France: the bourgeoisie sizes up the New Anti-Capitalist Party

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In the week since the founding congress of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, NPA) of Alain Krivine and Olivier Besancenot, the French bourgeois press has made its initial assessment.

The NPA came into being at a February 6-8 congress organized by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), which dissolved itself into the NPA. The LCR leadership's goal in this exercise was to formally disavow whatever symbolic or rhetorical association the party had with Trotskyism and to prepare itself for a role as a player in bourgeois politics. Press coverage shows that the French bourgeoisie has gotten the LCR's message: it views the NPA not as a revolutionary threat, but as a significant new factor in electoral politicking.

A large portion of the February 13 issue of conservative daily *Le Figaro* was dedicated to polls, interviews of bourgeois politicians and editorials discussing the NPA. In an editorial titled "PS: the mailman's trap," *Figaro* columnist Paul-Henri du Limbert explained how the French right views the NPA and the popularity of LCR presidential candidate, media celebrity and part-time mailman Olivier Besancenot: as an instrument for pressuring France's left party of government, the Socialist Party (PS). Limbert wrote, "With the PS, [the NPA] will constantly play the game of bigger slogans, asking it to ‘make a little effort to be revolutionary.'"

This gives the right the opportunity to split the left vote between the PS and the NPA, Limbert argued, in a strategy recalling that of President François Mitterrand (of the PS). In the 1980s Mitterrand maintained his power despite disaffection with his policies in part because of the growth of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), which split the right-wing vote. In 2007 conservative candidate (and now President) Nicolas Sarkozy adapted to this difficulty by an anti-immigrant, law-and-order appeal that won him a large section of the FN vote. With the NPA, Sarkozy now seeks to return the favor to the PS.

Thus, Limbert wrote, "The NPA is in a confrontational mode against the PS. Just as the National Front was for twenty years against the RPR [Gathering for the Republic] and the UDF [Union for French Democracy]"—the two main right-wing parties of the Mitterrand era, the majority of whose members merged into the current ruling Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) in 2002.

Sarkozy himself expressed this strategy in indelicate language to the PS leadership on a flight returning from Lebanon in June 2008: "For years you dragged us through shit with the FN, now we're going to screw you with the NPA." This is one aspect of Sarkozy's reliance on the LCR—another being Sarkozy's and the LCR's common policy of critical support for the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) trade union as it negotiated and contained workers' opposition to Sarkozy's social cuts in 2007 and 2008.

Given the NPA's orientation to pressuring the establishment left, however, there is always the possibility that the PS might invite the NPA into a left coalition. In interviews with PS and French Communist Party (PCF) officials over the last year, leading NPA personnel repeatedly signaled their willingness to participate in a left coalition government. Such a coalition would be the only combination of parties that could, under the current conditions, credibly threaten to form an alternate government to the UMP's.

Limbert noted this possibility: "The spirit of the time is to the left.... Therefore the PS considers it opportune to go all out and seek affinities with the irreconcilable enemies of market economy, admirers of Ché Guevara and Hugo Chávez. This is all the easier in that, unlike [FN leader] Jean-Marie Le Pen, Besancenot has the advantage of not being treated ‘like the devil,'" i.e., of not being ostracized in French bourgeois politics.

Limbert solicitously but not disinterestedly counseled the PS against trying to draw closer to the NPA: "In this enterprise [of trying to match the NPA's rhetoric], the PS greatly risks running out of breath or betraying itself." He concluded by asserting that the NPA's slogans are a "threat to democracy, and it is time for the PS to take that into account."

Le Figaro's polls show, however, the appeal of a coalition including the PS and NPA is gaining strength. Thanks to extensive media coverage of Besancenot, who is presented as aware of people's problems and willing to speak truth to power, increasingly large sections of the electorate see the NPA as an important partner in a future government. An OpinionWay poll commissioned by *Le Figaro* found that 22 percent of the population, and 42 percent of PS supporters, saw a broad left coalition including the NPA as the PS's best alliance strategy.

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Besancenot himself was designated "best opponent of Sarkozy" by 23 percent of those polled, far ahead of the runner-up, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry (13 percent). In polls last year, Besancenot's approval rating in the French public was 60 percent.

Sections of the PS have openly declared themselves favorable to an NPA-PS alliance. This includes notably the right-wing faction around 2007 presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, whom *Le Figaro* quoted: "There is no impassible barrier between these three components: the left parties of government, social movements of day-to-day struggle and what is called in France the ‘far left,'" i.e., political parties such as the LCR and NPA.

Sections of the PS proposing greater state regulation of the economy view the NPA as more of a threat, however: it competes with their appeal and is less useful to them than to the free-marketeers, for whom the NPA would render invaluable service by giving a "left" gloss to their policies. The currently dominant factions of the PS around Aubry have therefore taken a more hostile stance towards the NPA.

Claude Bartolone, Aubry's assistant at the PS, told *Le Figaro*, "First of all, [Besancenot] rejects the left parties of government. Moreover, besides Besancenot's smile and good looks, when you read the NPA's program, it's the return to the Ice Age." He warned against any faction of the PS ignoring the PS's party line on the NPA: "If there were three, four or five different accounts of the decision we would have taken after each meeting, we would lose credibility."

In a sign of the PS's difficulties before rising popular hostility to capitalism, Bartolone was quickly forced to retreat from the implicit assertion that opposition to capitalism is old hat. *Le Figaro* quoted his explanation that the PS's January proposal of an alternate stimulus package to Sarkozy's was largely an attempt, in the run-up to the NPA congress, to present the PS as an alternative: "We wanted to show the French people that, faced with the crisis of capitalism, we are not determined fixers of the system, but that we bear another social project."

Further comments by PS politicians show they have understood the NPA's basic function: tying the political perspectives and struggles of masses of people who are breaking with the PS, in the final analysis, to hopes in reforms negotiated with the bourgeois state, and thus to illusions about the potential role of the PS. The NPA is thus a brake on the leftward political development of the working class.

Ex-PS First Secretary François Hollande noted that the LCR presidential campaigns had received the votes of millions of people disillusioned with and hostile to the PS. Attacking any policy of tacking towards the NPA, Hollande told *Le Figaro* that NPA voters are so hostile to the PS that PS attempts to woo them were doomed to failure: "Trying to seduce the NPA would be on the PS's part an act of extreme naiveté, amounting to legitimizing the ideas and slogans of the ‘far left' without getting anything in return, i.e., boosting [the ‘far left's'] score in the first round [of the presidential elections] without benefiting from those votes on the second round."

Henri Weber, a former LCR member who left it to join the PS in the 1980s and is now a high-ranking PS official, pointed to the contradiction between the NPA's stated hostility to the PS, and its lack of a clearly defined perspective for taking political power.

In an editorial published by *Le Monde*, he wrote: "The NPA wants to be Nicolas Sarkozy's best opponent, but it does not want to be in power with the parties of the ex-Plural Left [i.e., the PS, PCF and Green Party], or support them ‘without participation' in the reconquest of government responsibilities. As the NPA cannot govern alone, or with the support only of Lutte Ouvrière, this double rejection means refusing to govern. The NPA is thus taking up an old anarcho-syndicalist tradition, refusing to exercise political power, claiming that power corrupts and only trade union and associative struggles are pure."

In line with the NPA congress's calls for "unity of all the left," Weber is confident that the NPA will not fight for revolutionary politics in opposition to the PS, but leave its voters with no other perspective besides a pressure vote against the existing left establishment. Under such conditions, voters' demands for the NPA to accomplish something will inevitably push it towards the PS. Weber explained, "As we know, politics abhors a vacuum: refusing to govern with the left means letting the right govern. I doubt that most NPA voters agree with this impotent sectarianism. I do not believe in a 21st-century resurgence of anarcho-syndicalism. Far-left voters will want to mark their opposition to the policies of the right. They will not follow voting instructions that block this aspiration."

The bourgeoisie has taken largely the political measure of the NPA. Though it at times attacks the NPA entirely incorrectly as a representative of Marxist political traditions, its picture of the NPA's role in French politics is fairly clear: a brake on the political development of the masses. This is a function that the various political factions of the bourgeoisie will seek to use to their advantage.

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