

Amiens rally for “no” vote on EU constitution

The French left and the politics of evasion

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A meeting held Thursday in the northern French town of Amiens, under the title “No to the Constitution: for a Social and Democratic Europe,” differed considerably from a meeting of the Socialist Party which this writer attended the previous evening in Paris.

The atmosphere was relaxed and optimistic, without the bitterness and spite that characterized the gathering of the Socialist Party. The organizers of the Amiens meeting clearly felt they were riding the crest of a wave of popular opposition. A few speakers made insightful criticisms of the European Union constitution on which French voters will pass judgment in Sunday’s national referendum, in contrast to the ultimatic tirades that poured from the speakers platform at the meeting of the pro-constitution camp. But this was all the meeting of left groups had to offer.

Anyone who expected a critical assessment of the consequences of the referendum, which the bourgeois press regards as virtually certain to go down to defeat, or sought answers to the complex and difficult problems confronting the working class in France and Europe, could have saved himself the trouble of making the trip to the meeting hall.

The organizers presented the anticipated victory of the “no” camp as a major step along a straightforward path to a more socially just and democratic Europe. A “no” vote, they proclaimed, would initiate a European-wide process that would increasingly force neo-liberal forces onto the defensive.

The perspective advanced was limited to an intensification of popular pressure on the ruling circles, without questioning the capitalist and nationalist foundations and forms of their rule. That this is an illusionary perspective is confirmed by the continuous rightward trajectory of all bourgeois parties in Europe, including the social democrats and Greens.

Praise was reserved above all for the “unitary dynamics” of the “no” campaign. This is a euphemism for the mutual political amnesty agreed upon by the various constituent groups of the alliance represented at the Amiens meeting. It embraces a minority wing of the Socialist Party, the Greens, the Communist Party (PCF), Attac and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR). Participants at the meeting were only too ready to forget that the majority of the parties represented on the podium—the Socialists, the Communists and the Greens—had spent much of the past 25 years in government, where they were responsible for implementing many of the stipulations of the EU constitution they now criticize.

Some 400 people attended the meeting—members and supporters of the organizations involved, trade unionists and other interested parties. All age groups were represented. The podium was decorated with the flag of the LCR on the left and that of the PCF on the right. Between them hung the “non” posters of the different organizations.

Francine Bavay of the Greens was the first speaker. She criticized

the undemocratic and anti-social character of the constitution. The catalog of fundamental rights it contained was minimal and represented a considerable retreat from the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789. Social rights, such as the right to work and receive job training, are entirely left out of the document.

She said, “We do not want competition between workers, but rather the same rights and social standards throughout Europe.” With regard to environmental policy, she noted that the word “bank” appears some 600 times in the constitution text, while the term “climate” occurs just once.

Gérard Filoche of the Socialist Party said there was a close relationship between social resistance to the government and rejection of the constitution. He pointed out that there was also substantial resistance to the constitution in other countries. In Greece, the parliament ratified the constitution although 10,000 demonstrated in favor of a referendum.

Referring to the historic defeat of the German Social Democratic Party in a state election last week, he declared that Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had received the comeuppance for his right-wing policies: “That happens when one calls oneself left and refrains from carrying out a left-wing policy.”

Filoche called for a renegotiation of the constitution. He said that as a trade unionist he knew, “If one wants something, then one must say no.” The rejection of the constitution by the French people, he continued, was not an “expression of the crisis, but rather the maturity of Europe.” He then described in detail the implications for workers’ lives of the “free market” liberalisation of the economy embodied in the constitution. He concluded his contribution with the demand for a common European minimum wage and the abolition of the so-called Bolkestein directive.

Pierre Khalfa of Attac began his contribution by praising the “unitary dynamics” demonstrated in the “no” campaign. This was a “fundamental success,” he said, which will have positive consequences even in the unexpected case of the constitution being accepted on Sunday.

Khalifa declared that the vote centered on the question: “for or against neo-liberalism.” The constitution text is permeated with neo-liberalism, he said. Like the preceding speaker, Khalfa called for reform of the constitution. Rejection should be used to push for new negotiations in order to arrive at a compromise, he said.

While to this point the speakers had sought to argue in a reasonable manner, the next speaker, François Sabado of the LCR, screamed into the microphone. His shouting, which could only have the effect of benumbing the critical faculties of the audience, served to mask the timid, bourgeois reformist perspective advanced by the previous speakers.

Sabado began his contribution by asserting that even if the “yes” camp emerged victorious on Sunday, the “no” side had prevailed on the level of argumentation. At first, the argument revolved around right-wing themes such as the possible admission of Turkey into the EU, he said. But now, social questions were at the heart of the debate. “The ‘no’ of the left is social and internationalist,” he roared. “It is swept along by social dynamics.”

He then began to describe in glowing terms the consequences of a rejection of the constitution. It would be the beginning of a “left answer” and strengthen the “development towards unity” (i.e., the cooperation of the different organizations). “If the ‘no’ camp wins,” he declared, “history will have been rewritten.” The consequences will not be “chaos and crisis,” but a blow against neo-liberal politics and a step towards a social Europe. A “no” in France will invariably spread to other countries.

“The politics of this campaign must continue,” Sabado said, taking care to avoid any formulations that might cause his allies on the platform to take offense. “Another politics is possible,” he exhorted. It must be “anti-capitalist” and aim at a “break with capitalist liberalism.”

The next speaker, Yves Salesse from the Institute Copernic, a left-wing think tank, concentrated on criticizing the constitution. He stressed that the “no” campaign was directed not against Europe, but against a “deeply undemocratic” constitution. Whoever declared it was necessary to vote “yes” because a better constitution was not possible, he said, had descended into resignation.

The constitution, he declared, must express the will of the people. He recalled the figure of Mirabeau, who in 1789 replied to the envoy of the king, who wanted to dissolve the newly formed National Assembly, by declaring: “We are here at the behest of the people.”

The final speaker was Francis Wurtz, a European deputy for the Communist Party. Wurtz began by invoking the unity of the left, then skipped from one topic to the next, and finally got entangled in a rambling discourse on regulations and paragraphs—until the chairman of the meeting politely asked him to finish off his speech.

The meeting ended with the singing of the “International.”

Most speakers were keen to use the success of the “no” campaign to construct a common front or new organization to fill the political vacuum left by the right-wing drift of the Socialist Party. The latter has further discredited itself by campaigning so vigorously for the constitution.

Such a formation, consisting of reformists, Stalinists and the LCR, would serve to hold back the political development of the working class, limiting it to a reformist protest program, and thereby attempt to block the development of a genuinely independent socialist movement.

The most active role is being played in this respect by the LCR. Sabado’s argument, that rejection of the constitution would set in motion a “social dynamic” inevitably leading to a “social Europe,” disarms the working class politically. In reality, rejection of the constitution—which is absolutely correct and necessary—will not by itself solve the outstanding political problems. The ruling classes have already made clear that they will not passively accept a defeat on this issue. They regret the initial decision to let voters have their say, and are preparing for more authoritarian forms of the rule.

Symptomatic of the thinking in these circles was an editorial that appeared Friday in the daily *Le Monde* attacking the opponents of the constitution in the most vicious manner. The editor, Jean Marie Colombani, declared that “no” voters were harboring a “double

illusion.” They believed one could punish the powerful and change Europe.

Punishing President Chirac, he continued, like any outburst of anger, could bring a certain relief. “However,” he wrote, “it changes nothing—certainly not the main problem of the economy and French society: mass unemployment.” It risked at the same time delaying a change of government, “because the left emerges from this campaign deeply and enduringly split.”

In other words, the working class either swallows the undemocratic constitution or confronts a long period of rule by a hated right-wing government.

Echoing the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who in *Nouvel Observateur* condemned all “no” voters as “right-wing and racist,” Colombani went on to accuse opponents of the constitution of being driven by chauvinist motives: “The ideology supporting the ‘no’ vote—opinion polls show that most of those opposed to the constitution believe that more is being done for other Europeans than for Frenchmen—is much more sovereignist than left.”

The implications of this slander are unmistakable: one cannot allow a population contaminated by chauvinism to hinder the resolution of the “problems of the economy” and weaken France. Such a population must be prepared to accept infringements on its democratic rights.

The light-minded and superficial optimism of the LCR and its partners in the “no” alliance disarms the working class in the face of these political dangers. Characteristically, they barely mentioned Le Pen, his National Front, or the other right-wing extremist organizations that are championing a “no” vote on the basis of anti-immigrant racism and French chauvinism.

Just three years ago they called for support for Chirac in the presidential elections, arguing that this was the only way to contain his contender in the run-off vote, Le Pen. Their current euphoria is merely the reverse side of the panic that in 2002 flung them into the arms of Chirac.

Both reactions evade the fundamental task confronting the working class in France and Europe: the building of a new, independent party based on an international socialist program to fight for the unification of Europe on socialist foundations.



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