

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

Introduction: Trotskyism and Centrism

Peter Schwarz
8 July 2004

The following is the introduction to the seven-part series “The politics of opportunism: the ‘radical left’ in France,” which was posted by the WWS May 15-June 4, 2004.

The construction of the Fourth International in Europe and all over the world is posed today with the greatest urgency. Social democratic and Stalinist parties together with the trade unions have no answers to the dangers and problems, to the social decline and threat of war that confront the masses of the population. These parties have themselves become part of the problem and are vigorously pressing ahead with the dismantling of social and democratic gains. Millions of voters and members have deserted these parties and are seeking an alternative. This is clearly shown by the mass demonstrations held against the Iraq war and the continuing protests against the breaking up of the welfare state taking place in countries across Europe.

However, on its own, this spontaneous resistance to social cuts and war is unable to provide a viable new perspective. This can only be provided by a party that has drawn and understood the lessons arising from the victories and the defeats of the working class in the twentieth century. This is precisely the significance of the Fourth International. Originating in the Left Opposition against Stalinism led by Leon Trotsky, the FI has consistently defended the Marxist programme of international socialism against reformism, Stalinism and centrism.

From this standpoint, it is necessary to follow events in France with the closest attention. In the first round of presidential elections held on April 21, 2002, around 3 million voters cast their ballots for candidates who describe themselves as Trotskyist—Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière (LO—Workers Struggle), Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR—Revolutionary Communist League) and Daniel Gluckstein of the Parti des Travailleurs (PT—Workers Party). In a country where Stalinism has dominated the workers movement for decades, Trotskyist candidates received three times more votes than the candidate of the Communist Party (PCF), Robert Hue. Having suffered decades of bitter experiences at the hands of French Communists and Socialists, these results demonstrate that a significant section of workers and young people are seeking a revolutionary answer to social and political problems.

However, for their part, the organisations of the radical left—LO, the LCR and the PT—have made clear that they cannot offer such an answer. Their policies have nothing in common with the revolutionary traditions of the Fourth International. As we will demonstrate in the course of this series, at decisive historical turning points all three organisations broke decades ago with the programme of the Fourth International. Their politics today fatally recalls the type of centrism

that Trotsky fought against so vigorously in the last years of his life.

Centrism developed in the 1930s as a decisive obstacle preventing workers from breaking with reformism and Stalinism. After the defeat of the German working class in 1933, due to the betrayals of Stalinism and the subsequent right-wing development of the Communist International, many progressive workers sought a new revolutionary orientation. Centrism represented an adaptation to this requirement that in words tended towards revolution but in practice rejected a clean break with the reformist and Stalinist apparatuses.

The classical case of a centrist organisation was the Spanish POUM, the Workers Party of Marxist Unification, led by Andrés Nin. Trotsky characterised the POUM as follows: “The POUM leaders do not consider for a moment playing an independent role, they do everything to maintain their role as good ‘left’ friends and advisors to the leadership of the mass organisations.”(1) Nin had often stressed his general agreement with Trotsky, but at the decisive turning points of the Spanish revolution he adapted to Stalinism and therefore bore a considerable share of the responsibility for the defeat of the revolution. In 1936, at the highpoint of the revolutionary wave, Nin went so far as to enter the ranks of the People’s Front government in Catalonia that subsequently strangled the revolution.

The French equivalent of the POUM was the PSOP—the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party. This party, which was founded in 1938 by Marceau Pivert and fell apart at the beginning of the Second World War, has shaped to a large extent the political methods, standpoints and habits that one still finds today amongst French radical organisations. In a letter to Daniel Guérin, Trotsky wrote of the PSOP: “Left centrism, especially under revolutionary conditions, is always ready to adopt in words the programme of the socialist revolution and is not stingy with sonorous phrases. But the fatal malady of centrism is not being capable of drawing courageous tactical and organisational conclusions from its general conceptions. They always seem to it to be ‘premature’....”(2)

Like the POUM, the PSOP supported the revolution verbally while at the same time remaining politically, socially and morally tied to the corrupt milieu of social democracy and Stalinism. In a letter to Alfred Rosmer in 1939, Trotsky emphasised: “What is most difficult and also most important in an epoch such as France is now going through is to free oneself from the influence of bourgeois public opinion, to break from it inwardly, not to fear its howling and lies and calumnies, and equally to despise its praise and flatteries. On this condition alone can one be assured the necessary freedom of action, the faculty of hearing in time the revolutionary voice of the masses and putting oneself at

their head for the decisive offensive.”(3) The PSOP was organically incapable of undertaking this task.

The party’s founder, Marceau Pivert, had been in the leadership of the Revolutionary Left tendency inside the Socialist Party (SFIO) until the mid-1930s. After the defeat of the German working class, he came closer to Trotskyism and supported the call for a workers’ United Front. During the period from the summer of 1934 to the summer of 1935, Pivert maintained close relations with French Trotskyists who worked inside the SFIO to win left-orientated members to their programme. During this period, he repeatedly expressed his agreement with Trotsky.

In 1936, at the high point of the general strike during the rule of the People’s Front government, Pivert enthusiastically announced the beginning of the revolution. In an article headed “Now Everything is Possible!” he declared: “*The masses are much more advanced than one imagines. They are not concerned with complicated doctrinaire considerations, but with a sure instinct are demanding fundamental solutions. They expect a great deal.... They would accept the riskiest of surgical operations because they know that the capitalist world is involved in a struggle to the death and that one has to build a new world in order to put an end to the crisis, to Fascism and the war.*”(4)

However, while Pivert was writing these lines, he was and continued to remain a leading member of the People’s Front government led by Léon Blum, which went on to suffocate the wave of revolutionary struggles. From his post in the office of the head of government, Pivert was responsible for the political control of radio, press and cinema. He never freed himself politically or organisationally from social democracy and eventually openly opposed the Fourth International.

Typical of Pivert’s refusal to break with the milieu of the official workers’ leaders was his membership in a lodge of the Freemasons. The significance of his membership was remarked upon by Trotsky: “In Freemasonry are assembled people of different classes, of different political parties, with different interests and with different personal aims. The whole art of leadership of Freemasonry consists in neutralising the different tendencies and smoothing out the contradictions between the groups and the cliques (in the interests of ‘democracy’ and of ‘humanity,’ that is, of the ruling class). Thus one grows accustomed to speaking aloud about everything save the essential. This false, hypocritical, adulterated morality impregnates, directly or indirectly, the majority of the official labour leaders in France.”(5)

The centrist traditions of the PSOP continued to live on, despite the demise of the party. In France, there are thousands for whom this type of centrism has merely constituted a stage in their passage into the camp of the bourgeoisie and who today occupy leading positions in political and economic life. Many of them regarded themselves at some point as “Trotskyists”—e.g., the former Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin, who was active for 20 years in Pierre Lambert’s OCI (today part of the PT); the editor-in-chief of *Le Monde*, Edwy Plenel (ten years in the LCR); and the founders of the bookstore chain FNAC, André Essel and Max Théret.

In all the organisations of the radical left one finds the typical characteristics of Pivert-type centrism: the habit of “speaking aloud about everything save the essential,” the adaptation to public bourgeois opinion, the close relations to the milieu of the official workers’ leaders—and, in the case of the PT, with its close connections to the lodge Grand Orient, even ties to Freemasonry. As in the case of the PSOP, the revolutionary socialist rhetoric of these organisations is

accompanied by an utterly opportunistic practice.

Every historical experience has demonstrated that the struggle against centrism is an indispensable prerequisite for the construction of a revolutionary party in France—and not just in France. Only on this basis is it possible to build a party that is politically armed and ready for the coming class struggles. Or, as Trotsky wrote in a letter to Daniel Guérin: “In order to prepare the party for such a test, it is necessary now to polish and repolish its consciousness, to temper its intransigence, to follow all ideas to the very end, not to pardon perfidious friends.”(6)

This series of articles has precisely this aim. It subjects the political conceptions, programme and history of LO and the LCR to careful criticism.(7) Despite their claim to represent a revolutionary socialist perspective, there is not the slightest trace of any energetic initiative to this end. A profound gulf separates their political claims and their practice.

The history of the French workers’ movement yields an abundance of frustrated opportunities. Repeatedly, promising mass movements have landed in a dead end because their leadership either failed to provide the necessary political guidance or consciously betrayed the movement. The best-known examples are the People’s Front of the 1930s and the general strike of 1968. The aim of this series of articles is to ensure that such defeats are not repeated. Undertaking a critical polemic over these fundamental issues, it seeks to establish the basis upon which a genuine socialist mass movement can be developed and led to success.

Notes:

- 1). Leon Trotsky, “Centrism and the Fourth International,” in *The Spanish Revolution: 1931-39*, vol. 2, p. 328
- 2). *Leon Trotsky on France* (Pathfinder), p. 215
- 3). *ibid*, p. 210
- 4). Marceau Pivert, “Tout est possible,” *Le Populaire*, May 27, 1936, emphasis in the original [<http://ensemble.snuipp.free.fr/index.php?mode=dossiers&dossier=bibliotheque&filetype=pdf&filename=pivert36>]
- 5). *Leon Trotsky on France*, p. 221
- 6). *ibid*, p. 219
- 7). We are unable to take up the PT within the framework of this series.



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