

European elections

French New Anti-Capitalist Party promotes Keynesian reformism

Antoine Lerougetel, Alex Lantier
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The European Union parliamentary election campaign of France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste—NPA) along reformist lines confirms the assessment which the *World Socialist Web Site* made of the NPA at the time of the organization's February 2009 founding congress.

Launched at the instigation of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), which dissolved itself into the NPA, the NPA initiative represented the LCR's attempt to repudiate any reference to Marxism and integrate itself into the French political establishment.

Even before the NPA founding congress, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a long-serving member of the Socialist Party (PS) and former minister in the 1997-2002 Plural Left government of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, broke away to form the Left Party in November 2008. He proposed that the NPA join the Left Front alongside the French Communist Party (PCF) and other "left" parties to contest the European elections. An active minority faction within the NPA, led by LCR veteran Christian Picquet, urged an open alliance with the Left Party and the PCF's Left Front.

These proposals placed the NPA, which recruits its membership based on protest politics and the media image of LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot, in a difficult situation. Joining the Left Front would publicly associate the NPA with Mélenchon's and the PCF's record of support for austerity policies. On the other hand, refusing to join the Left Front would lead to charges, from Picquet and the broader membership, of breaking solidarity with Mélenchon and the PCF.

The NPA leadership ultimately decided to stay separate from the Left Front, but to maneuver to place responsibility for the divide on the Left Front instead of on the NPA. Criticizing the PS for "social-liberal" austerity policies, it demanded that the Left Front organize a campaign separate from the PS not only for this year's European elections, but also for the 2010 French regional elections.

It made this request knowing that the PCF survives financially only thanks to its national alliance with the PS. The PS divides up legislative seats so as to enable the PCF to maintain a small group in the National Assembly and retain the resulting financial subsidy.

The NPA met with Left Party and PCF leaders March 2 to discuss an electoral alliance for the European elections. Predictably, these parties refused to commit to presenting lists separate from the PS. On March 8, Christian Picquet announced that his group, the Unitary Left, had joined the Left Front for the European Union election, while retaining his membership in the NPA.

Besancenot stressed that he had "no enemies" in the Left Front and was always prepared to extend a "fraternal hand" to it, but in order to maintain its pose of independence from the PS, the NPA announced March 9 that it

would run separately from the Left Front. It gave as an explanation "the refusal of the Left Front to exclude a definitive alliance with the PS in coming elections, and especially the regional elections."

On May 18, a *Convergences and Alternatives* faction constituted inside the NPA national leadership, advocating a "unitary struggle" together with Left Front parties. The group's spokesman, trade unionist Yann Cochin, told Agence France-Presse: "We are for a unitary front in the struggles and in the elections." He added that there was already a "convergence of demands" between the NPA and the Left Front. Cochin claimed his group represents roughly 10 percent of the NPA membership.

Thanks to large-scale media coverage of the NPA Congress and particularly of Besancenot, the NPA started its campaign polling at roughly 9 percent of the vote. In line with the establishment left's generally poor performance in the European campaign, this has fallen somewhat to 6-7 percent of the vote in most polls.

The Left Front has increased its projected vote, reportedly to some extent by winning over NPA voters, raising its poll numbers from 4.5 to 6 percent.

The mainstay of the NPA's campaign meetings has been calls for more protests and strikes, aiming to benefit from the upsurge in workers' struggles due to the economic crisis, particularly in the automobile and auto-supply sectors.

The problem facing the working class in France is not, however, lack of militant activity. It is principally the need to form an organization to coordinate workers' struggles and arm them with an independent and genuinely socialist political perspective, in opposition to France's trade unions.

The NPA uncritically supported the three one-day strike and protest actions organized this year—January 29, March 19 and May 1—by France's eight main trade union confederations (known as the G8). The NPA did not make the obvious political point that Sarkozy has nothing to fear from these occasional one-day strikes.

Since 2007, President Nicolas Sarkozy has obtained passage, in close concert with the unions, of all his pension cuts and labor "reforms." The unions' days of action were held for the purpose of defusing popular opposition and providing political cover for their collaboration with Sarkozy.

Rather than exposing this treachery, the NPA signed joint appeals of support for the unions with the PS, the PCF, the Left Party and other "left" groups.

The NPA carefully cultivates the fetish of trade union and "left" unity in protests against the social crisis created by the world economic crisis and the government's austerity policies. While occasionally criticising the trade union confederations—whose main components are the PCF-aligned CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and the SP-aligned CFTD

(French Democratic Confederation of Labour)—for their lack of militant initiatives, the NPA never denounces their integration into the French state and collaboration in preparing Sarkozy's attacks on living standards, working conditions and democratic rights.

The NPA's answer to the complicity of the unions with the state is not for workers to build a revolutionary party that will lead the working class in the struggle for power. Instead, Besancenot has repeatedly called for a "new May 1968," referring to the student protests and general strike that were sold out by the PCF and the CGT in exchange for wage concessions.

This call for a new 1968 is perhaps more revealing than Besancenot himself realizes. Calling for a new 1968 begs the question: What were the results of the experience of 1968?

While the ten-million-strong 1968 strike demonstrated the enormous power of the working class, French history since then has principally demonstrated the crushing effects of the strike's lack of political perspective. The ultimate defeat of the strike and the incorporation of ex-student radicals and the PCF into the French establishment ushered in four decades of political stagnation and defeats for the working class.

Entire industries—notably textiles and steel—have collapsed, devastating large sections of the country. Job-cutting and privatizations have gutted the public service sector. With the help of the PS and PCF, the establishment has succeeded in marginalising Marxism as a force exercising any significant political influence in France.

Whether Besancenot fully realizes it or not, his protest politics objectively form part of the French establishment's efforts to prevent the emergence of conscious working class politics in France and ensure similar defeats for the workers in the future. This is why the bourgeoisie is so eager to put him on television.

A pro-capitalist perspective

There was no clearer indication of this pro-capitalist orientation than the political statement published by François Sabado, a leading NPA member, in the May 2009 issue of *Contretemps*—a magazine devoted to the writings of long-time LCR members and the NPA's newer libertarian recruits among petty-bourgeois intellectuals. Despite its title—“An anti-capitalist alternative in Europe”—Sabado's article proposes that the NPA serve as an instrument to pressure the bourgeoisie into bailing out European capitalism.

He writes: “Europe could constitute the functional setting for a Keynesian bailout. However, the politics of the European Union clearly illustrate the incapacity of the ruling classes to carry out such a turn.” He laments that the ruling classes “do not intend to impose new financial and accounting standards that could effectively control the availability of credit to restart economic activity.”

Sabado implies that working class action is needed to push the bourgeoisie towards a Keynesian program. He writes: “The Keynesian option was not the socio-economic mode of construction chosen by the ideological debate inside the dominant classes. It was imposed by relations of power, a rising tide of workers' struggles.”

These lines constitute yet another public repudiation by Sabado and the NPA of revolutionary politics. Keynesian policies refer to deficit spending by the bourgeois state, boosting overall demand in the market to counterbalance the destruction of workers' purchasing power by the economic crisis. Such nationally-oriented policies have been carried out by many capitalist governments. They have been revived by the major powers on an ad hoc basis in response to the financial collapse of 2008. In the 1930s, they took such forms as massive military spending by Nazi Germany and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the US.

Keynesian policies seek not to overthrow capitalism, but to save it under conditions where the unfettered operation of the free market threatens economic collapse and the eruption of social revolution. Proponents of Keynesian policies, including those, like Sabado, who seek to channel workers' struggles behind a Keynesian program, are not “anti-capitalists” but apologists for and defenders of capitalism.

Sabado complains that the stimulus packages adopted by the major powers are too small to prevent a major fall in economic activity. “According to Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman,” he writes, “the Obama stimulus package, which amounts to over 5 percent of GDP in 2009, will succeed only in reducing by half the likely magnitude of the recession. What should we say of European stimulus plans? They are at best undersized: 1.3 percent of GDP in the UK, 1 percent in France, 0.8 percent in Germany, 0.1 percent in Italy.”

Sabado knows that central banks that oppose price inflation, such as the European Central Bank, are hostile to bailout packages that the bourgeois state often funds by printing money. He writes: “We must finish with the independence of the European Central Bank, which must become a public bank subject to the political institutions that the peoples of Europe will establish for themselves.”

In an aside, Sabado notes that the Keynesian policies of the 1930s, based as they were on individual capitalist states, “were essentially deployed on the basis of armaments economies.” Despite implicitly acknowledging the role Keynesian policies played in preparing the foundations of World War II, Sabado does not reconsider his advocacy of them.

In tandem with his assertion of the viability of capitalist reform, Sabado evinces complete demoralization towards the activity of the working class. His document mentions none of the strikes that are shaking the public sector, the universities and significant parts of the private sector (such as auto) which had not seen strikes in years. Even bourgeois politicians like PS leader Ségolène Royal and Gaullist leader Dominique de Villepin warn of a “revolutionary risk” in France. But Sabado can only opine, “There is no mechanical relation between economic crisis and the class struggle.”

As growing sections of the working class enter into struggle and the volume of world trade and industrial production collapse, Sabado is left to repeat the LCR's old phrases about “a social and ecological emergency plan,” which would include asking the state to outlaw sackings. His document has only this merit: it shows that these pseudo-radical phrases, long repeated in LCR documents, are consistent with a Keynesian, pro-capitalist orientation. They have nothing socialist, revolutionary or genuinely anti-capitalist about them.

Without any political proposals to offer to the growing layers of the working class entering into struggle, Sabado vents his fear that the NPA will lose influence to the neo-fascists. He writes: “The difference between historical periods [the 1930s and the present] are clear. A race is nonetheless taking place between workers, the social movements, the workers' movement, and the populist, authoritarian and xenophobic right.”

Sabado concludes with a discussion of the NPA's perspective for political action, addressing, in particular, the question of why the NPA is not building an open electoral alliance with sections of the PS or the PCF. This question, which substantial sections of the NPA membership ask themselves, is particularly relevant because Sabado has proposed a Keynesian policy—that is to say, one that can be carried out only with the collaboration of top echelons of the state bureaucracy. Such a policy requires support, therefore, from the established parties of the bourgeois left.

Sabado writes: “In all the countries where the radical left has participated in government with the social democracy or the center-left, it became a political satellite of the free-market left.” As examples, he cites the PCF, whose popularity plummeted as it participated in PS governments that imposed social austerity policies and, in the early 1990s,

joined the Gulf war against Iraq, and Romano Prodi's 2006-2008 Unione government in Italy, in which Rifondazione Comunista participated, and which pushed through pension cuts and participation in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

As the NPA's campaign and Sabado's perspective document show, the NPA is likewise a political satellite of the ruling parties, differing from the PCF and Rifondazione only in the eccentricity of its orbit. If Sabado refrains from openly consummating the alliance with the PS and the PCF that is implied by his political perspective, it is because he fears it will lead to a collapse in popular support for the NPA along the lines of what befell the PCF and Rifondazione.

The conclusion that Sabado draws in relation to them applies equally well to the NPA: "The attractive force of bourgeois institutions has been stronger than all the anti-free market proclamations."

The authors also recommend:

France: What is the LCR's New Anti-Capitalist Party?

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