New Anti-Capitalist Party endorses French unions' sellout of pension strikes

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The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) held a meeting of its National Political Committee (CPN) last weekend to take stock of the October strikes against French President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts and prepare its next national congress. The CPN's statement sought to hide the party's endorsement of the unions' and "left" parties' sell-out of the strike.

The defeat of the strikes last month, and the passage of deeply unpopular legislation that includes a two-year increase in the retirement age, was a direct product of the actions of the unions. After first negotiating the cuts with Sarkozy, the unions then worked to contain mass popular opposition by organizing a series of one-day protests that did not seek to challenge the political authority of Sarkozy.

When police action smashed the powerful oil and port workers' strike, the unions stood aside and refused to mobilize any industrial action in sympathy with the strikers. This led to a fall-off in workers' attendance in the protests, despite continuing mass support for strikes against the cuts. The government seized the initiative by pushing through the legislation, and has begun negotiations with the unions for new cuts.

The NPA seeks to cover-up this record and its own role by employing activist rhetoric. "In France, the pension law is the first act of a hyper-austerity plan," the statement declares. "In the face of destruction, we respond with mobilization! In the face of the law against pensions, we massively demanded to retire the law! In the face of its promulgation, we say abrogation!"

Such phrase-mongering is utterly bankrupt. The NPA has no way to enforce its request for abrogation of the law on Sarkozy: strikes are now limited to a few militant workplaces, which Sarkozy plans to ignore.

More importantly, the NPA is hostile to developing a political campaign to rally the social opposition that it claims to represent. The only viable perspective for renewed struggle against social cuts is one the NPA rejects: mobilizing the workers independently of the unions, in a political struggle to bring down Sarkozy and build a workers' government fighting for socialist policies.

Instead, the NPA aims to bolster the authority of the unions and the pro-business "left" establishment, notably the Socialist Party (PS), which is seeking to manipulate popular opposition to Sarkozy for its own electoral purposes. Throughout the strike, the NPA insisted on the need for a "unitarian" campaign with the PS, a right-wing party that supports austerity measures.

The NPA insists that workers still on strike should continue striking, under the leadership of the unions: "The reinforcing of action in our workplaces by combative trade unions is obviously the order of the day."

The NPA states its support for the PS, even as it acknowledges that the PS supports cutting pensions: "The Socialist Party attends demonstrations—and that is a good thing—but it is caught in an insoluble contradiction. The PS's position is not fundamentally different from that of the government on the question of pensions."

In fact, it is not a good thing that the PS, a pro-business party, attends demonstrations and tries to deceive workers and youth there about its intentions. This only sows confusion and dulls workers' class consciousness, helping the unions arrange a sell-out and avoid a political clash between the workers and Sarkozy. The NPA can applaud this only because of its own conciliatory attitude towards capitalist austerity politics.

The NPA concludes its statement with its signature "radical" demands. It writes that the situation requires "an anti-capitalist program, the social appropriation of the main means of production and financial resources, the redistribution of wealth, the protection of resources, and a break with existing institutions."

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The reader is left to decide what this means by himself. On the one hand, the demand for public, socialized ownership of the banks and major industries is a classical demand of the socialist revolution as formulated by Marxists. Coming from the NPA, however, this is simply a political fiction: while advancing these demands, the NPA suggests that a revolution can be carried out in alliance with the PS and with unions that do nothing to defend workers against police strike-breaking!

This is, indeed, the NPA's specialty: combining false, pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric with a defense of the political establishment.

The NPA has consistently taken the position that the unions are the legitimate leadership of workers' industrial struggles—a position that it seeks to camouflage by occasionally criticizing the tactics of the unions. Under conditions in which the unions isolate workers' struggles and plan social cuts with the state, however, this means subordinating the working class to the capitalist state.

In a November 11 article, "Must we separate the political and the social," the NPA explains its attitude on this issue. It criticized the French Communist Party (PCF) for "defending a division of labor that is profoundly anchored in the French workers' movement: the unions get the streets and social protests, while parties deal with elections and political institutions. This is questionable in many ways."

The NPA "questions" this division only to re-affirm it a few lines later, however: "Trade-union independence is a critical social right that cannot be questioned—it is inside the unions that the unions' orientation is decided."

The NPA stated its position less ambiguously during a meeting with the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union last year, during which it reassured the CGT that it would abandon its mild criticisms of the CGT's isolation of last year's auto strikes.

In an October 2, 2009 communiqué, "NPA-CGT meeting," it declared: "The NPA reaffirmed that it does not aim to substitute itself for the trade unions though, as a political organization with a project, it has views on the sort of immediate demands that can respond to the attacks of the Medef [business federation] and of the government." It added, "The principle of trade-union autonomy in the defense of workers is not challenged by the NPA."

Such statements not only expose the NPA's fundamentally hostile class position vis-à-vis workers striking against Sarkozy's cuts, but vis-à-vis the heritage of Trotskyism. The NPA's predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), was nominally a Trotskyist organization. However, it set up the NPA to dissociate itself from the legacy of Trotsky and revolutionary Marxism.

The traditional document sanctioning the separation of parties' and unions' work in the French trade union movement is the Amiens Charter, adopted at the 1906 Congress of the CGT. At the time, the CGT consisted of revolutionary syndicalists hostile to parliamentary opportunists in the Socialist Party. The Charter called for a "struggle for a global transformation of society in complete independence from political parties and from the state."

Trotsky criticized those who refused to modify their understanding of the 1906 Amiens Charter after the outbreak of World War I and the conquest of power by the workers in Russia, during the 1917 Revolution. He insisted that these events showed the need for revolutionary proletarian parties struggling for state power around the world.

In "The Errors of Principle of Syndicalism," written in 1923 to win over working-class militants under the influence of anarcho-syndicalism, he said: "With the exception of one country [the USSR], state power throughout the world is in the hands of the bourgeoisie. It is in this, and only in this, that, from the point of view of the proletariat, the danger of state power lies. The proletariat's historical task is to wrest this most powerful instrument of oppression from the hands of the bourgeoisie."

Much has changed, of course, since then; a political gulf separates the anarcho-syndicalists of the 1920s, who were class fighters, from those like the NPA who today tacitly endorse state strike-breaking. However, the arguments that Trotsky made to win the anarcho-syndicalists over to Marxism read as condemnations of the policies of the political charlatans of today. The NPA's tenuous association with Trotskyism, like its claim to support workers' struggles against capitalism, is a fraud.

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