

France: Socialist Party, “far left” move towards electoral alliance

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Bourgeois democracy, as Karl Marx famously wrote in *The Civil War in France*, is a mechanism for deciding “which member of the ruling class [is] to misrepresent the people in Parliament.” Recently, however, this mechanism has begun to sputter in France—with the discrediting of the Socialist Party (PS) after its first-round elimination in the 2002 presidential elections, and multimillion-strong strike waves against austerity policies in 2003, 2006 and 2007. True to form, the pseudo-Trotskyist “far-left” groups, Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), are stepping up to try to repair it.

The strikes of October and November 2007 against pension cuts planned by President Nicolas Sarkozy were—despite their defeat—an important turning point in class relations in France. Their reverberations have shaken bourgeois political circles.

Sarkozy’s approval ratings have dipped below 50 percent for the first time since his election in May. Though it is too early to tell, the upcoming March 2008 municipal elections could well deal Sarkozy’s right-wing UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) party a tangible setback. Bourgeois political circles are worrying: how will popular discontent be channeled?

The problem facing the French bourgeoisie is that its preferred left party, the PS, cannot become a full-fledged governing party on its own. Its current goal is to establish itself as a substantial minority party. Henri Weber—a top PS official and former co-founder of the LCR with Alain Krivine—told a December 7 meeting of top PS and LCR officials at the Théâtre du Rond-Point in Paris: “We must become, we can become a party with 35 percent [of the popular vote], like in most countries of Europe.”

The PS has always relied on alliances with other parties to rule—indeed, its formation at the 1971 Epinay Congress was predicated on a strategy of allying itself with the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). In the 1980s and 1990s, its preferred partners were the Stalinists and the Greens, the so-called Plural Left coalition.

The Stalinists’ and Greens’ collaboration with the PS has so discredited them, however, that they are no longer useful. In a December 6 article, “The question of alliances is posed,” the center-left daily *Le Monde* noted: “The PCF no longer exists, electorally speaking (1.3 percent for [PCF chief Marie-George] Buffet in 2007 versus 15.3 for Georges Marchais in 1981). It’s the same for the Greens.... The left can no longer hope to return to power with the alliances of the ‘Epinay cycle.’”

There is every sign that the “far left” is being felt out and weighed as a potential new PS ally in an attempt to rebalance French bourgeois politics.

Former PS Presidential candidate Ségolène Royal has given interviews in the television and press calling for a coalition “from [conservative bourgeois politician] François Bayrou to [anti-globalisation protestor] José Bové.” In her interview with *Le Monde*, she claimed that she “saw herself in [LCR presidential candidate] Olivier Besancenot when he demands radical measures on certain questions.”

Besancenot in particular has been selected in the bourgeois media for extensive coverage. A November BVA poll placed his approval rating at

40 percent, and an October Ipsos poll for *Le Point* placed his popularity above that of Royal. Certain PS politicians have begun publicly praising him; Senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon said: “Mr. Besancenot is very popular. How could we criticise him for it? He has won his epaulets!”

The PS has also consulted LO, as LO spokeswoman Arlette Laguiller admitted in a December 8 interview with the daily *Libération*. Asked about the topic of her meetings with Royal, Laguiller answered: “[Royal] said that at one of her meetings, my call for voters to vote for her had provoked much applause.”

Attempts to feel out the “far left” are facilitated by the social links between the “far left” leadership and their ex-comrades now in top posts at the PS. The Théâtre du Rond-Point meeting, attended by both Weber and LCR leader Krivine, was one case in point.

Another, according to an amused October 2 report in *Le Monde*, was Weber’s wedding to TV producer Fabienne Servan-Schreiber—a gathering of 800 exclusive guests, including top banking and fashion industry executives, former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, and current Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, as well as a number of “Trotskyists.”

LO and the LCR are both acutely conscious of the radicalisation taking place in the working class, as the trade unions negotiate social cuts and block strikes in alliance with the government.

In an article titled “Social situation and union tactics,” in the November 9 issue of *Class Struggle*, LO wrote: “The seriousness of the attacks against workers by the bosses and the state is convincing a number of them that the policy of negotiations pursued by the trade unions, without a power relationship, is at best useless and, in reality, harmful.”

In its December 6 open letter to LO, the LCR similarly noted: “The criticisms of [CGT union leader Bernard] Thibault by [striking] transport workers and even within the CGT railway union express in a certain way opposition to a politics of diagnosis by the trade union leaderships. This growing consciousness also expresses itself in political terms with regard to the PS, which has not missed a single opportunity to stress its agreement with the planned reforms.”

LO and the LCR have both responded to this growing political consciousness in the working class by ditching their pretenses of loyalty to Marxism and vigorously promoting unprincipled political coalitions. This has, however, taken somewhat different forms in the two organisations.

Since its August summer school at Port-Leucate, the LCR has been trying to form a unified left party into which it could liquidate itself, while mounting a campaign to promote the South American guerilla Che Guevara among French youth. The new party would no longer claim association with Trotskyism. Precisely because it is junking its former pretensions to Marxism, however, the LCR has felt obliged to (altogether falsely) claim substantial political independence from the PS.

In an August 24 interview in *Le Parisien*, titled “The LCR has no more reason to exist,” Besancenot made clear that he saw the new party as a potential ruling party of the French bourgeois state: “Let’s be clear: we’re not afraid of power. But it can also make us dizzy! We want no

parliamentary or ministerial accords with a social-liberal party like the PS. This political independence is a sign of liberty. And it's been rather well rewarded in recent elections...it doesn't prevent a common resistance faced with the right."

LO, on the other hand, recently announced that it would post joint candidate lists with the PS and other Plural Left parties in cities across France—including Angers, Besançon, Saint-Brieuc and Orléans. This is the first time LO has ever run joint candidates with the PS. In her letter on LO's December 1-2 Congress, Laguiller revealingly noted: "This attitude is doubtless new, but the possibility of considering it is, for us, not new. It's just that, in previous municipal elections, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party were in government and were behaving just like the right is today—and we didn't want to be seen as excusing it."

LO has refused to join the LCR's new catch-all party, prompting a rather comical spat. LO improbably explained its refusal to participate by claiming that it refused to abandon the perspective of a "Marxist, Leninist, and Trotskyist party"—a point to which the December 6 edition of the LCR's *Rouge* newspaper responded by ironically noting that LO's supposed principles prevented it from allying with the LCR, but apparently did not prevent it from running with the PS.

The same day, however, in an open letter to LO asking them to reconsider their decision, the LCR admitted that its new, catch-all party would be a chaotic, faction-ridden organism, where all sorts of ex-Plural Left and pseudo-radical organisations would flourish. Claiming that LO could join the LCR's new party without compromising its independence, the LCR wrote: "We hope to manage to regroup organisations, militant groups, even former members of the PCF. This means the right to freely organise tendencies or even factions."

In short, growing political disquiet in the working class is pushing the pseudo-Trotskyists into an electoral alliance with the ruling parties of the French left. This is not an accident or a temporary miscalculation, but the reflection of an organic fear and hostility towards independent working-class politics arising directly from their political perspective—a demoralised trade unionism that has as its main objective putting political pressure on the bourgeoisie through militant strike action. Workers' growing hostility to negotiation with the bourgeoisie places the viability of this strategy in question.

LO gave a concise summary of this perspective in its November 9 article: "In the past, workers have been able to swamp the union apparatuses in order to develop, reinforce and amplify the movement. This is how the working class has won most of its victories. This is the most promising perspective for the future." It is, of course, true that a strike struggle cannot last long unless it escapes the control of the trade union bureaucracy, which inevitably seeks to stifle it. However, the political questions that a struggle of the working class breaking free from the trade unions would raise today—that is to say, the question of which class would rule—are completely passed over.

LO even admitted that the most politically advanced workers have arrived at devastating political conclusions regarding the CGT, writing: "If the most radical rail workers have understood, correctly, the CGT's attitude as reticence towards pursuing the ongoing movement, or even by some as an abandonment of the fight, this is because it did not propose a follow-up [for the one-day movement of mid-October]."

Instead of seeking to use these betrayals to politically expose the trade union leadership, however, LO pressed for the CGT to change the policies that are most immediately discrediting them in the eyes of the workers: "[The CGT] should have, even before October 18, announced the date of another struggle, to give workers another date."

This political incoherence is no accident: the entire pseudo-Trotskyist fraternity ultimately bases its perspective for strike action on reaching an agreement on reforms with the bourgeois state.

This was underscored by Alain Krivine's comments at the Rond-Point

gathering with PS bigwigs Weber, François Rebsamen and Manuel Valls. He began by stressing his fundamental political agreement with the PS: "[F]or me, the adversary is not the PS but Sarkozy, the right, and the Medef [employers' federation]. If today we have disagreements, they are on how to fight Sarkozy, the right, and the Medef."

Krivine continued: "The first question I ask you: can we deal with [social inequality] by concrete measures that imply a new redistribution of wealth? The second question is that of means: all the great reforms in France, those of the [1936] Popular Front, of the Liberation, of 1968, the [2006] victory against the First Job Contract, never came directly from parliaments. They came because millions of people went into the street, launched a general strike, booted your buttocks."

It is difficult to imagine a more blinkered perspective than one that views the titanic social struggles of the twentieth century primarily as a means of pressing the French bourgeoisie for legislative reforms. One cannot deal with all the historical issues raised by Krivine's claims in the current context. However, suffice it to say that they do not in the least bear out Krivine's implicit claim—that it suffices to mobilise large numbers of strikers to gain lasting reforms from the bourgeoisie. The question of the political perspectives acted upon by the international working class, in fact, essential.

The 1936 Popular Front is perhaps the clearest example. The alliance between the Radical Party, the SFIO (the precursor to the PS), and the PCF headed off a revolutionary struggle for power on the part of the working class. By leaving the French bourgeoisie's foreign policy largely untouched, it sealed the isolation of the Spanish workers' movement that underpinned the struggle of the Republic against Franco, helping lead to the fascist victory in the Spanish Civil War. By further removing workers' struggle for power from the world-political agenda, it helped solidify Hitler's rule in Nazi Germany. The reforms the Popular Front granted were, in fact, soon nullified by World War II, the Nazi Occupation of France, and the French bourgeoisie's collaboration with it.

To the extent that these reforms were revived under the Liberation and in the post-war era, this was because of fear of revolution—especially during the 1945 Liberation, when state authority collapsed in large parts of France—and the immense ideological pressure exerted by the heritage of the Bolshevik Revolution and the existence of the USSR. It was also made possible by the national scale on which much of industrial and financial life took place. These conditions, however, have collapsed.

This is underscored by the last struggle Krivine mentioned, against the 2006 First Job Contract. As a result of a deliberate political collaboration between the trade union leadership and then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, who aimed to unseat political rivals in the French right, the struggle's achievements were limited to the temporary retraction of the First Job Contract law. However, it only helped pave the way for the election of Sarkozy as president, and thus for even more vigorous attacks on the living standards of the working class

Sarkozy's offensive cannot be successfully defeated with simple strike militancy. The competitive pressures of capitalist globalisation and the explosion of political tensions in world geopolitics drive French imperialism towards cuts in the living standards of the working class at home and military aggression abroad—for instance, in Sarkozy's alignment with the Bush administration on Middle East policy. This calls for a political response from the working class that exceeds by far the trade union struggles envisaged by LO and the LCR, and poses the question of workers' power.

It is on the basis of this perspective that the International Committee of the Fourth International bases its call for the development of a section of the ICFI in France.



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