Behind the crisis in the French Socialist Party

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The Socialist Party National Council's elevation of Martine Aubry, the mayor of Lille, as the party's first secretary draws to a close four days of bitter political infighting that has dominated news headlines in France.

The Socialist Party (Parti socialiste, PS), the main left bourgeois party in France and the leader of parliamentary opposition to conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, came close to tearing itself apart over who would best direct and manage the party's political image.

After the November 14-16 PS Congress in Reims failed to produce a majority platform, the election of a first secretary went to a membership vote. Three candidates ran in the first round on November 20: Aubry, the right-leaning 2007 PS presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, and Benoît Hamon, a member of the European parliament and of PS's "left" New Socialist Party faction—receiving 35, 43, and 23 percent of the vote, respectively. Hamon then called for his supporters to vote for Aubry the next day.

The run-off produced a virtual tie, with Aubry leading Royal by 42 votes out of 137,000 cast. Both candidates claimed victory, and soon began trading accusations of ballot stuffing.

Royal supporters like Essonne representative Manuel Valls and PS National Secretary François Rebsamen accused Aubry's camp of padding their vote totals in the North, around Lille. Valls said Aubry's camp was "stealing victory" from Royal and called for a "membership revolt," including demonstrations in front of the PS headquarters in Paris.

In the Aubry camp, Claude Bartolone responded by threatening a defamation lawsuit and adding that the only instances of "industrial-strength cheating" had been the PS's section in the overseas region of Guadeloupe, which voted for Royal.

The matter went to the PS National Council, where Aubry's supporters had the majority. On November 25, by a vote of 159 to 76, the National Council declared Aubry the winner.

The Socialist Party now presents the public with a bizarre spectacle: only a few days after trading accusations of ballot stuffing, its leading members are working together to present the PS as the best parliamentary-democratic party to rule France. The divisions inside the PS leadership will inevitably reappear, moreover, as the party fights over the choice of its 2012 presidential candidate.

Much of the popular frustration with the PS dispute centered on the lack of any principled differences between the two sides. The British *Financial Times* approvingly quoted PS insiders who claimed the leadership election was "fought on personality rather than on policies." However, such ostensibly personal disputes inevitably have a political character.

To the extent one can extract politics from the morass of petty ambition and rampant opportunism that dominated the proceedings surrounding the PS leadership contest, the difference appears to be the following: Royal seeks to abandon any formal connection to the working class, orienting to an alliance with right-wing bourgeois parties such as François Bayrou's Democratic Movement as she did during the 2007 campaign. While not opposed to such alliances in principle, having exploited them in local administration in Lille, Aubry believes this is unadvisable as a broader course of action, as it would create a massive political vacuum on the left.

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Aubry has called for the PS to be "anchored in the left," and is known principally for her role in organizing the Socialist Party's now-rescinded 35-hour workweek reform.

For Aubry, no less than Royal, bows in the direction of the working class are dishonest and hypocritical. Her left rhetoric reflects concerns within the PS leadership about an emerging threat on the left. Jean-Luc Mélenchon recently quit the PS to found a Left Party, citing the example of German politician Oskar Lafontaine and die Linke (Left party). There is also concern that Olivier Besancenot and the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) would profit from a rightward turn of the PS—the press repeatedly referred to Hamon as an "anti-Besancenot weapon" during the leadership campaign.

All of this occurs in the framework of an accelerating crisis of world capitalism that has exploded the credibility of free-market policies. Having dedicated €360 billion to a bank bailout and facing layoffs and strike action in numerous industries, Sarkozy has adapted his policies to the new environment, calling for a national industrial policy and investment strategy. Not long ago, Sarkozy portrayed himself as a champion of American-style free-market capitalism. But now, with a cynicism that has astonished even the jaded French media, Sarkozy declared in front of the European parliament that he was "maybe" a socialist!

In this context the virtually unanimous support Aubry found within the top PS leadership—including from former prime ministers Laurent Fabius and Michel Rocard, and Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who is serving as head of the IMF after Sarkozy nominated him to the position—deserves mention. Royal, who aspired last year to guide the PS towards an open embrace of the free market, is no longer in style. In the opinion of these practiced defenders of French capitalism, a vote for Aubry is a better defense against the danger on the left.

Clearly, the situation is extraordinarily promising for a genuine socialist movement. There is deepening mass opposition to establishment politics, and millions of people are looking for new political paths.

This is precisely the moment, however, that the LCR and Besancenot, atop a wave of media-driven popularity, have decided to formally repudiate all political vestiges of their past association with revolutionary socialism. Toward this end they are about to dissolve the LCR into the so-called "New Anti-Capitalist Party" (NPA). As the debate within the LCR leadership that has accompanied this transformation makes clear, the NPA will be based on a bourgeois reformist program. Alain Krivine, Francois Sabado and other LCR leaders have stressed that their new party will have no programmatic association with Trotskyism, i.e., with the perspective of socialist revolution.

For the LCR, which hopes to use its popularity to establish a position on the left flank of the PS, the rapid development and depth of the PS crisis come as an unpleasant surprise. Besancenot said the crisis in the Socialist Party was a "very sad sight" and that "the only people who could be happy about it" are "the right wing."

Socialists in France and in Europe must carefully think through what the PS crisis has revealed. The situation recalls nothing more than Trotsky's judgment in *Whither France*: "The general trend of the toiling masses, including the petty bourgeoisie, is quite clearly to the left. The orientation of the workers' parties is no less self-evident: to the right." The perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International is to fight, as Trotsky did, for the formation of a revolutionary socialist party in France.

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