

How the Mediterranean Anti-Capitalist Conference defended French imperialism

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The May 7-8 Mediterranean Anti-Capitalist Conference in Marseille, called by France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), was a gathering of pro-capitalist parties run in the interests of French imperialism. The conference was billed as an opportunity for "different organizations to know each other better, to reinforce their ties, and to consider common international campaigns."

It passed over the French-NATO war in Libya in near-total silence, welcomed parties hostile to workers' revolutionary struggles in Tunisia and Egypt, and backed various Mediterranean and Middle Eastern separatist groups, in a move apparently aimed largely at Turkey.

At the conference, several dozen representatives attended closed-door sessions Saturday afternoon and Sunday. A public meeting Saturday evening gathered a few hundred people, who listened to speeches by NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot and other leading NPA figures.

It is almost beside the point to ask whether the conference reflected discussions that NPA leader Alain Krivine had with the French state, i.e., with figures like his friend and ex-comrade Henri Weber, now a high-ranking member of the big-business Socialist Party (PS). Its pro-imperialist orientation emerged directly from the politics of the NPA and its sister parties, who insist on tying the working class politically to imperialism.

The list of parties attending the conference, published on the NPA's internationalists13.org website, reads largely like a rogues' gallery of middle-class ex-"left" parties now trying to block the struggles of the working class. Besides the NPA, other European parties in attendance included Italy's Sinistra Critica (Critical Left), Spain's Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA, Anti-capitalist Left) and En Lucha (In Struggle), and Greece's OKDE.

Several North African parties who contribute to the NPA's website attended. From Tunisia came the Maoist Communist Workers Party of Tunisia (PCOT), the Party of Patriotic Workers of Tunisia (PTPD), and the newly-reconstituted Left Workers League (LGO). The LGO consists of ex-affiliates of the NPA's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, in the 1970s. There was also the Socialist Workers Party of Algeria (PST), the Democratic Way and Al-Monadil from Morocco, and Socialist Renewal and the Socialist Party from Egypt.

From the Near East came the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Lebanese Communist Party (PCL) and the Democratic Lebanese Youth Organisation (OJDL). Several separatist and nationalist groups also attended—Cypriot, Corsican, Sardinian, Basque, and Catalan nationalist groups from Europe—as well as Kurdish and Iraqi Stalinist parties.

The resolution adopted by the conference is a political fraud, trying to give itself a "left" coloration with petty-bourgeois-nationalist and social-democratic rhetoric entirely unrelated to the right-wing policies of the parties involved. It begins: "Breaking radically with the system and not repairing it, opening a road to socialism and a project of social and democratic emancipation, rebuilding the unity of the world of labor

beyond national borders is today a burning need."

It continues: "North of the Mediterranean, there is a wave of social resistance, of general strikes, of rampant refusals of austerity policies and the ravages of the crisis. In line with these acts of resistance, there are the same concerns as in North Africa: young women and young men in precarious employment, workers, and students. People are not resigning themselves anywhere."

While it is undoubtedly true that workers on all shores of the Mediterranean are oppressed by European and world imperialism, this leaves out one crucial issue: what is the attitude of the NPA and its sister parties to workers' struggles? They hope the reader of the declaration will assume that only parties aiming to lead such struggles would write in such a fashion. This is not the case, however: these parties are bitterly hostile to the working class.

The fraud of these parties' claims to be fighting for socialism is clearly revealed in North Africa. In countries hit by revolutionary struggles, they have been more publicly drawn into the regimes' attempts to make cosmetic, pseudo-democratic reforms to placate mass opposition. None of these parties have tried to lead the working class in the seizure of power, made socialist demands, or even proposed slogans beyond calls for new elections and democratic reforms that are acceptable to Washington or Paris.

This is perhaps most clearly the case for the Tunisian parties attending the NPA conference. The PTPD participates in the Tunisian regime's reform commission which—barricaded inside the Tunisian Social and Economic Council, which is the target of mass protests—hosts discussions with the unions, the UTICA bosses' federation, and professional groups over how to "reform" the Tunisian state machine and prepare elections for a constituent assembly. For its part, the PCOT echoes the NPA's line, posing as a friendly critic of the reform commission; it is sympathetic to its attempt to build a "democratic" capitalist regime in Tunisia.

In Europe, the NPA and its sister parties seek to limit and suppress workers' struggles, by tying them to a perspective of negotiating with capitalist governments. All of the European parties at the conference have given total and uncritical support to the toothless, one-day protest marches called by the trade unions amid the social cuts imposed by the ruling class during the debt crisis over the last year. The governments imposing the cuts have ignored these protests, and imposed the social cuts with complete contempt for popular opinion.

When workers mounted industrial action, moreover, these parties all echoed the unions' hostility to the struggles. During the October 2010 French oil strike against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts, the NPA adopted the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union's demand that workers limit themselves to only "symbolic" or "playful" action against police strike-breaking. The strike was then smashed and Sarkozy's cuts were passed despite mass opposition.

During the December 2010 strike by Spanish air traffic controllers, which was ultimately broken by the intervention of the Spanish army, IA

was similarly hostile. As the Stalinist United Left (IU) and the unions denounced the strike, echoing the bourgeois press, IA issued a statement making no criticism of IU and instead blaming the air traffic controllers for isolating themselves by striking. It wrote that the controllers forgot “two variables of the equation: consumers and the rest of the workers of the [Spanish airports]. This has left them isolated and the perfect target for labor repression and media lynching.”

The Marseille conference’s attempt in its statement to present itself as an opponent of imperialism is as cynical and false as its attempt to pose as a defender of the working class. It declares itself “in support of refusing all imperialist intervention in the region, for the immediate withdrawal of intervention forces in Libya, and of the occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.... States of the Mediterranean and Europe must break their ties with NATO, with the perspective of multilateral cooperation in the region, without any military intervention.”

Such a statement is a capitulation to the positions of French imperialism on its main intervention in the Mediterranean: the bombing of Libya. It did not even manage to explicitly denounce the bombing, limiting itself to insisting that “intervention forces in Libya” be withdrawn. However, as most French military operations involve aerial bombing, this amounts to no more than echoing the positions of imperialist politicians like Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, who have supported bombing while warning against ground intervention.

This echoes the broader position of the NPA on the Libyan war: it has oscillated between echoing the imperialist justifications for the war, and declaring that it was internally split on the issue. The clearest statement of the NPA’s position, however, was given by Gilbert Achcar on the NPA’s website, where he argued that the NATO attack on Libya was a vital “humanitarian” intervention: “Here is a case where a population is truly in danger, and where there is no plausible alternative that could protect it.... You can’t in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians.”

As for the conference’s claims to oppose NATO and the war in Afghanistan, they are equally specious. The drafters of this statement manifestly hoped that no one reading it would be aware of the history of the groups attending the conference.

Though none of these parties are opponents of NATO or the imperialist war in Afghanistan, the role played by the Italian group, Sinistra Critica, is particularly infamous. In backing the government of Romano Prodi in a 2007 confidence vote, Sinistra Critica’s Senator Franco Turigliatto voted for a 12-point ultimatum that included support for Italy’s military intervention in Afghanistan and cutting the Italian pension system.

As for calls for an Mediterranean alternative to NATO, the misleading character of such appeals by European ex-“left” parties was made quite clear by a WikiLeaks revelation concerning Germany’s Left Party.

The Left Party advances a similar position, formally calling for the dissolution of NATO and its replacement by a security alliance—in Germany’s case, involving Russia. However, in a private conversation with US diplomats, Left Party leader Gregor Gysi explained that this demand really amounted to support for NATO: Germany would never get US, British, and French support for Russia’s membership in NATO, and the Left Party’s position blocked demands for Germany to leave NATO. As tensions inside Europe rose, Gysi said this was the more dangerous demand.

The NPA’s proposals for Mediterranean cooperation on a capitalist basis are, if anything, more unrealistic than proposals to let Russia into NATO. Many long-standing conflicts—between Israel and Syria and other Arab states, between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus, or between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Saharan—divide countries of the region. Proposing to replace NATO with a peaceable cooperation in the Mediterranean—without a revolutionary internationalist orientation to the working class and a struggle for international socialism—is indulging in the

sheerest fantasy.

In the meantime, however, the NPA can pose as an “opponent” of NATO imperialism, committed to impotently waiting for all the Mediterranean capitalist regimes to cheerfully settle their differences. At the same time, the NPA advances positions favorable to French imperialism.

A reader of the statement can only be struck, moreover, by the NPA’s decision to attack the Turkish regime while hiding the ongoing crimes of French imperialism, such as the war in Libya and its ground intervention in the Ivory Coast. This decision turns the NPA’s statement into an instrument of French imperialist diplomacy.

Attacking the Turkish government is a lasting and significant French foreign policy interest. Paris has consistently opposed European Union (EU) membership for Turkey; recently, it was outraged by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s initial criticisms of the Libyan war—which Erdogan dropped only after NATO formally took over bombing Libya.

The Marseille conference statement is calculated to highlight the strategic weaknesses of the Turkish regime. It demands “self-determination” for Kurdistan—that is, the potential independence of majority-Kurdish regions of the Middle East, that include large sections of eastern Turkey, and about which the Turkish regime has always been highly sensitive. It also denounces “Turkish occupation forces” in Cyprus.

This orientation was also reflected in the composition of the parties attending the Marseille conference. There was a Cypriot party and several Kurdish Stalinist organizations from Turkey and Iraq, but no other Turkish parties were invited.

The supposed highlight of the conference was a politically demoralized speech Saturday night by NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot. He pointed to the rising influence of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) in France and to the Sarkozy government’s closing of the border with Italy, fearing immigration from Tunisians fleeing violence in North Africa. He called the French government’s reaction a “real political victory” for the FN.

Considering these events and the fact that revolutionary struggles have not yet spread to Europe from North Africa, he blamed the working class in France and Europe, saying they had to “wake up” and that they “frankly were not up to the situation.”

This position is reactionary and absurd. Workers in Europe have repeatedly protested and gone on strike against deeply unpopular, discredited right-wing governments. The main problem is not the objective weakness of the working class, but its political domination by a right-wing cadre of union bureaucrats and petty-bourgeois, ex-“left” parties—of which the NPA is one of the more politically disorienting. The FN’s electoral gains in France are largely won by default, because the repeated strangling of working-class opposition to the Sarkozy government has left the FN with a monopoly on the language of political protest.

Another significant element of the FN’s rising influence has been the promotion of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant hysteria by the French political establishment, targeting Muslim headscarves or burqas on a false pretext of promoting “secularism.” All the major bourgeois “left” parties with which the NPA collaborates—the PS, the Communist Party, Lutte Ouvrière, or the Independent Workers Party (POI)—enthusiastically participated in this chauvinist campaign.

As for the NPA, it ran a candidate wearing a headscarf in 2010 regional elections, Ilham Moussaïd—who was recruited to the NPA because she thought its politics were consistent with Muslim faith and her belief in the institutions of the French Republic. However, the NPA ultimately expelled her, after the elections and widespread right-wing criticism in the media.

As the Marseille conference made clear, however, this brief and unprincipled flirtation with Islamism assisted the NPA in its foreign-

policy operations. Several Marseille conference participants coming from the Middle East who spoke to WSWS reporters mentioned their political sympathies for Islamist parties, such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

The right-wing character of the Mediterranean Anti-Capitalist Conference is a warning to the workers on all the shores of the Mediterranean, in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East. The main political problem facing the working class as it moves into struggle, and revolutionary battles begin in North Africa, is the reactionary role of middle-class forces hostile to socialism. These include prominently the NPA and its co-thinkers throughout the Mediterranean, who have gone over to the camp of imperialism.



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