

In run-up to its founding congress

France's Left Party tries to reorganize French bourgeois left

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The founding congress of the Left Party (Parti de Gauche—PG), established by Jean-Luc Mélenchon as he left the Socialist Party (PS) last November, will take place January 30-February 1.

As rising popular discontent and the growing economic crisis destabilize French political life, the PG is courting virtually the entire French political establishment to the left of the Socialist Party (PS) in the hope of forming a large, left coalition (the so-called Left Front) that can fill a political vacuum created by the virtual collapse of the PS and the French Communist Party (PCF).

Mélenchon is appealing to many groups to join the PG, or participate in an electoral Left Front alliance in this June's European elections. This is in line with the conception, advanced by Mélenchon at the PG's founding conference in November, that the PG will be a "melting pot" party (*parti creuset*) comprising Socialists, Communists, ecologists and republicans in order to "make something new."

According to the January 16 issue of PG's online paper, *Vie de Gauche* (*Left Life*), the PG's appeals have met with significant successes. It wrote, "On the whole, overall these meetings have taken place in good spirits, with respect for one another, and—good news—we have not for the time being faced any outright refusals on our propositions."

Several organizations have decided to join the PG's Left Front: the Communistes Unitaires (Unitary Communists, a PCF faction around Pierre Zarka, the editor of the PCF daily *l'Humanité*), the CNCU (National Coordination of Unitary Collectives, a federation of anti-globalization activists and academics) and the MPEP (Political Movement for Popular Education, around Jacques Nikonoff, the former leader of the Attac anti-globalization group).

In a recent meeting between the Left Party and the PCF, both agreed to work together on a common platform. The PG is still negotiating with the POI (Independent Workers Party, which descends from the ex-Trotskyist Internationalist Communist Organization [OCI] of the late Pierre Lambert) and the MRC (the Republican and Citizens movement of Jean-Pierre Chevènement). However, it noted that Chevènement, an ex-PS minister of defence and minister of the interior, "leaves open an alliance with the PS, which we refuse to do."

The PG is also seeking to form an alliance with the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), whose founding congress is being organized by the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League) in early February. The LCR has said

the NPA will announce its decision about whether to join the PG's coalition after the founding congress.

Emulating the German Left Party

In its party literature, the PG presents itself as a left reformist party, seeking to pressure the state to enact measures in favour of working people. Its hyperbolic, imprecise rhetoric and pose of independence from the PS imitate the LCR.

As the split-off of more left-talking sections of the PS oriented to the PCF, the PG's establishment character is more difficult to hide than the LCR's, however. The PG explicitly and publicly models itself on a contemporary political party with an established, right-wing track record: the German Left Party (Die Linke).

In a November 11 *Le Monde* interview where Mélenchon announced his intention to leave the PS, he said, "I am following in the footsteps of Oskar Lafontaine, who created Die Linke. He is changing the situation in Germany, I will do the same in France."

When *Le Monde* asked whether he therefore meant to incorporate the PCF into a new party, Mélenchon replied, "Let's be clear. We will not make a unifying party in France by dissolving others. However, we can create a common front in the European elections regrouping the party I'm creating—the Left Party—the Communists, the NPA of [LCR presidential candidate] Olivier Besancenot, the left ecologists, all those who want to be in rupture with the Lisbon treaty [for an EU constitution]. If we manage to realize such a coalition, we will be the leadership of the left."

The PG and Left Front project take the form of a peculiar deal between well-established political apparatchiks. The PCF is seeking to obtain a political facelift by allying with Mélenchon in a political front that alludes to a leading party in German bourgeois politics. Mélenchon seeks to gain a certain base of support in the PCF's large body of local elected officials and its paper, *l'Humanité*.

Though not as well established as Lafontaine, Mélenchon is a well-tested bourgeois politician who, from a radical past that is not so uncommon in French bourgeois politics, has retained a certain ability to

talk left while carrying out right-wing policies. Mélenchon joined the OCI just after the student revolt and general strike of May-June 1968, during which he was a leader of the high school student movement of his hometown. He was the leader of the OCI from 1972 to 1975, after the OCI officially broke from the ICFI and Trotskyism.

After being expelled from the OCI, Mélenchon joined the Socialist Party in 1977 and became a staunch supporter of President François Mitterrand. He was elected senator in Essonne in 1986 and, apart from a four-year spell out of office, has remained a senator to this day. He served as a junior minister in the Jospin government from 2000 to 2002.

His attempt to copy Die Linke has one drawback, however, for Mélenchon: it puts him on record as approving Die Linke's policies. This is a far more eloquent testimonial to the course of action Mélenchon wishes to carry out than the nebulous phrases the PG advances in its leaflets.

Die Linke has shared power with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) for some time in the municipal administration of Berlin, where it has pursued a thoroughly right-wing policy of social austerity. The "red-red" coalition of Die Linke and the SPD has cut tens of thousands of jobs in hospitals, public transport and other public services, while slashing wages for public service workers by 10 percent. In 2007, almost 250,000 of the city's 3.3 million workers depended on "social welfare assistance."

Die Linke also officially supports the German government's bailout package giving hundreds of billions of euros to the banks. Some of its leaders further demonstrated the party's thoroughly reactionary character by supporting the Israeli government's recent assault against Gaza.

An operation to shift French bourgeois politics

As the economic crisis deepens throughout Europe, the French bourgeois left has mounted a definite political counteroffensive in an attempt to re-establish its credibility before the workers.

The nomination of Martine Aubry as PS first secretary last November represented a step away from the openly free-market policies advocated by the party's 2007 presidential candidate, Ségolène Royal. The PS has now presented motions of censure against the government and an alternative stimulus package to that proposed by conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The trade unions, adopting a similar stance to the PG, called a mass strike and national day of action on January 29, holding out the false hope that this might pressure the bourgeoisie to carry out a less damaging state economic policy.

The LCR's foundation of the NPA, though it adopts a more radical tone, is essentially the left flank of this political offensive of the ruling class. However, the French bourgeoisie, though well aware of the class-collaborationist orientation of the LCR, views it as somewhat inexperienced and untested as a defender of its class interests. One of the PG's initiatives has been to attempt to corral the LCR-NPA into the Left Front. At the same time, the PG is spearheading a campaign, in line with the positions of Die Linke, to develop a foreign policy more directed

against the US, towards whom Sarkozy had made a policy shift after his election.

Conscious that mass popular hostility to the big-business interests represented in various plans for a European constitution blocks attempts to give the EU greater foreign-policy independence from the US, the PG has violently criticized the Lisbon treaty. However, its opposition to the treaty does not signify opposition to greater political unity of parts of the EU.

Rather, it seeks to give a left gloss to attempts to pass a European constitution. The platform of the European Left coalition for the 2009 European elections, in which Die Linke and the PCF participate, states: "Democratic participation and parliaments' powers must be strengthened through norms on popular petitions, co-decision enlargement and the relations between national parliaments and the European Parliament. The EU citizens must discuss and decide on an alternative to the Lisbon treaty."

When the PG proposed membership in the Left Front to the LCR, therefore, the PG asked that the LCR agree to reject the Lisbon treaty and to act independently from Europe's official Socialist parties in the European parliament. The PG's January 16 proposal initially went unanswered. The PG leadership doubtless knew that substantial forces inside the LCR—the minority around Christian Piquet, but more broadly the organization's orientation to allying itself with every group claiming to be left and oppositional—would strongly pressure the LCR to join the Left Front alliance.

Besancenot's first reaction on January 20 was somewhat hostile: he first asked for a longer electoral alliance, lasting until the 2010 regional elections. He then reversed himself, adding that the parties to the left of the PS are "unable currently to write a joint statement on sackings" for the January 29 demonstration, so "don't try to make us think, afterwards, that we can build a lasting political front."

On January 26, however, the PG announced that the LCR had agreed to a joint statement for the January 29 strike.

The PG's foreign policy campaign involves more, however, than negotiations on a European constitution: it is also articulating the basis of a frankly anti-American policy. Though this policy clearly does not currently have the support of the dominant factions of the French bourgeoisie, Mélenchon presumably calculates this sort of policy may find more support under conditions of growing economic and political crisis. However, these policies if pursued could easily lead to an open diplomatic break between the US and France.

Mélenchon laid particular stress on Latin America—where the French left has substantial contacts in left bourgeois circles and French imperialism has a colonial possession, French Guiana—as an arena for Franco-American rivalry. He outlined a policy of discussions with Latin American regimes towards whom Washington has adopted a hostile stance. Mélenchon announced at the November 30 PG conference, "Over the last several years, several of us have been going back and forth between the two edges of the ocean and meeting comrades in Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, all those who have undertaken to face up to capitalism and the warmongering empire."

In an August 2008 statement, while still a PS member, Mélenchon declared he was for "peace, and thus a rupture with the policy of following the US government, the politics of the clash of civilizations, and NATO. This point obviously implies total opposition to the European plan

to build a 'great transatlantic market.'”

While presenting itself as a “left” party, the PG is in fact trying to lay the basis for social austerity and an eruption of geopolitical tensions between the US and the European powers.



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