

How the NPA disorients the struggle against Sarkozy's cuts

Alex Lantier
15 October 2010

France's Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) is a petty-bourgeois party that workers seeking to mount a real struggle against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts will have to defeat. Despite their efforts to appear "left" in demonstrations and on television, the NPA's politics are not based on developing strike action into a struggle for political power, but on tying protest actions to pro-business forces in the political establishment.

The communiqué from NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot yesterday said that he wanted to see "a new May '68"—that is, a repeat of the 10-million strong general strike of May 1968 that staggered the Stalinist Parti Communiste Français and led to the resignation of General Charles de Gaulle as president. He was appealing to broad and growing support in the population for a general strike against Sarkozy's cuts.

Asked last week how he saw the protests, Besancenot explained, "[W]hen rail workers and students are going at it together, it brings back good memories.... There's a delicious scent like 1995 [when a rail workers' strike forced the partial retraction of Prime Minister Alain Juppé's pension cuts] and the First Job Contract" (CPE, Contrat Première Embauche). In 2006, youth protests forced the retraction of the CPE, which would have made it easier to hire and fire young workers at their first jobs.

Asked what alliances the NPA might make with the "left"—a term taken to include such forces as the bourgeois *Parti Socialiste* (PS)—Besancenot declined to be specific. However, he said that the NPA had "never had pretensions to being by ourselves the solution to everything".

This communiqué epitomizes the NPA's ability to conceal a rightwing program with "left" phrases. For Besancenot and the NPA, the call for a general strike does not mean fighting to organize mass strike action against Sarkozy, bring down his government, and build a

workers' government. Besancenot's statement makes no criticism of the unions' refusal to organize a political struggle with the government.

Rather, his statement is a way of promoting the NPA's protest politics, while developing alliances with the ruling class. The principal result of such a policy is to block the development of mass workers struggles against the government and its austerity policies. While Besancenot himself was skilled enough not to spell this out, NPA member Sandra Demarcq laid it out more clearly in a recent statement entitled, "An explosive situation".

She wrote, "The NPA participates with the whole French left including the PS...in a unitary campaign against pension cuts." She acknowledged that there were many "disagreements" inside the "unitary coalition", however.

One not-insignificant detail is that the most powerful force in this "campaign" supports the cuts. Demarcq writes, "The disagreement over demands is in particular with the Socialist Party. They agree with the demand of keeping the minimum retirement age at 60, but they defend the idea that workers must work longer to get a full pension. And so they voted with the rightwing deputies for the increase in the number of years worked needed to qualify for a full pension".

The PS claims to oppose increasing the retirement age past 60 are a fraud. Since the required pay-in period is now to increase to 41 years and beyond, and most workers officially enter the work force when they are well over 20, the minimum retirement age figure is a dead letter. Nevertheless, after the PS has effectively voted for the cuts, the NPA still describes it as a "left" party!

Given its rightwing record, why is the PS interested in a coalition with the NPA, which calls for protests? This becomes clear from a consideration of the 1995 and 2006 struggles Besancenot praised.

In both cases, those who went on to form the NPA in

2009 refused to organize mass industrial action against the government. Instead, they insisted that the unions had to plan and lead workers' struggles, even though the unions clearly had no intention of organizing a mass political strike against the government.

As a result, these struggles were denied a political perspective and ran out of steam, allowing the ruling class to regroup and carry out more social attacks. As Sarkozy's arrogant refusal to modify his cuts shows, this is what the ruling class hopes will happen now, as well. The PS is willing to help publicize the NPA, which it hopes will help guarantee such an outcome.

The record is quite clear, however. The 1997 elections brought to power the PS government of Lionel Jospin, which carried out a massive privatization program. As for the 2006 protests, Sarkozy's visible support for them (against his rival, then-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin) boosted his opinion ratings and helped him win the presidency in 2007—and then carry out his rightwing, pro-austerity program.

The social consequences for the generation that has grown up in the intervening period have been disastrous. With the number of secure jobs collapsing, huge numbers of workers have been forced into temp jobs, or unemployment—as unemployment insurance was slashed. They have also seen measures to lengthen the work week, and a series of pension cuts leading up to Sarkozy's current “reform”, to mention only the most prominent cuts.

As the NPA itself acknowledged in a recent statement (“The youth sh*ts on Fillon and Sarkozy”), “[T]he youth understand the situation very well, that their generation is being sacrificed, that they will live less well than previous generations”.

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

Anyone honestly holding this position would conclude that, whatever temporary successes the workers may have won in 1995 and 2006, these struggles ultimately produced horrible defeats. Why then does Besancenot find that they have a “delicious scent?”

The recent statement by Pierre-François Grond, a leading member of the NPA's national leadership, suggests that the “delicious scent” the NPA smells is that of the state dinners, fine perfumes, and other perks that come with ministerial office in a future coalition government with the PS.

In “For a social and democratic uprising,” Grond writes, “[T]he relationship of forces for 2012 [the next

presidential election] is being determined now. One condition for victory is the capacity to build...popular mobilizations supported by a united social and political left that is a combat party”.

Despite the jumble of adjectives, Grond's meaning is fairly clear. By claiming credit for calling protest actions, the NPA hopes to organize a victory of a “united left” in the next elections. Such a victory would produce a PS president who would feel obliged to hand out a few minor offices to the NPA (and the Parti Communiste Français and similar right-wing small fry).

The character of such a government is clear from the identity of the man described as the most likely presidential candidate of the PS in 2012: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who is now the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Strauss-Kahn has helped impose drastic austerity measures on many indebted states, notably in Greece, where he insisted on huge social cuts in exchange for a European Union-IMF bailout earlier this year. The IMF also recently released a report on French pensions aligned on the PS's position—backing the “fiscal equilibrium” of Sarkozy's cuts, yet recommending that the minimum retirement age be kept at 60.

That the NPA would consider entering into an alliance with Strauss-Kahn, or even his future government, speaks volumes on its class character.

The social-democratic government of Giorgios Papandreou in Greece gives an example of how such a government could rapidly turn to implement massive austerity measures against the workers. Elected in October 2009, as he promised to increase social spending by billions of euros, Papandreou claimed upon reaching office that he had suddenly discovered that Greece had far larger deficits than was previously acknowledged. Like his social-democratic counterparts in Spain and Portugal, Papandreou was soon involved in negotiations with the IMF and other financial institutions to carry out huge social cuts.

The NPA and the entire bourgeois “left” establishment enter into the coming social struggles as enemies of the working class. As the workers prepare for mass strikes and political struggles, the watchword must be: no confidence in the petty-bourgeois friends of the IMF.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact