

The case of Fabien Engelmann in France

Trade unionist, ex-member of Lutte Ouvrière and the NPA—and neo-fascist

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The French press recently reported the case of a CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union official, Fabien Engelmann, who spent 10 years in “far-left” organisations, first in Lutte Ouvrière (LO—Workers Struggle), then in the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA—Nouveau parti anticapitaliste), and who will now be a candidate in the upcoming local elections for the neo-fascist National Front (FN). Contrary to the declarations of these organisations, Engelmann’s political trajectory is not an aberration, but the consequence of their own perspectives.

Engelmann is a 31-year-old local government worker in Nilvange, a small town in Lorraine in eastern France. The Nilvange town hall has been run by the Socialist Party (PS) since 1965. This steel-producing region lost thousands of jobs in the 1980s to 1990s, with the shutting down of steel plants largely organised by successive PS governments.

Engelmann joined the FN last January, after Marine Le Pen was elected its president, on the grounds that she had “de-Satanised” the organisation. In reality, the growing integration of the FN into mainstream politics in France is not the product of a supposed move by this party to the left. Rather, the entire French political and union establishment is rushing to the right. (See “French media gives glowing coverage of new National Front leader”.)

After *Le Figaro* wrote an article about Engelmann on January 24, the CGT started proceedings on February 16 to expel him and the local union branch that overwhelmingly supported him. He declared his intention to take legal action against the CGT for political discrimination.

The NPA also published a statement on Engelmann, claiming that his was an “extremely rare” case.

These are merely attempts to dodge the serious political questions raised by the Engelmann affair. The latter has, in fact, exposed affinities between the FN, layers of the trade union bureaucracy, and its supporters among the ill-named “far-left” parties, such as LO and the NPA.

Contrary to the declarations of these organisations, Engelmann’s trajectory is not an isolated one. Many other “left” activists or union officials seem likely to follow his route. Interviewed by *Libération*, Baptiste Talbot—a leader of the CGT federation in Moselle, the department in which Nilvange is located—declared: “It wouldn’t astonish me if other cases come to light between now and the local and presidential elections”.

Engelmann is supported by nearly all 26 of his local branch members and claims that “dozens of CGT members who support or have joined the FN will be ‘coming out’ in a couple of weeks”.

The CGT local secretary, Denis Pesce, told *Libération*: “What the activists are telling us in the workplaces is worrying, in particular about the impact among certain workers of the ‘social’ talk of Marine Le Pen. People are less frightened to talk about it and now openly flaunt their position”. The *Républicain Lorrain* newspaper quotes an anonymous “CGT leader,” who says: “In our branch, three quarters of the guys vote for Le Pen or [for conservative President Nicolas] Sarkozy, and they don’t hide it”.

Already in 2007, the CGT had commissioned an opinion poll that revealed 11 percent of its members had voted for the FN. The president of the FN group in the Lorraine regional government—an official of the CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers) trade union, Thierry Gourlot—boasted of having FN activists “from all organisations, some of whom hold official positions, including in the CGT”.

The press also records cases of student activists crossing from the nominally “far-left” parties to the FN. One example is Vénussia Myrtil, a 21-year-old psychology student who went through the youth organisation of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR, forerunner of the NPA) “during the protests against the Darcos education reforms to fight big business and for more social justice”, to become an NPA sympathiser.

She is now a candidate for the FN in local elections in the Yvelines near Paris, explaining her departure as follows: “Their [The NPA’s] internationalist position annoyed me. I didn’t like Arabs either praying in the street during pro-Palestinian demonstrations”.

The FN youth organisation claims to have recruited 2,000 youth since mid-January, of whom “many” come from the “left or extreme left”.

Far from representing a “rare” case, as the NPA claims, the Engelmann example raises a phenomenon of the greatest importance for the working class: the swing into the camp of neo-fascism of a sizeable layer of union bureaucrats and the “far-left” party members.

While such moods do not speak for a majority of working people in France, they are undoubtedly having an impact on sections of the population. Amid the vast media promotion of Marine Le Pen, a recent poll found that currently the FN would have the largest vote—23 percent—of any party, were next year’s presidential elections to be held immediately. As all efforts by the working class to oppose social cuts and war have been strangled by the unions and “far-left” parties, the FN’s right-wing protest rhetoric allows it to effectively monopolise the language of social protest.

These developments have the greatest impact on the unions and “far-left” parties themselves. They have always had a perspective of economic nationalism, encouraging illusions that the bourgeois state would defend workers’ living conditions. Currently, under the impact of globalisation and the pro-capitalist policy of the “left” and “far-left” parties, these hopes have been largely abandoned by the bulk of the population.

The unions and “far left” have, however, continued to sanction the politics of the bourgeois “left”. For decades, they have smothered any workers’ struggles that risked provoking a revolutionary confrontation between the working class and the bourgeois governments, of the “left” or of the right, which were implementing social austerity policies. Thus, the railroad strikes of 1995 and 2007, the teachers’ anti-pension-cut struggle of 2003, and last year’s oil strike—to name only a few struggles—were isolated by the unions and defeated, with devastating impacts on working-class living standards.

The unions and “far-left” organisations have often cited as an excuse one of the traditions of French bourgeois republicanism: the principle of separation between workers’ struggles, supposedly led by the unions, and political activity. This principle is supported by the NPA and LO—which have never wanted to criticise the union bureaucracy’s strangulation of strikes and protests, citing “respect for trade union independence”.

It is telling that this principle is also embraced by the neo-fascist union officials around Engelmann. For these people, politics and union work are two totally autonomous activities. “His being in the FN is not incompatible with the union. That has nothing to do with it. Furthermore, in 2010, Fabien [Engelmann] was on the NPA election slate, and that posed no problem”, one of his colleagues explained to *L’Est Républicain*.

As class tensions explode amid the world economic crisis and revolutionary workers’ struggles develop in North Africa, the nationalist, anti-worker character of these organisations push certain of their members to assume a political coloration more in keeping with their social activity. Activists like Engelmann are abandoning the diffuse and deceitful pretensions to “communism” or “anti-capitalism” of LO and the NPA, to directly display the classical ideology of anti-worker nationalism: fascism.

These events are a powerful confirmation of the Trotskyist critique of the formerly “left” organisations advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International. The fact that such forces pass through the “far left” underlines above all the right-wing character of these parties, the class chasm separating the bureaucracies from the workers, and the political vacuum that exists on the left. The wider circumstances of Engelmann’s evolution underline the historic bankruptcy of the perspectives of defending workers’ interests on a national programme.

The consequences of the collaboration of unions and the “far-left” organisations with the bourgeois “left” in government have been disastrous for workers, and notably those of the Lorraine region where Engelmann lives. Soon after his election in 1981, Socialist Party President Mitterrand declared during a visit to Lorraine: “No jobs will be cut in the steel industry without another one being created beforehand in another sector”.

In February 1982, Mitterrand nationalised the whole of steel with the support of the French Communist Party (PCF—which had called for this policy for years), while heavily compensating the capitalist owners. This allowed them to abandon the industry to go into finance under

comfortable conditions. In June 1982, the state announced cuts of 12,000 jobs, which were followed by many others without compensation.

Engelmann himself says that he “started his interest in politics very young, becoming conscious of social inequalities, seeing employees and workers made redundant as if they were nobodies, whilst it is they who make the economy function”.

This entirely legitimate sentiment was not, however, tied to a broader political orientation to the working class and to socialism, but to various single-issue and right-wing conceptions—especially xenophobia. Resentment against immigrants, and particularly those from the former French North African colonies, perhaps came easily to Engelmann, whose grandparents were repatriated from Algeria. More broadly, however, such resentment was fed by the official left parties.

In a recent interview, Engelmann quotes approvingly the anti-immigrant prejudices of historical PS and PCF leaders: “We have neither the moral obligation nor the possibility of taking in all the world’s poor, as was said by the Socialist [ex-Prime Minister] Michel Rocard or George Marchais the communist [party leader] who in the 1980s demanded a stop to immigration”.

Engelmann joined LO in 2001 because he “appreciated [LO leader] Arlette Laguiller’s straight talking and sincerity”. He remained in LO until June 2008. LO felt sufficiently close to him politically to stand him as a candidate in several elections: for the legislative elections in 2007 in the Longwy constituency (of the Meurthe-et-Moselle region), and then as the leading candidate for the municipal elections in 2008 in Thionville, in eastern France, where he obtained 6.4 percent of the vote.

Apart from the personality of Laguiller, his entry into LO was based on ideas that had no connection to Marxism, but which were clearly to the right. As Engelmann explained, “I have been a political activist since I was very young in associations for animal protection, because I attribute great importance to the respect for life, and I admit my admiration for Brigitte Bardot”.

Bardot, a film star in the 1960s and an animal rights defender, is an open right-winger and married to a close associate of Jean-Marie Le Pen (the founder of the FN). She is often the subject of legal action on charges of racial discrimination over her statements on the slaughter of sheep by Moslems on the occasion of the Moslem festival of Aid el-Kebir.

The support accorded by LO to the anti-Islamic campaigns of the French bourgeoisie under the cover of “secularism”—such as the 2004 law against the wearing of the veil by girls at school—no doubt facilitated Engelmann’s membership in LO, just as it did his transition to the FN.

Engelmann went over to the NPA in May 2009 due to “the closed aspect of LO in its tendency to refuse associations with other left forces”. He was selected as second on the NPA electoral slate for the regional elections in Moselle in 2010.

The NPA is a creation of the ex-LCR (Revolutionary Communist League), which sought to amalgamate all the “anti-capitalist” protesters in order to channel them behind the PS, or more generally the bourgeois order.

The itinerary of Engelmann underlines the correctness of the analysis of the NPA by the WSW, which wrote at the time of the founding NPA congress in 2009, “The choice by the LCR of anti-capitalism as an

ideological guide constitutes...a colossal step backwards towards the right, towards the lowest common denominator. Politically vague, this term encompasses all kinds of social discontent, independent of its social base or orientation.... [I]t covers everything going from the anarchism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the middle of the 19th century to the right-wing populist protest movement of Pierre Poujade in the middle of the 20th century". (See "What is the LCR's New anti-Capitalist Party?")

Engelmann's break with the NPA occurred during the regional elections, when a section of the party presented a veiled Moslem candidate.

Disturbed by this episode, Engelmann, along with three quarters of the party committee in Thionville, left the NPA, and oriented themselves around the so-called secular magazine *Riposte Laïque* (RL), which was founded by Pierre Cassen, an ex-member of the PCF, LCR and CGT, who now approvingly cites the Dutch extreme right-wing populist Geert Wilders as an example.

RL hypocritically claims to combat Catholicism as much as Islam. In a country where a largely institutionalised Catholicism prevails, this gives nationalists a pretext to denigrate people from majority-Islamic countries. Engelmann started to write articles for RL in November 2010, without arousing any concern in the CGT, or a reaction from LO or the NPA.



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