

French LCR-PCF debate: A dialog of political opportunists

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On June 7 the French newspaper *l'Humanité*, long associated with the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), published a debate between PCF spokesman Olivier Dartigolles and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) theorist François Sabado. The discussion cast a sharp light on the LCR leadership's analysis of the political situation: they view their role as preparing a left bulwark for the bourgeoisie, to trap the working class behind a reformist program when a revolutionary situation develops.

More astute sections of the French bourgeoisie admit the relevance of such calculations. As workers face stagnant wages and rising food and fuel prices, the unpopular government of President Nicolas Sarkozy is pressing on with social cuts and relying on the trade union leadership to prevent strikes from coalescing into a political movement against it. The daily *Le Monde* noted that the lack of opposition from bourgeois political circles explains “the ease with which Mr. Sarkozy pushes through his reforms. But with a risk: that suddenly everything could flame up. In the government, there is awareness of this danger.”

Le Monde also interviewed Sarkozy's counselor on social questions, Raymond Soubie, who said he was watching carefully to prevent “a weakening of the trade unions and the appearance of uncontrolled movements.”

In such a context, it is critical for the bourgeoisie to have a party that can make revolutionary noises, while acting to politically tie the workers to the unions and state apparatus. The LCR, which previously claimed to be Trotskyist, but is now promoting Che Guevara and preparing to dissolve itself into a broad New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), has been found suitable for the job.

The organization has a long history of opportunism, dating back to the early 1950s, when a section of the French Trotskyist movement abandoned the program of building independent revolutionary parties in favor of adapting itself to the Stalinist and other bureaucratic misleaders of the working class. The LCR has for decades played a critical role in blocking a movement of the French working class outside the Stalinist and social democratic parties and the existing union leaderships.

In 2002, it called for a vote for the favored candidate of the French ruling elite, Jacques Chirac, in the second round of the

presidential elections, along with the rest of the official left.

The French corporate media has recently been actively promoting the LCR's 2007 presidential candidate, Olivier Besancenot. A series of recent polls have given his public approval ratings as between 45 and 60 percent, and he is now a regular guest on talk and debate shows.

For the PCF, which has been a part of bourgeois coalition governments since 1981 and whose support has collapsed, the LCR is principally interesting as another potential partner in coalition governments with the Socialist Party (PS), such as the 1997-2002 Plural Left coalition of PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. In the June 7 interview, Sabado made it clear that the LCR was more concerned by the potential for the emergence of a revolutionary situation in France.

The Stalinist Dartigolles said: “We both attend demonstrations. But we see today that what limits these mobilizations is the absence of a political project to accompany them. This situation cannot last... To be a revolutionary today is being able to define here and now, in the next five years, inescapable measures, necessary to change the balance of forces—realizable measures, with the necessary financial, institutional, and democratic means, measures that form a coherent whole and map out a democratic alternative.”

In reply, Sabado of the LCR said: “The main [social] conquests in this country may have been codified by one or other government, but they are the product of general strikes, of revolutionary or prerevolutionary situations.... When the right pushes too hard, the pendulum can swing the other way and one cannot rule out a popular reaction. But we are realists, the balance of forces has gotten worse during the free-market offensive.”

It is indicative of the LCR leadership's outlook, in the face of repeated multimillion-strong strikes and protest marches in recent years, that Sabado should lamely say that one “cannot rule out” a social upheaval. However, even more telling is his comment that a “popular reaction” might yet still occur in response to Sarkozy's policies. Sabado well knows that the recent, union-controlled strikes and marches are not an unfettered, “popular” movement of the working class, but rather a way to channel working-class opposition to reactionary state policies behind the trade union bureaucracy.

Such a view might, however, come as a surprise to the readers of the LCR's publication, *Rouge*, which uncritically promotes and glorifies the demonstrations called by the trade unions.

The reason for the gap between what the LCR prints and what its leadership thinks became clear in the course of the interview. Citing columnists from the right-wing daily *Le Figaro* who hope to see the LCR weaken the PS, Dartigolles asserted that "the LCR's current position is part of the landscape which prevents the emergence on the left of a political project and dynamic."

Sabado explained that the LCR is willing to participate in government, but wants to arrive there on the back of a mass struggle of the working class: "We're not refusing all participation in government, we clearly situate ourselves in a governmental perspective, but a government that would be the product of social movements, of political relations of forces, and not the result of parliamentary alliances with the center-left and the PS."

After further questions from Dartigolles about LCR participation in a government gathering together all the left parties, Sabado said: "Agreeing to subordinate oneself to the dominant party to get a parliamentary majority, that's been done, and the balance was negative. Perhaps we will discuss these things again with the left parties, but in the framework of a balance of forces where the popular movement is calling the shots."

Sabado's comments merit careful attention. Of course the LCR leadership, which presents itself as having revolutionary sympathies, maintains that it wants to come to power as a result of "social movements"—the term used by the French bourgeoisie to refer to mass strikes and protests by the workers. However, this begs the question of what the LCR would do with state power, were the LCR to obtain or share it.

Would the LCR seek to act as a detachment of the international socialist revolution, seeking to democratically organize the world economy under the control of the working class and put an end to social inequality, war, and class oppression? Or would it seek to restabilize French capitalism through a partial reform program? Of course Sabado and Dartigolles do not discuss the question, but the LCR's history, and in particular the contents of the June 7 interview, show the party leadership's determination to follow the latter course.

In particular, Sabado's reason for refusing an open electoral alliance with the "dominant party" (i.e., the bourgeois PS) is highly significant. It is not one of political principle or class perspective. Rather, in light of the PCF's political and electoral collapse, the LCR views it as poor tactics—in Sabado's words, "that's been done, and the balance was negative."

Sabado is amenable, however, to a discussion with the left if "the popular movement is calling the shots." In other words, if bourgeois politics become so destabilized by the struggles of the working class that the LCR can come to power, at that point

the LCR will consider negotiating accords with the PS and PCF. Under such conditions, however, the only agreements the LCR could negotiate with the PS would be how to preserve capitalist rule.

This possibility is very much on the minds of the LCR leadership, as shown by Sabado's reference in the course of the interview to the 1936 Popular Front government—an event to which other LCR leaders, such as Alain Krivine, have also alluded in meetings with official left parties. The Popular Front is perhaps the classic example in France of the ability of opportunist parties to disarm a revolutionary situation through an alliance with the bourgeois left.

At the time of the Popular Front, the Socialist and Communist parties formed a coalition with the bourgeois Radical Party in the face of a massive strike wave by the working class. With employers panicked that the result could be a revolution like the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, they rapidly signed concessions—a 40-hour workweek, paid vacations, nationalization of strategic industries. The left parties then forced workers back to work, with PCF leader Maurice Thorez famously declaring: "One has to know when to end a strike."

The betrayals of the Popular Front were particularly damaging internationally. They sealed the international isolation of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, contributing significantly to their defeat and to the victory of fascism in Spain. By further removing the workers' struggle for power from the world-political agenda, the French Popular Front helped solidify Hitler's rule in Nazi Germany. The Popular Front itself drifted to the right and collapsed in 1938. Its limited domestic reforms were soon nullified by World War II, the Nazi occupation and the French bourgeoisie's collaboration with the latter.

Sabado's ability to refer to such events, while hypothesizing about negotiations with the official left in the course of a revolutionary situation in France, shows up the LCR for what it is: a party created to save capitalism by subordinating the working class to the state machine and the bourgeois left.



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