

France: NPA promotes Socialist Party's austerity agenda

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Plans of the French corporate and financial elite to carry out a major attack on social programs have the critical support of the Parti Socialiste (PS) and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA).

The government of President Nicolas Sarkozy is preparing major austerity measures, lengthening the pay-in period for pensions beyond 41 years and increasing the retirement age beyond 60, possibly to 65. The response of the NPA to the planned cuts is to call for joint work with the PS, even though the PS has made clear its intention to carry out similar and even larger cuts.

In a May 1 interview with *Le Parisien*, NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot invited PS First Secretary Martine Aubry for a joint meeting on May 6, together with the Parti de Gauche (PG, the Left Party, a split-off from the PS), the Stalinist Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Green party.

Besancenot said, "We must urgently develop a relationship of forces that can stop the government's reform by building a prolonged, general mobilization of working people." He described the NPA as "supporters of the largest united battle" for pensions. NPA members also marched with a PS delegation in a May Day demonstration.

The May 6 meeting did not produce a policy statement, but provided an opportunity for these parties to pose as defenders of workers' living standards against Sarkozy's plans. Besancenot described it as "a commitment of political and trade-union organizations to lead a united campaign...a campaign until victory."

One question that arises is: a victory for whom? There can be no doubt that the policies of a PS-led government,

were it to return to power, would be similar or worse than those of Sarkozy.

Citing pressure from banks that threaten to hold up lending, social democratic governments in Greece, Portugal and Spain are carrying out huge cuts. Prime Minister George Papandreou's PASOK government in Greece, elected last October, won the vote with false promises that he would increase spending and improve workers' living standards. Once in power, he has carried out a series of massive cuts over mass opposition.

The PS deputies in the National Assembly recently voted with the government to lend €16.8 billion to Greece, at punitive interest rates of 5 percent, as part of the European-IMF bailout package aimed at forcing Greece to carry out cuts.

Though the PS is not currently in power, it is a pro-business party. Soon after taking power in 1981, Socialist Party President François Mitterrand abandoned his nationalization program and imposed painful austerity measures that devastated manufacturing. Under the government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002), the PS privatized numerous state industries.

Hoping to capitalize on the unpopularity of Sarkozy, the PS is actively considering how to return to power in France. As such, it is preparing numerous documents on the right-wing policies it is preparing to implement. These documents underline the NPA's political duplicity in promoting the PS as a defender of pensions.

Olivier Ferrand, a PS member who participated in the Jospin government and is president of the PS-linked Terra Nova think-tank, recently wrote a series of articles in *Libération* on the perspectives for French state spending.

He stressed that the credit crisis in Greece could spread to France. He wrote: “Though French public debt remains ‘objectively’ sustainable, the psychology of the financial markets might decide otherwise.” In other words, should the banks drive up interest rates on France’s national debt, the PS would immediately bow to their demands, as Papandreou did.

He noted the public debt was expected to rise from 63 percent of GDP in 2007 to 83 percent by the end of 2010. He added, “On average, [France] increases its debts by almost €100 billion each year. It is this long-term structural degeneration that we must attack. We can no longer put off the necessary reforms.”

The task of an incoming PS government in 2012 would be to carry out immense, unprecedented cuts, Ferrand explained: “After 35 years of procrastination, we must now turn to a true ‘budgetary revolution.’ A Herculean task awaits the left, in 2012, if it returns to power.”

Ferrand made clear that such cuts would aim to funnel money away from the working class and to big business. Referring to last year’s plans for a national subscription, where the state would borrow €35 billion to invest in major French firms, he said, “We need one ‘national subscription’ per year” to boost France’s competitiveness.

On April 27, the PS National Council adopted a project for a “New Economic, Social, and Ecological Model,” which is widely seen as the party’s program for the 2012 presidential election. The orientation of this project essentially parallels that of Ferrand’s writings in *Libération*. There are plans to raise French competitiveness on world markets, increase investment in profitable industries, and create an ecological tax.

The NPA’s promotion of the PS is, in this context, a critical lesson on the class character and orientation of France’s middle class parties. Drawn from sections of the union bureaucracy, academia, and students either oblivious or hostile to the interests of the working class, the NPA demands that political opposition to Sarkozy be directed behind the PS—and thus, behind the banks and capitalists.

This perspective is, to varying degrees, consciously

understood by the NPA leadership. As another recent comment by Besancenot made clear, the NPA sees as the precondition for successful struggle, the support of a section of the “top” of society.

On the eve of the February 15 “social summit,” where the government met with unions and employers organizations to discuss upcoming pension cuts, Besancenot made an appeal to the PS to defend pensions. A few weeks before the summit, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry had publicly proposed increasing the retirement age by two years to 62. In response, Besancenot appealed to leading PS and PCF officials to form a “unitary collective” against pension cuts.

Besancenot said he hoped this movement would be “crowned with success like the struggle against the *Contrat première embauche* (CPE) was in 2006. In fact, the CPE movement was sold out by the unions and the “left,” in exchange for a partial pullback of the government. Sections of the unions acted directly in concert with Sarkozy, who used then-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin’s defeat to promote his own 2007 presidential campaign.

Besancenot continued, “To be victorious, one needs not only a mobilization at the base but also divisions at the summit of society...those existed at the time [of the CPE struggle] between Nicolas Sarkozy and Dominique de Villepin.”

These comments highlight the political bankruptcy of the NPA and France’s broader milieu of middle class parties: their perspective is to periodically promote various factions of the ruling class, as they pursue ever more right-wing policies.



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