

France: What is the significance of the falling-out between the NPA and the trade unions?

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The French media have made much of the refusal of some trade unions to attend Olivier Besancenot's New Anti-Capitalist Party's summer school, which took place from August 23 to 26 at Port-Leucate. This raises for workers the question: what is the political significance of the disagreements between the NPA and the trade unions?

The NPA, founded by the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) which dissolved itself February 10, 2009, had continued its predecessor's tradition of tendering a friendly invitation to the trade unions to participate in its summer schools. However, this year the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party), the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party) and FO (Workers Power) declined the invitation. Alain Guinot, confederal secretary of the CGT sent a letter to the NPA July 10 explaining its refusal. Guinot explained that the CGT could not participate in a discussion entitled "What strategies for the struggles", which confirms the CGT's understanding that "between our organisations there is a difference of conceptions as to our respective prerogatives."

Conscious of the mounting anger of workers at the string of betrayals by the trade unions of workers' struggles, the unions were warning the NPA that they would tolerate no criticism of their conduct. The CGT could not accept that a party should "take the place of the trade unions in their responsibility for the defence of the workers' interests and the running of struggles."

Confronted with this demand that it keep silent about the reactionary policies of the unions, the NPA tried to make its peace with the CGT. The NPA's reply, published in *Le Monde* under the signature of a leading member Sandra Demarcq, was: "We want to discuss with them [the CGT] about the perspectives for the return to work after the holidays, about the broad unity which has to be built between the trade unions and the political organisations."

The falling out between the CGT and the NPA sharpened with the invitation to Port-Leucate extended by the NPA to a CGT representative at Continental, Xavier Mathieu, who

denounced the CGT national leadership's isolation of the struggle of the workers at the Continental factory in Clairoix.

After participating in a joint demonstration with German Continental workers in Hanover, the Clairoix workers also occupied the Continental factory in Sarreguemines. After a court ruling rejecting their request for a suspension of the plan to close the site, several Continental workers, including Mathieu, wrecked the Oise department government offices (préfecture) in Compiègne.

Hampered by the lack of support from the CGT for their struggle, the workers were only able to obtain enhanced redundancy payments when their site closed.

On *France Info* radio, Xavier Mathieu explained that "Thibault [the CGT leader] and co. are only any use for hobnobbing with the government, for keeping the rank and file quiet. That's all those scum are good for."

Referring to the indictment handed down by the Compiègne court over the trashing of the *préfecture*, he added: "Bernard Thibault refused to demand our acquittal. It's shameful! The only response that we had was that the CGT does not support hooligans and that radicalisation was not one of its methods."

The NPA's invitation of Mathieu to the summer school had nothing to do with a fight to expose the policies of the trade unions, which have betrayed workers' struggles. In an interview in *Marianne*, Olivier Besancenot asserted: "It is not us who are at war with the CGT. It's them who are not coming to our summer school when we invited them. We won't be accused of that as well... With the CGT, we'll have to see each other, renew the discussion."

These exchanges bring out the episodic character of the differences between the unions and the NPA, whose orientation to the unions—not the anger of the workers with the unions—remains a central element of their politics.

The LCR has a long tradition of covering up for the trade unions' betrayals of workers' struggles. In 1995 the Juppé government launched an offensive against post-war social gains: pensions, social security and jobs. The workers

responded with a strike that got out of the control of the unions, threatening to become a general strike capable of bringing down the government. The unions, backed by the “far left”, obtained a partial withdrawal of the Juppé plan. This gave the president, Jacques Chirac, time to prepare the orderly transition from the government of the utterly discredited Gaullist Prime Minister Juppé to the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin.

In 2003, the pension reform imposing a 30 percent lowering of pensions and the decentralisation of the national public education system brought millions of state sector and private sector workers onto the streets. Fearing a repetition of 1995, the trade unions were under very heavy political pressure. The CFDT sabotaged the protests, coming to an agreement with the government, while FO, the CGT and the main teacher union, the FSU, maintained the tactic of intermittent strikes.

The trade unions adopted the same role in the struggle against the First Job Contract (CPE) in 2006 and the railway workers’ strikes in 2007-2008 against Sarkozy’s pension reform.

Today, the world economic crisis is sharpening all the political tensions that the actions of the unions and the NPA-LCR are designed to smooth over.

While the government is handing over billions of euros of taxpayers’ money to the banks, it is imposing measures against the workers—pension reform, factory closures, etc.—demonstrating its true class nature. Since the beginning of the crisis, unemployment has gone from 7.6 percent of the active population in the last quarter of 2008, to 9.1 percent in the second quarter of 2009, about 2.5 million unemployed. Moreover, unemployment will rise further, with the arrival of 300,000 students onto the jobs market.

The government is relying on the treachery of the unions to avoid a political offensive by the working class against the economic crisis. The unions have systematically kept isolated the struggles of workers at Continental, New Fabris, Caterpillar, and other plants, forcing workers to accept redundancy payments or flexible work schedules to safeguard the profitability of the businesses.

At the same time, the trade unions gave support to the reactionary policies of the PS. Between January and May, they organised demonstrations to support PS leader Martine Aubry’s modifications to Sarkozy’s plan to refloat the economy. Also the NPA collaborated with the PS, signing its appeals and calling on workers to participate in the days of action organised by the trade unions within the framework of Aubry’s political initiatives.

At its founding congress in February, the NPA rejected Trotskyism as a fundamental political principle. The rejection of Trotskyism is a signal to the bourgeoisie that the

NPA is ready to become a political institution of the capitalist class. The NPA is already trying to create the conditions in which its alliance with the bourgeois parties such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Left Party (PG) and the Communist Party (PCF) will go forward.

The consequences of the disagreement between the NPA and the CGT demonstrate also the reactionary and opportunistic character of the political conceptions of the NPA leadership.

For the NPA, a political struggle is inseparable from an orientation to the PS and other French bourgeois parties. Thus Philip Pignarre, a member of the NPA political committee, wrote in his book *Being Anti-Capitalist Today*: “the condition for a mass struggle to leave the purely social sphere and to begin to cause the political powers-that-be some serious problems, is that it obliges

the traditional parties of the left to take a stand. In this case, there can be a following stage: to ask the government to leave.”

In the course of an interview with Olivier Besancenot, *Marianne* asked him: “Are you in favour of the general strike? Which the unions say cannot just be decreed?” Besancenot replied: “We, when we talk of a general strike, we aren’t thinking of the ‘Great Social Revolution’ [*Grand Soir*, a term used cynically by Stalinists and reformists to reject any genuine socialist perspective]. We are just seeking effectiveness.”

In this rejection of the “*Grand Soir*”—that is, a workers’ struggle which would transform society—is expressed all the accumulated pessimism and hostility of the NPA towards the working class as a revolutionary class. Drained of its revolutionary content of a revolutionary confrontation between the whole working class and the bourgeoisie, the term “general strike” is merely a hollow slogan.



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