

Presidential election in France

The dismal world of Lutte Ouvrière and Arlette Laguiller

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The election campaign conducted by presidential candidate Arlette Laguiller of Workers' Struggle (*Lutte Ouvrière*, LO) is dominated by three main themes: unemployment, the housing shortage and wages. The organisation has nothing to say on international questions, and the three pillars of its political perspective are also approached from a purely national standpoint.

Laguiller has limited herself to a sort of reformist minimal program: an increase in the national minimum wage (SMIC), an expansion of social housing construction and greater job security. The measures are to be realized by tax increases for big companies.

Her election manifesto states, "The demands I raise are therefore the first measures to be realised by a genuine socialist presidency and government." The term "socialist" in this context refers to the French Socialist Party led by Ségolène Royal.

Laguiller does not see herself as responsible for translating these demands into practice—instead she considers herself more as the good conscience of the Socialist Party. On her election posters she stresses her opposition to Sarkozy, accuses Royal of being weak, and then calls upon her supporters to elect her in order "to force the left to act."

"Oh, I know that a large part of the electorate expects the rejection of Nicolas Sarkozy in this election," she announced last Sunday at her last big election meeting in Paris. "But in the first round one must warn Ségolène Royal, that if elected she does not have a blank cheque to do what she wants, and that the workers and the popular classes will not just stand by should she carry out the policy of the right wing." In other words, a vote for Laguiller is presented as a vote to pressure Royal to the left.

This appeal to the SP is accompanied by a complete absence of any self-confidence in her own campaign. In her articles, Laguiller invariably points out that she does not have any illusions about becoming president. Even her one-minute television spots begin with this assurance. One

almost gets the impression that Laguiller is fearful that some voters could get the incredible idea that they should cast their ballots for her.

The newspaper *Libération* quotes Robert Barcia, alias Hardy, the nearly eighty-year-old leader of the organization, who declared his hope at the Paris meeting that Laguiller will pick up two percent of the vote. Anything else would be a fluke: "Arlette has so far never had below two percent. The two occasions when we received more than five were a total surprise."

Hardy complained that in 2002 when Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot, the candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*, LCR), won a total of ten percent of the vote, "this made no impression on the right wing." It was possible, on the other hand, to exert pressure on the left—but only if Ségolène Royal was elected.

For Hardy, this is rather improbable. "Royal will certainly make it to the second ballot, but it is quite a different matter to win against Sarkozy," he told *Libération*. "The left was always in a minority in this country. Mitterrand was only elected, because he was given a leg-up by Chirac." This is a strange interpretation of recent French history, when one considers that, beginning in 1981, the Socialist Party occupied the office of the president for fourteen years, and the post of prime minister for a further five years after 1997.

It was above all the attacks carried out on the working class by the Socialist Party President François Mitterrand and SP Prime Minister Lionel Jospin that allowed the right wing to regain power. In this respect, *Lutte Ouvrière* bears a large share of the responsibility. It continually encouraged the illusion that one could force the Socialist Party to act in the interests of workers, thereby providing them a left cover. At the same time it rejected any political responsibility or initiative of its own.

And it continues on this same course today. For the likes of Hardy and Laguiller, it is not the policies of the misnamed "left" parties that are responsible for the electoral successes

of the right wing, but rather the working class itself. They reject any sort of political initiative, which goes beyond exerting pressure on the Socialist Party and its allies. They speak of socialism in the manner of the true believer when he speaks of paradise—i.e., something which can only be obtained in the afterlife.

In an interview for Canal Plus, Laguiller was reminded of the fact that two weeks prior to the presidential election of 2002, her poll rating stood at 11 percent. Unable to deny this state of affairs despite her best efforts, she remained speechless. This speechlessness is a reflection of the basic program and outlook of the LO.

Even if *Lutte Ouvrière* refers to Trotskyism, it was never a member of the Fourth International. Arguing that the composition of the Trotskyist International was petty bourgeois and that the main task was to establish organizational connections to the working class, LO limited its political work to distributing factory newspapers and trade union activities. Verbally, it called for the building of an international party, but in practice it adapted completely to the national environment of the trade unions.

This was not merely an organizational stance, but a fundamental problem of political orientation. The construction of the Fourth International arises from the necessity of solving the crisis of working class leadership following the nationalist degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals. This requires an international strategy and organization, which LO vehemently rejects. The group's concentration on the trade union milieu went along with limiting its attention to the most immediate national issues.

While international conditions after the Second World War permitted a certain limited revival of reformism, the revolutionary developments in technology and the globalization of production since the 1980's have stripped away the basis for any sort of policy based on the national state.

The world has collapsed for the LO. Totally absorbed by its day-to-day work in the factories, it failed to prepare for or understand the process of globalization. The defeats of the strike movements of the 1980's and 90's were additional blows to an already embattled organization. The end result is the strange political entity one encounters in the current election campaign.

When, in exceptional cases, LO addresses world events, its conclusions are weak and toothless. It condemns the war in Iraq as imperialistic, it criticises the grab for oil reserves while demanding the withdrawal of American troops, but it completely fails to make any analysis of US imperialism. There is not a trace of any attempt to come to grips with the driving forces behind the war and the posing of an active,

international strategy to oppose the war is completely beyond the comprehension of the LO leaders—after all, it is not taking place in France.

In the controversy over Iran's nuclear problem, LO protests against the fact that different criteria are applied to the five large nuclear powers and aims a muted criticism at France. But there is no background analysis, no reference to the war preparations being made by the US, and above all no analysis of the consequences of the crisis for world politics.

For *Lutte Ouvrière*, politics is not determined by the dictates of world economy and objective laws, but rather by good or bad individuals. As such a stance is barely tenable, LO takes refuge in political areas where haggling over concessions still seems possible. To this end Laguiller is particularly ready to discuss the level of the minimum wage (SMIC), the lack of adequate housing or the high level of unemployment.

However it is world policy that determines the policy of national states, and world economic developments that dictate the fate of the French economy. The issues of wage increases, jobs and the social infrastructure can neither be understood nor resolved without analyzing such factors as international money markets, the global pressure to maximise profits, the decline of US capitalism and the international changes in world politics which have taken place over the past 30 years.

Today the defence of the most elementary of interests poses the need for an international, revolutionary strategy. The reformist perspective of LO merely serves to create illusions in the national state and is an impediment to the building of an independent, revolutionary movement.



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