

# The French New Anti-Capitalist Party and the anti-burqa campaign

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In recent weeks, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has announced a series of deeply anti-democratic measures, including the persecution and deportation of Roma, the prosecution of the parents of young “offenders,” and a proposed law enabling to government to strip immigrants of their French nationality.

These policies underscore the significance of the campaign launched by Sarkozy last year to ban the burqa. This racist anti-Muslim drive, initiated with the approval of the Socialist Party (PS) and the French Communist Party (PCF), set in motion a violent turn by the government against religious liberties and the rule of law.

All French political parties, including those of the so-called “left,” bear a heavy responsibility for this anti-democratic offensive, which they have supported in various ways.

The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) participated in its own way. It was obliged to make some superficial criticisms of the law, all the while accepting the fundamental premises of the anti-burqa campaign and working to block a principled opposition to Sarkozy’s racist and law-and-order policies.

Sarkozy’s speech on the burqa and national identity was delivered in June 2009. It took till the end of the year for the NPA website to deal with the subject, posting only two articles. These merely announced that the NPA would not participate in the debate over the ban.

In an article entitled “National Identity: Nauseating Sarkozyism,” posted on December 10, 2009, the NPA wrote, “Beyond the electoral manoeuvring, the ‘big debate on national identity’ testifies to unabashed racism and state xenophobia; it is out of the question for us to participate in the masquerade of the ‘debate.’”

This absurd declaration says much about the NPA, a party that is indifferent to workers’ democratic rights. Having remarked that the state was encouraging racism—a dangerous political turn to the right, whose extent has since revealed itself—the NPA announced that it would not intervene against the campaign, which it trivialized as “a masquerade.”

The other NPA article in 2009 on the burqa, entitled “Internationalists and Proud of It,” claimed to oppose the campaign on “national identity” declared by Sarkozy. The NPA wrote that with the anti-burqa law, the government “is manipulating for its own ends a few hundred women by demonising them, thus shutting them up in their homes, while on the contrary it would be necessary to allow them to turn outwards,

which means providing the resources for social centres, free education....”

The so-called “internationalism” of the NPA was totally without substance. It limited itself to making vague recommendations on social policy to the French bourgeois state—which the parties of the official “left,” the PS and PCF, well versed in implementing austerity measures, would never adopt.

In order to mask its lack of opposition to the law-and-order campaign of the government, the NPA adopted a feminist posture. On May 19, 2010, in an article entitled “The Full Veil: An Inefficient and Demagogic Law,” the NPA remarked, “The burqa and the niqab are at the heart of a fundamentalist project which is in contradiction with our values on all counts. But it is first and foremost by women fighting together for the right to use their bodies as they wish that women emancipate themselves.”

This formula broadly coincided with the positions of the government, which justified its anti-burqa measures by insisting on the right of women to exercise their individual freedom. The NPA simply added a recommendation that women should fight “together”—an NPA mantra principally characterised by its lack of class content.

It would have been impossible for the NPA to deal with the class questions raised by the government’s racist campaign—the French government’s relations with Islamic countries, notably its participation in the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, where many women wear the burqa; or the frontal attack on past social gains by the European ruling classes in the course of the economic crisis, which they are attempting to carry out by encouraging anti-Muslim racism as a means of dividing the workers.

On these most essential questions, the NPA has aligned itself with the positions of imperialism.

The start of the anti-burqa campaign coincided with the so-called Green Revolution in Iran, an attempt, supported by American and French imperialism, to reverse the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009. By supporting the “green” demonstrations, the NPA placed itself on the side of Washington and French Foreign Ministry, and against the majority of the Iranian electorate.

Through the electoral alliances that it was preparing to negotiate with the PS and PCF—the parties in government when France sent its troops to participate in the occupation of Afghanistan in 2001—the NPA was quietly indicating that it had no principled objection to the Afghan war.

In fact, the international Pabloite tendency, represented in France by the NPA, supports the war. The most striking example is the NPA's Italian collaborators grouped around Sinistra Critica, who gave a vote of confidence in 2007 to the Romano Prodi government, which was supporting the war in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the NPA was concluding a campaign of support for trade union demonstrations on the plan to be adopted for economic revival after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. By associating itself with the PS and PCF, and other parties of the bourgeois "left," it gave implicit support to the economic recovery plan proposed by Martine Aubry, PS national secretary.

The consequences for workers were disastrous. The Elysée relied on the unions and the parties of the bourgeois "left" to channel the anger of workers and get the principle of a "recovery plan" adopted to bail out the banks at the expense of the working class.

As regards the workers' struggles—concentrated at the time in the automobile sector, which was devastated by the recovery plan—the NPA abstained. Its spokesperson Olivier Besancenot explained, "The NPA could gather representatives of fifteen or so companies in France affected by layoffs and pull 'an NPA appeal' out of its hat. That is not its way of doing things."

In other words, the NPA advanced no opposition to the betrayal being carried out by the trade unions.

In the autumn of 2009, while the NPA was refusing to participate in the debate on the burqa and national identity, it attempted to negotiate an alliance, within the framework of the regional elections of March 2010, with parties that had launched the anti-burqa debate. The NPA negotiated region by region with the Left Front, which grouped together the PCF and ex-members of the PS in the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This is despite the fact that the PCF, in the person of André Gerin, as well as the PS, had participated in the commission for a law on the burqa, providing a "left" cover for the reactionary measure.

The NPA finally presented its own list of candidates in 15 regions, campaigning jointly with the Left Front in three regions and linking up with the Left Party in three out of the 15 regions where the PS and PCF stood a joint slate.

Having demonstrated the small distance separating it from the rest of the "left," the NPA permitted itself a gesture of simulated opposition to Sarkozy's anti-Muslim campaign. It ran a Muslim candidate, Ilham Moussaïd, from the Vaucluse department in the south of France, who wore the hijab. This decision provoked intense debate within the party as well as a hateful media campaign against the right of Moussaïd to stand as a candidate.

The candidacy of Moussaïd had nothing to do with defending the rights of women wearing the burqa in France. In fact, during her campaign, Moussaïd repeated the feminist themes that the government was using to give a pseudo-progressive façade to its reactionary anti-burqa campaign.

The NPA, in fact, hysterically denounced women wearing the burqa. Josette Trat, a Paris university sociologist and NPA member, wrote of women wearing the burqa, "We can be shocked, revolted, when we come across these birds of death. We can be convinced (and we are) that the full veil attacks human dignity, the equality between men and women, and it must not be treated as a

normal fact of life." Nevertheless, Trat judged, a law banning the burqa would be an attack on democratic rights.

After the March regional elections, whose results were disappointing for the NPA, criticisms started to fly against Moussaïd within the party. She was expelled in April.

Having adapted to the positions of the ruling class on all the fundamental political questions, including the bating of their own candidate, the NPA had to resort to childish antics to maintain its "internationalist" pretense.

In "National Identity (2): Five Smart Replies to a Nasty Question," the NPA encouraged its readers to "screw France." It wrote, "To screw France and do it together is a way of reminding ourselves that anti-patriotism must not be the preserve of a Brassens or a Renaud [anti-establishment folk singers], and that it is urgent to re-conquer a freedom of tone, an autonomy of thought and a right to irreverence by being in solidarity with those men and women who, while being the first targets of the witch-hunt, have the courage of heresy."

This is a pretentious lie. Far from being guided by anti-patriotism, internationalism, or even a hypothetical freedom of thought, the NPA has adjusted its political orientation to the needs of the French bourgeoisie.

The leading cadre of the NPA have no principled opposition to the idea of banning the burqa. In an interview appearing on May 2, *Le Parisien* asked spokesperson Besancenot if "a fine of €150 to punish the wearing of the veil in public places" was "fair." Besancenot replied, "*The problem is not the fine*, but the use the politicians make of it. The burqa oppresses women, but any law would be inefficient and unfair. Who would be the big winners? The extremists of the far right and religious fundamentalists." [emphasis added]

This position is incoherent and reactionary, claiming to separate a law from the political forces that support it and benefit from it. With this reply, Besancenot is indicating that he has no principled objection to a neo-fascist law, but only a tactical objection. It would benefit the National Front, not the NPA or the bourgeois "left." This says a great deal about the political orientation of his party and the anti-democratic backsliding of all the established parties in France.



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