fight to redivide the world—have removed the basis for any perspective of gradually improving social conditions within a national framework. European governments of both right and left are reacting to the mounting pressure of the US by increasing their own military spending and intensifying their attacks on the working class.

After delivering her speech, we asked Laguiller what effect the crisis of the American government would have on the political situation in Europe. She evidently did not know what to do with the question. "I can't really answer that," was her first reaction.

She then approached the question exclusively from the aspect of how the war had contributed to "mobilising" the population. She said that in some countries that had supported the war, this had a direct influence on the domestic political situation. "However, in those European countries that did not go into Iraq, this was inevitably less the case, because the population had less reason to demonstrate continuously," she said. "There was no identical reaction at a European level. It differed from country to country."

This answer not only shows a complete lack of understanding of the dramatic consequences of the crisis of American imperialism for Europe's internal equilibrium; it also shows that LO has no fundamental objections to President Jacques Chirac's foreign policy. The French government did not support the Iraq war, but its attitude was from the beginning determined by considerations of how French imperialism could best defend its own interests in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

It is characteristic of LO that it also supports the eastward expansion of the European Union—another foreign policy project of French (and German) imperialism. Under the heading "Do not fear expansion," an extensive LO leaflet on the European elections says, "The expansion of Europe, despite all its limitations, represents incontestable progress." The rest of the leaflet contains no clear line and to a large extent comprises unconnected anecdotes.

LO admits that European Union expansion primarily serves the interests of the large enterprises, but adds, "The unification, at present still incomplete, will become complete in some years time

and the weight of the working class and workers in general will increase in Europe, enabling them to exert greater pressure on the public powers and the chiefs of finances."

LO completely ignores the fact that a socialist Europe can develop only in a political struggle against the institutions of the EU, which today is spearheading attacks on the social and political rights of the working class.

There was only one political question that really gave rise to heated debate at the LO event—the law recently passed banning the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls in school. LO supports this law unreservedly, despite Laguiller's concession that it was passed by "one of the most reactionary governments we have ever known."

Asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* why she had supported this law, demonstrating alongside Chirac's Secretary of State Nicole Guedj, Laguiller answered that she stood "on the side of women's rights." She compared support for this law, which forbids the wearing of religious symbols in schools, with the fight for the right to abortion—as if a repressive law and a law granting civil rights were the same. At that time, according to Laguiller, she had also demonstrated alongside a conservative politician, Simone Weill.

A forum discussion on the question of the headscarf ban drew hundreds. The official LO spokeswoman described the veil in a semi-hysterical manner, as the epitome of female oppression, and as if a ban on this religious symbol would resolve all the problems of discrimination against women. A young Algerian, who had just joined LO, said it was not about social issues but the behaviour of "young guys" towards girls. Whoever spoke against the ban could reckon with a hostile public reaction.

Only after a contribution from an older social worker, who had worked for 40 years among North African immigrants and said that the consequences of this law were "catastrophic," did the proponents of the law become somewhat quieter. The social worker described, how the law stigmatised Muslim families and aggravated the situation of Muslim girls. Nevertheless LO continued to defend the law.

A clear rightward shift of LO can be seen when one draws a balance sheet of the main characteristics of the event—the avoidance of political questions and silence over the Iraq war; the insistence on a purely trade union perspective; the endorsement of EU expansion; and the vehement defence of a reactionary, anti-democratic law. Faced with social and political conflicts breaking out worldwide, the organisation is drawing closer to the French state.



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