

French “left” parties trail in European election campaign

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The campaign in France for the June 2009 European parliamentary elections bears particular significance, as it is the first electoral campaign in France since the outbreak of the global economic crisis last September. Despite the unpopularity of right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy, current polls suggest that conservative parties will lead in the upcoming election.

Two new parties are also contesting the European elections: the Left Party (*Parti de Gauche*, PG), founded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in January after he left the Socialist Party (PS); and the New Anti-Capitalist Party (*Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste*, NPA), founded in February, whose most visible figure is part-time postman and media celebrity Olivier Besancenot.

The Socialist Party (PS), France’s largest bourgeois left party, is campaigning as part of the Party of European Socialists (PES) coalition, which aims to become the largest single group in the European parliament. The PES currently has 217 seats in the European parliament, while the European Popular Party (EPP, a coalition of conservative parties) has 288.

PS officials explain that they see the European elections as essential to proving to the population that its policies can address the economic crisis. It also calls for greater European independence in military matters. When the PS began to fix its European electoral lists in late February, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry called for the PS to unite in the elections, “given the economic and social situation that our country is facing, given what is at stake in changing the majority in the European parliament.”

The PS has focused its criticism on the response to the economic crisis by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and EU Commissioner José Manuel Barroso, the former Portuguese prime minister and a member of the EPP. In its election web site, the PS attacks Barroso for his “non-interventionism,” his lack of a “voluntarist policy to preserve jobs,” and his failure to organize discussions on the future of the automobile industry in Europe.

Sarkozy’s ruling conservative UMP (*Union pour une Majorité Populaire*) has not yet announced its European electoral lists—reportedly due to difficulty in satisfying male-female equality requirements, and political tensions between Sarkozy and powerful Bordeaux mayor and ex-Prime Minister Alain Juppé.

As a result, Sarkozy has decided to campaign for the UMP in place of the candidates, giving speeches on European themes. In line with his recent promotion of right-wing, law-and-order measures, such as outlawing ski masks in demonstrations and “gangs” of youth, he called for opposition to Turkish participation in the European Union (EU). He also took the occasion to praise his own record, when France

held the rotating presidency of the EU in late 2008 and carried out negotiations between the Russians and the Georgians during Georgia’s August 2008 attack on South Ossetia.

Polls predict a large abstention, by 49 percent or more of the electorate. Sentiment in favor of European institutions in France has fallen from its historic highs of 74 percent in 1987 to only 49 percent today. In part, this is because the EU parliament has little power: for instance, it does not control the EU’s budget or name the executive personnel of the European Commission.

More broadly, the situation reflects popular disillusionment with the institutions of bourgeois Europe: they are seen as enforcing business interests against social spending and the working class (notably with the 2006 Bolkestein directive creating a single European market for services) and, after the experience of the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia, as incapable of stopping renewed war on the European continent.

According to the latest poll by CSA for *Le Parisien* and *Aujourd'hui en France*, the conservative UMP of President Nicolas Sarkozy is leading with 27 percent of the vote, and the Socialist Party (PS) comes next with 25 percent. The conservative MoDem (Democratic Movement) of François Bayrou would receive 12 percent of the vote, and the Europe-Ecology list led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit and José Bové 10 percent.

The NPA would obtain seven percent of the votes in the June election, ahead of the Left Front (the PG and the French Communist Party, PCF) and Workers’ Struggle (*Lutte Ouvrière*, LO), which would get three and two percent, respectively, giving the “far left” as a whole 12 percent. These vote totals represent a fall from these parties’ results in mid-February, when they received 18 percent of the vote—the NPA then had 9 percent, the PG 6 percent, and LO 3 percent.

This slump in support for the PS and other “left” parties in France is particularly remarkable, given that the current economic crisis is widely seen as a crisis of capitalism.

Official projections for French unemployment exceed 10 percent next year, the French economic monitor OFCE said in a statement. Over 20 percent of those aged under 25 are out of work.

Sarkozy has promised to spend hundreds of billions of euros to save the banks, whose executives have continued to receive millions in bonuses, provoking widespread anger among working people as tens of thousands of jobs are lost each month. In recent weeks, bitter and occasionally violent disputes have broken out at several French and foreign plants over job losses and redundancy terms, including “boss-nappings” of executives suspected of planning mass layoffs.

The fact that such a crisis and an upsurge in workers’ militancy produces not an upsurge, but a fall, in electoral support for the left bourgeois parties underscores the social gulf separating these parties

from the working class.

The 1997-2002 Plural Left government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin—comprising the PS, PCF, and Green Party—carried out series of austerity measures, including mass redundancies and the privatization of numerous public enterprises. The ultimate outcome was a humiliating defeat for Jospin in the first round of the presidential election of 2002. Left voters abandoned the PS, splitting their votes between several parties and voting for the “far left” in record numbers, and Jospin did not receive enough votes to advance to the second round.

Until the economic crisis broke last year, the PS was largely engaged in internal debates over how to remake itself as a party defending “a social and ecological market economy,” according to its April 2008 statement of principles. This entailed mounting no serious opposition to the social cuts proposed by a succession of right-wing governments since 2002.

Similar bitter experiences underlie a broad trend in favor of conservatives throughout Europe. The *Financial Times* noted on April 20, “In no big European country is the main party of the left, in or out of government, surging ahead. The Burson-Marsteller forecast for the European elections in June shows that the centre-right European People’s party will remain the largest group in the European parliament—even if the British Conservatives and the Czech ODS fulfill their aim to leave the EPP.”

The *Financial Times* quoted Olaf Cramme, director of the British center-left Policy Network: “Despite the scale of the crisis of neo-liberalism, left-wing proposals about how to remake capitalism aren’t being received well. The centre left finds it difficult to offer a credible alternative to how to ensure wealth and security. In fact, in many countries, the conservative parties have been less enthusiastic about the growth of finance capitalism and tougher on regulating the financial sector than the left.”

Much of the responsibility for the rightward shift in European politics falls to the so-called “far left,” especially the NPA. While presenting itself as the embodiment of a revolutionary alternative to the bourgeois left parties—notably the PS and PCF—it has in practice acted to demonstrate its essential agreement with the bourgeois left’s perspective. This leaves voters bereft of any outlet to express militant hostility to the policies pursued by the Plural Left parties.

Their calls for militant strikes are based on the premise—also espoused by the PCF and sections of the PS—that strikes and appeals for national regulation can usher in a new era of social solidarity, overseen by the state. With the class struggle intensifying and support for the PS weakening, the credibility of this perspective is rapidly declining.

There has been no clearer indication of the close connections between the “far left” and the establishment left than the peculiar negotiations between the NPA, PCF, and PG.

Having spent more than three decades inside the PS and held ministerial posts under Jospin, Mélenchon created the PG to promote illusions in the French establishment left’s ability to reform itself. After its formation last November, the PG proposed a “Left Front” in the European election, comprising the PCF and several other, smaller petty-bourgeois parties. The foundation of the PG also aimed to exert influence and pressure over the NPA: in the run-up to the NPA’s founding congress, Mélenchon proposed that the NPA should join the Left Front.

This proposal placed the NPA in a difficult situation. On the one hand, its growth depends on projecting a radical image and thus

maintaining a basic level of organizational independence from the PS. On the other hand, its membership is committed to “unitary struggle” together with the establishment left parties against the conservative parties, and its leadership works in close coordination with the PS and PCF leaderships.

The NPA cynically resolved this difficulty by proclaiming its independence from the Left Front parties, while continuing in practice to work with them. This was achieved in the course of a division of labor between Besancenot and Christian Picquet, a long-standing member of the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR, the NPA’s organizational forebear).

On January 20, Besancenot made the NPA’s counter-proposal: the NPA would ally with the Left Front, but only if the alliance lasted through not only the European election campaign, but the 2010 regional election campaign as well. He explained: “If it’s just to get together for the European elections and then for the regional elections in 2010, half of the Front goes back in with the PS, it will not have served its purpose.”

Besancenot made it clear that he had no principled objection to working with the Left Front parties. However, he presented the matter as wanting to maintain a certain independence from the PS. On February 1 for *France 5*, Besancenot repeated his offer, stressing he “does not have enemies in that camp. It must be a lasting front,” adding that the “essential question of independence vis-à-vis the PS must be resolved in a lasting fashion.”

On March 2, the NPA met PG and PCF delegations to discuss a possible alliance. The PG and PCF refused to commit to running regional election lists separate from the PS. On March 9, the NPA officially announced that it would run separately from the Left Front, citing “the refusal of the Left Front to exclude a definitive alliance with the PS in coming elections and especially for the regional elections.”

On March 8, the leader of a minority faction in the NPA, Christian Picquet, announced that he joined the Left Front for the EU election, while retaining his membership in the NPA.

During the negotiations, Picquet’s faction repeatedly signaled its interest in joining the Left Front and urged the NPA leadership to do so. Picquet explained that “the poll ratings and popularity of Besancenot are not enough to create a credible alternative on the left.”

To justify his decision, Picquet said it was “impossible to accept that party interests prevail over the general interest of left people.” He added he was deciding to participate in the Left Front “with full responsibility and awareness of the implications of his action,” promising that his fraction of the NPA would be “active and demanding partners” in the Left Front.

Picquet is acting with the tacit support of the NPA leadership: even though Picquet is ostensibly defying his party’s decision on participation in the Left Front, he has not been expelled or faced disciplinary action.



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