

France: LCR congress decides to found new party

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At its 17th congress held in January, the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR) decided to found a new “anti-capitalist party” by the end of the year. The 40-year-old LCR will then dissolve itself into the new party.

The congress failed to decide on either a name or a programme for the new party. This process is to take place in the course of the year. What is clear, however, is that the organisation will not be based on distinct historical traditions or theoretical principles. In contrast to the outgoing LCR, which nominally associated itself with Trotskyism, “no specific history, that of Trotskyism, will be imposed as a brand name on the new party,” chief LCR spokesman Olivier Besancenot writes on the organisation’s website.

The new organisation is to combine “anti-capitalism with the ecological struggle and the advocacy of every form of emancipation, beginning with women” and be open for “young people, ex-members of political parties who are disgusted by the direction taken by the leadership of their old party, trade union activists in the factories, feminists of all generations, opponents of liberalism [i.e., the free market] who do not want to sacrifice their convictions in alliances with social liberalism,” and individuals “becoming active for the first time.”

Other political currents are also invited to take part in the project, and Besancenot lists as examples Lutte Ouvrière (Worker’s Struggle—LO), “anarchists, communists or anti-liberals.”

The setting up of a party whose programme is completely amorphous and eclectic and that rejects any sort of theoretical commitment corresponds to a fundamental need of the French ruling class. At a time when the old, bureaucratic-reformist and Stalinist organisations (Socialist Party, Communist Party) are deeply discredited, such a new party is needed to disorient and derail the increasing number of workers and young people who are being radicalised and have lost faith in a reformist solution of the social crisis.

The LCR calls the new party “anti-capitalist.” But only firm programmatic principles and a solid foundation in the historical tradition of the Marxist movement enable a party to conduct a consistent struggle against capitalism and resist the pressure of bourgeois public opinion. The LCR rejects any such adherence to programmatic and theoretical principles. It prefers a party that floats in the air, is not bound by principles and can adapt to the prevailing wind at any time. Such a party can be easily manipulated and adapted to the requirements of the powers that be.

Besancenot sought to portray the renunciation of any definite programme as a sign of rank-and-file democracy. Not the LCR, but future members must determine the programme and form of the party, he declared. Whoever wants to take part in its construction can “democratically control the process from A to Z.” But this is all hogwash. Without clear principles, which apply in equal measure to the leadership and members, there can be no democratic control of the party leadership. In a party in which everyone can do and say whatever he or she pleases,

the leadership cannot be controlled either.

The German Green Party is an instructive example in this regard. When the Greens came into being 30 years ago (with the enthusiastic backing at the time of the German supporters of the LCR), the organisation stressed its commitment to rank-and-file democracy. Everyone was welcome if he or she supported the vaguely defined goals of the new party—members of the SPD (Social Democratic Party), Maoists, environmentalists, pacifists, citizens’ rights activists and even diehard “blood and soil” ideologues.

To prevent the leadership from detaching itself from the rank and file, the Greens drew up special rules, such as the rotation principle for leadership positions and the prohibition of double mandates. The whole business, however, was a charade. The absence of any sort of binding programmatic basis made it possible for a few appointed leaders to manipulate the party as they wished. Joschka Fischer, who was never elected to a party post, was able to use the party as a launching pad for a career that was to catapult him into the post of German Foreign Minister and led the Greens to take their place at the heart of the bourgeois political establishment.

Since its foundation 40 years ago, the LCR has continuously played the role of a left figleaf for the reformist and Stalinist parties and the trade unions, which subordinate the historical interests of the working class to the maintenance of capitalist society. The LCR leadership always justified this role by claiming that these organisations, or sections of them, could be pressured from below to carry out policies in the interests of workers and be won to a socialist perspective. Now, for the first time, the LCR is seizing the initiative to develop a party on its own aimed at preventing forthcoming class conflicts from assuming a revolutionary dimension.

Just two years ago, at its 16th Congress, the LCR decided by a large majority to build a broad movement embracing all the parties and organisations that had opposed the European Union constitution in the 2005 referendum. This included, alongside the LCR, first of all the Communist Party (PCF), but also a wing of the Socialist Party (PS), sections of the trade union bureaucracy, anti-globalisation activists and a motley mix of social initiatives and movements. At the time, the LCR and the PCF worked closely together and met regularly to consult at a leadership level. At a local level, various anti-EU activists cooperated in so-called “collectives,” which were to be the base of the new movement.

But in the second half of 2006, the project collapsed due to the growing gulf between the working class and the allies of the LCR. It was no longer possible to maintain the fiction that one could develop an “anti-capitalist” movement extending deep into the ranks of the “plural left,” which comprised the government led by Lionel Jospin from 1997 to 2002.

With the nomination of Ségolène Royal as its presidential candidate, the Socialist Party moved visibly to the right. For the first time since the early 1970s, when François Mitterrand initiated the “unity of the left,” Royal no longer sought to establish a “left” alliance with the Communist Party and the Greens, but instead favoured a centre-left coalition with the Democratic Movement (MoDem) led by François Bayrou.

Once the country's biggest party, the Communist Party had shrunk to the point of insignificance. It participated in the "collectives" but was not prepared to break with the Socialist Party—its ally for the past three decades. The PCF had filled ministerial posts in all of the Socialist Party-led governments and remains dependent on the latter to retain its deputies and local government mandates.

The LCR eventually withdrew from the collectives, and the attempt to select common "left" candidates for the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections failed. A leading member of the LCR, François Sabado, justified this as follows: "the social-liberalisation of social-democracy and the incapacity of the PCF, Greens and alternatives to represent a truly independent social force now open up a situation where the formula of unity of the anti-liberal left including the leadership of the PCF and the Bové current [anti-globalisation activists] is obsolete" (*International Viewpoint*, July August 2007).

Similar broad left movements in other countries, which had served as role models for the LCR, also collapsed ignominiously. The entry into the government of Romano Prodi in Italy by Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*) was widely seen as the organisation's final step towards bourgeois respectability, while the Brazilian Workers Party led by Lula has been regarded as a prized customer by international financial circles for some time. In both countries, the co-thinkers of the LCR felt obliged to withdraw from these parties after many years of loyal cooperation.

In undertaking its initiative for a new party, the LCR is reacting to the profound gulf that has opened up between the working class and its old organisations. The reformist bureaucracies are increasingly unable to contain the massive strike and protest movements that have periodically testified to the rebellious mood of broad layers of workers and youth in France. In particular amongst youth, who took to the streets in massive numbers to protest against the First Job Contract (CPE) and revolted in the suburbs in 2006, the Socialist Party, the PCF and the trade unions have hardly any influence. A political vacuum has opened up, in which revolutionary ideas can spread—if it is not filled by something else.

It is precisely to counter such a revolutionary development that the LCR is founding its new party. It is fully aware of the crisis affecting the old organisations. According to the "Political Theses" adopted at the 17th Congress, the national and international situation is characterised by "two fundamental tendencies: the free market capitalist offensive and the decline/transformation of the traditional parties of the workers' movement." The capitalist offensive provokes social resistance and "the adaptation by the leaders of the traditional workers movement to free market priorities" leads to "an increasing gulf between left wing parties and the people," the Theses state.

Meanwhile, the entire French political system is in deep crisis. While the former "plural left" is deeply divided and has never recovered from its defeats at the last elections, President Nicolas Sarkozy, celebrated after his election victory as a new powerful leader, has hit a new low in popularity, with a part of his UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) refusing to follow him.

Should the class struggle escalate, the French ruling class needs a new "left" party in order to keep the situation under control. It has assembled considerable historical experience in this regard. In 1936, it suffocated the general strike, which threatened capitalist rule, with the help of the Popular Front government led by Leon Blum. In 1968, its trusted representative François Mitterrand reacted to the general strike by assuming the leadership of the Socialist Party, integrating a number of left-wing movements and forming an alliance with the PCF Stalinists. In this way, he created an instrument capable of re-stabilising the bourgeois order.

Already at that time, an important role was played by a party that, like the LCR, wrongly declared its fealty to Trotskyism: the Organisation

Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) led by Pierre Lambert. The OCI sent many of its members into Mitterrand's party in order to support him. One of these members, Lionel Jospin, finally went on to become French prime minister.

In view of the tense political and social situation, it is quite feasible that the LCR's "anti-capitalist party"—should it come to life—could rapidly assume political responsibility or even play a role in a coalition government. The organisation's insistence that it would never take part in a "government or parliamentary coalition" with the social democrats should not be taken too literally.

If such an opportunity should arise, then another argument will be fielded: "Unity against the right." On this basis, the LCR went so far in 2002 as to call for a vote for the Gaullist Jacques Chirac, supposedly to stop the presidential candidate of the extreme right National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Based on the same argument, future LCR deputies would be quite prepared to support a Socialist-led administration and prevent a UMP government. And from this sort of support to actual participation in government is a small step.

The French ruling class is quite able to distinguish between hollow "left" rhetoric and revolutionary politics. It will not lose sleep over the anti-capitalist clichés reiterated by Besancenot or party leader Alain Krivine. Both men have received extremely favourable treatment in the media. The media is well acquainted with the LCR, and the organisation has been tried and fitted out for its appointed role.

The LCR is linked to the bourgeois elite by a dense web of connections. In the 40 years of its existence, thousands have gone through the opportunist school of the LCR and then gone on to assume prominent posts in politics, media, economics and academia. The connections are fluid, and many former members never severed their relations with their erstwhile comrades of the LCR.

The LCR was founded at the end of the 1960s through the fusion of a Communist student federation led by Krivine, which had been expelled from the PCF, and the French section of the Pabloite United Secretariat led by Pierre Frank.

Already by the beginning of the 1950s, the United Secretariat had abandoned Trotsky's perspective of building independent Marxist parties of the working class and specialised in ascribing a revolutionary role to all sort of non-proletarian tendencies that inevitably betrayed the masses. The list of Stalinists, petty bourgeois nationalists, left Social Democrats and trade union bureaucrats feted by the Pabloites at one time or another is virtually endless. It includes the Algerian National Liberation Front, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, right up to the current president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez—to name but a few.

Krivine, who established a certain reputation for himself as a student leader in 1968, states in his recently published autobiography that despite his ultra-revolutionary posturing at the time, he never saw the possibility of revolution. "We did not know how far the movement [in May-June 1968] would go," he writes. "However, we knew exactly where it would not go. It was a revolt of unparalleled dimensions, but it was not a revolution: there was neither a programme nor credible organisations that were ready to seize power." For its part, the LCR glorified the students as the new revolutionary avant-garde and sang the praises of guerrilla struggles in backward countries, but it was not prepared to challenge the Stalinist PCF, which finally sold out the general strike and saved the regime headed by General Charles de Gaulle.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the LCR courted a variety of oppositional tendencies turning away from the PCF—without success, as the various "renewers" always turned rapidly to the right and disappeared without a trace. Like all Pabloite organisations, the LCR was then thrown into deep crisis when the Soviet Union collapsed.

It was only at the end of the 1990s that radical organisations in France

started to win support again because of the decline of the Socialist and Communist parties. The first to profit was Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière who won a considerable number of votes in presidential elections. The LCR reacted by cultivating Olivier Besancenot as its new mouthpiece. This verbose history student from a middle class background was able to score in particular with young voters. At the last presidential election, he obtained by far the best result of all the left candidates—1.5 million votes. Half of those who supported him were under the age of 34.

The LCR exploits the political inexperience of young people attracted to the organisation by Besancenot. Instead of training them politically, the LCR encourages contempt for the historical traditions of the workers' movement and educates them to be mindless opportunists. Besancenot publicly boasts he was never a Trotskyist. Instead, his role model is Che Guevara. Besancenot recently published a biography of the Argentine-born political adventurer, who on the basis of his perspective of rural-based guerrilla struggle encouraged countless young people to turn their backs on the working class in the cities and embark on hopeless political adventures—often with deadly consequences.

Taking all these facts into account, it was predictable that none of the 313 delegates who assembled at the 17th LCR congress from January 24 to 26 would object to the dissolution of the LCR into a formless “anti-capitalist party” and to the ditching of even a nominal attachment to Trotskyism.

The only opposition at the congress came from the right. For the minority current *Unitaire*, the liquidation process does not go far enough. It wants to maintain the orientation to the PCF and a wing of the Socialist Party and complains that the new party is only “a party of the extreme left with a new look.” *Unitaire* spokesman Christian Picquet accused the majority led by Krivine and Besancenot of chasing an “illusion” because it relied only on the existing base of the LCR, which turns exclusively to “revolutionaries,” while ignoring the “anti-neo-liberal sensitivities which exist elsewhere, from the PCF through the left in the PS up to the alternatives.... In reality we only have small groupings as partners,” Picquet said. “We are a long way from the figures which would be necessary to challenge the hegemony of the PS on the left.”

At the congress, the minority received 14 percent of delegate's votes and the majority 83 percent. The congress adopted a timetable that envisages the creation of local “initiative committees” in the coming weeks and months, which are to discuss the basis for the new party and hold meetings on a regional level. In June, they are due to assemble for an initial national meeting, which will elect a “pluralist control committee” to prepare the founding documents for the new party. The dissolution of the LCR and the founding congress of the new party are planned for the end of the year.



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