

# New Anti-Capitalist Party holds founding congress

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The New Anti-Capitalist Party (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, NPA) held its founding congress on February 6-8 in the north Paris suburb of La Plaine Saint-Denis. Prepared and organized by members of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), the NPA congress immediately followed the LCR's dissolution congress on February 5.

The congress marked a public and official break with all rhetorical or symbolic association with Trotskyism, a formal repudiation of any association with revolutionary socialist politics, and thus laid the basis for the NPA's integration into the structure of bourgeois politics.

The congress deliberations focused on how to eliminate politically inconvenient Trotskyist formulations from the founding documents, and how best to lay the basis for future participation in a coalition government of the bourgeois left. The most immediate task was therefore defining a party platform for the 2009 European election, and deciding how to formulate its negotiations with the French Communist Party (PCF), the newly founded Left Party (*Parti de Gauche*, PG), and smaller parties and political associations in their periphery.

The congress delegates were generally uninterested in or frankly hostile to Marxist theory. An attempt to replace references to "socialism" with "eco-socialism" was defeated, but received the support of roughly a quarter of the delegates. The formulation of Marx, taken up by Luxemburg and Trotsky, that the alternatives posed to mankind by the crisis of capitalism are "socialism or barbarism" was dismissed as "ethnocentric."

In the European election platform, references to the "United Socialist States of Europe"—a longstanding formulation of the Trotskyist movement to call for the unification of Europe on a socialist basis—were replaced with a "Europe of workers and peoples." The bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia, the risk of an ethnic break-up in Belgium and a number of movements (notably Irish nationalism and Catalan separatism in Spain) that the LCR has supported show the character of the elevation of ethnicity as a basis for political unity. A move from a conception of Europe as a class-based entity, towards a view of Europe as a collection of distinct nationalities, is dangerous and reactionary.

The most widely discussed topic at the congress was how to formulate the NPA's conditions for a broad electoral alliance with the PG, PCF and associated groups. The NPA congress settled on declaring that the NPA is "favorable to a lasting agreement of all the forces declaring themselves to be favorable to anti-capitalism."

The political context for this debate is the creation of the PG last November, and its proposal of forming a Left Front—including the PG, PCF and the NPA—in the European elections. The PG was formed by Senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon as a split-off from the Socialist Party (PS), France's main left party of government. After the PG's January 29-31 founding congress, Mélenchon issued a public appeal to LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot: "Olivier Besancenot has responsibilities to history, he is no longer in the leadership of a little group." Mélenchon added, "If he refuses the Left Front, the rebalancing of the left will be impossible. Beating the PS, it can be done." Opinion polls show the Left Front would receive 14.5 percent of the vote if the European elections were held today.

The longer-term objective of a Left Front-type alliance, under conditions of political crisis and the discrediting of the right-wing government of Sarkozy, would be to allow the formation of a coalition government of the French bourgeois left.

The NPA leadership has repeatedly signaled its interest in such an alliance. It signed a joint appeal organized by the PG and PCF in the run-up to the January 29 strike and day of action, and on February 3 it signed a joint criticism of President Nicolas Sarkozy's handling of the economic crisis with a group of parties including the PS, PG and PCF.

The NPA also allowed the PG and PCF to circulate appeals to its membership at the congress. The PG wrote that workers "will suffer from the crisis of capitalism if an alternative does not confront it. We know you take this argument seriously. [...] We feel sure that our differences are not significant enough to prevent us from helping to change the world."

In discussions of the European election platforms and the Left Front, congress delegates came out strongly in favor of "unity of the left." The majority of speakers were in favor of the Left Front,

though a significant minority expressed doubts about Mélenchon, whose position as a long-time member of the PS and minister of professional education in the 1997-2002 government of PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin is well known. A delegate who called him a “traitor to the working class” was booed down, however.

The PG’s Left Front proposal creates a tactical problem for the NPA: it fears it will lose popular appeal and bargaining power if it enters too rapidly into a Left Front alliance. On the question of how to join a Left Front-type formation, the NPA has split along a well-established fault line: between the LCR majority under Alain Krivine that seeks to carry out a more independent line, and the LCR minority led by Christian Picquet that favors immediately joining the Left Front.

A WSWs reporter spoke to Picquet at the congress. A man with a colder appraisal of the electoral and political potential of Besancenot’s promotion as a media celebrity, he is so concerned at discontent and political opposition in the working class that he feels the NPA must rapidly ally itself with the establishment left to head off an explosion in the working class.

Picquet said, “Those who break unity [i.e., of the “left” parties, including the NPA, PCF and PG] will pay a heavy political price. [The NPA majority] believe in the electoral success of the NPA and Besancenot—it’s an electoral choice, and I think they are mistaken. People who are disappointed with the PS do not understand why there is no credible left opposing the right.” He added that the majority, by not embracing a Left Front-type alliance that could form a government, is “deaf to the profound anger in this country.”

Asked what the NPA majority risked by such a course of action, Picquet responded: “A great deal of disappointment, a sudden movement of political opinion.”

The political conceptions that the NPA is promoting inside the membership—an “anti-capitalism” mixing together all of the ideologies of the petty-bourgeois left—were most clearly laid out in the 20-minute keynote address given by Besancenot. He began by noting that “nothing will be settled precisely” in his speech, which was simply an “introduction to the debates of the congress.” However, his essential perspective was that the collapse of the USSR had eliminated all politically meaningful distinctions between the tendencies of the French left establishment, which could be unified around a platform of protest politics.

The 1991 collapse of the USSR “closed” what Besancenot called “the cycle of 1917” and the “century opened by 1917”—that is, by the October Revolution in Russia. There are no “divisions between forms of revolution” anymore, he explained: “Ecosocialism, self-management [i.e., anarchism]—the label means little.”

To explain why the LCR had only founded the NPA 18 years after the collapse of the USSR, Besancenot noted that the LCR had repeatedly failed in attempts to build blocs with other political

parties, calling such attempts “cartels from above.” These attempts involved the LCR in public negotiations with parties that were associated to the PS. Presenting a concise version of the majority’s argument against an overly rapid integration into the Left Front, Besancenot said, such alliances “weakened the dynamic of mobilization.”

Besancenot noted that the global economic crisis created a more favorable atmosphere for the NPA: “For once, there is not generalized demoralization.” Citing the mass protests that erupted in Greece after the shooting death of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos, he said: “The Greek syndrome has scared people.”

He cited environmental problems as key aspects of the economic crisis and urged people “to produce only what is strictly necessary.” He proposed a series of demands: outlawing sackings, a €300 increase in the minimum wage, the use of empty houses and apartments to house the homeless. He called finally for “voluntarist activity” and “social transformation.”

Besancenot does not conclude from the eruption of potentially insurrectionary struggles in the working class that there is an objective necessity for a socialist and revolutionary perspective for workers. For Besancenot, no political lessons can be drawn from the defeat of the successive strike waves against social austerity policies in France since 1995. Instead, the development of a political and economic crisis on a scale not seen since the 1930s is seen as creating somewhat better conditions for protest mobilizations held in unity with the trade unions and parties such as the PCF and PG.

From birth, the NPA is a political organization firmly attached to the left flank of French bourgeois politics. As revolutionary struggles develop inside the working class, it will find in the NPA a determined enemy.

*The author recommends:*

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