Mediterranean Anti-Capitalist Conference aids counter-revolution in North Africa

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The Anti-Capitalist Conference of the Mediterranean that will be held this weekend by France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in Marseille is a political fraud, aimed not at leading the struggles of the working class in North Africa, but strangling them.

The NPA and its sister parties—whose perspective is based on pseudo-democratic and humanitarian slogans and support for pro-government trade unions—do not oppose capitalism. They are promoting the politics of a layer of union executives, human rights associations and middle-class groups that—no less than the parties of government—act as integral parts of the bourgeoisie's strategy for war and social reaction.

In its March 19 communiqué announcing the meeting, the NPA said: "It was in July 2008 that the first planning committees for the New Anti-Capitalist Party in Marseille had the idea of a Mediterranean meeting of anti-capitalist organizations. It was prompted by the announcement by [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy of the neo-colonial project of the Union of the Mediterranean (UM)."

The NPA's attempt to pose as an opponent of French neo-colonialism is cynical and false. In fact, the Marseille conference is taking place amid an imperialist war in Libya—in whose launching France played a major role, first pressing for Western-backed insurgents to receive military support—which the NPA loudly supported when the war began in March.

At the time, NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot called for the dispatch of weapons to Western-backed forces "to throw out the dictator." (See: A tool of imperialism: France's New Anti-Capitalist Party backs war on Libya)

Gilbert Achcar of the School of Oriental and African Studies and the NPA-affiliated International Institute for Research and Education said that without Western intervention in Libya "there would be a major massacre." Arguing for imperialist intervention, he continued: "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."

The NPA has not, to this day, given a serious account of why it supported this intervention, in which the imperialist powers have stoked up civil war, bombed Libyan army units and cities, and assassinated Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Arab.

As the Libyan war has turned increasingly bloody and unpopular, the NPA has backed off from its enthusiastic support at the outset. It has adopted a pose of cynical equivocation, publishing on April 1 an exchange of letters between NPA members arguing for and against the Libyan war. No less than its initial support for the war, this position—that the party cannot make up its mind whether or not to support a neo-colonial intervention—brands it as an anti-Marxist organization giving unprincipled support to imperialism.

This sordid record underlines the dishonest character of the Marseille conference, in which the NPA claims to be greeting delegations from a number of ex-colonial countries as well as other European powers in a spirit of international solidarity.

According to the NPA, delegations from groups in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Northern Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain and Catalonia, Portugal, Corsica and Sardinia will attend. The NPA states that the meeting will "allow different organizations to know each other better, to reinforce their ties, and to consider common international campaigns."

In deepening its ties around the Mediterranean, however, the NPA is not acting as an opponent of Sarkozy's UM plans, but as a secondary agency of French imperialism in North Africa.

Thus, on March 3, amid the international media campaign pushing for war in Libya, the NPA's signature appeared on an "Appeal to the European Union for a Mediterranean intervention for solidarity" alongside the signature of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN). EMHRN is run by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the European agency on which Sarkozy based his UM plans.

According to EMHRN's web site, it is funded by the European Commission and the state ministries of countries such as France, Spain and Belgium.

Ahlem Beladj, the ex-president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women and a major news contributor on Tunisia to the NPA's web site, works closely with EMHRN's Tunisian member organization, the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH).

These institutional relations reflect the NPA's fundamental alignment with the policy of imperialism. In the face of an upsurge of mass popular struggles, it seeks to bring together the existing unions and middle-class opposition parties—including right-wing Islamist groups—to give a "democratic" façade to the capitalist state.

In so doing, it is defending the fundamental interests of French imperialism and its allies, including the United States, in the face of the mass upsurge in North Africa and the Middle East.

Writing in *Survival*, a journal of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Professor Marc Lynch of George Washington University explained the response of the Obama administration to the mass protests in Egypt as follows: "Obama did not attempt to lead a protest movement which neither needed nor wanted his guidance. Instead, he focused American efforts on restraining the Egyptian military from using violence against the protestors, demanding respect for universal rights, insisting that only Egyptians could choose Egypt's leaders, and attempting to push for meaningful, long-term reform."

That is, Washington and its European allies calculated that, instead of taking a risky gamble that the Egyptian army would follow orders and carry out a bloodbath against the workers, they could rely on "opposition" parties to disorient the revolution and keep the old regime in power. The bourgeois opposition forces would pursue policies acceptable to imperialism, avoiding the need for an all-out confrontation in which the ruling class might lose control of the soldiers.

In this plan, imperialist strategists found willing helpmates in the NPA and its co-thinkers.

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A member of the Association of North African Workers in France (ATMF) interviewed by the NPA outlined the organization's program in Tunisia as follows: "The radical left in Tunisia—which one can say today is based around the Communist Workers Party of Tunisia (PCOT), the radical wing of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), and [anti-globalization] movements like RAID-Attac/CADTM-Tunisia—demand a provisional government without the RCD [the former ruling party], free and democratic elections, and an elected constituent assembly that will produce the basis of a true democratic republic."

There is nothing anti-capitalist or socialist, let alone Marxist, about this perspective. Though the role of mass working class protests and strikes in the revolutionary struggles in Egypt and Tunisia is well known, the above-stated orientation rejects a struggle by the working class to take political power and overthrow capitalism in Tunisia and internationally.

It promotes the fiction that one can have democracy in ex-colonial countries on the basis of a cheap-labor capitalist economy, where skilled workers are paid barely 100 euros a month, while the major international banks amass billions, and where the ruling classes are weak, discredited, tied to foreign imperialism and feudalist reaction at home, and dominated by fear and hatred of the working class.

The NPA's North African affiliates did not, however, limit themselves to support for liberal, pro-capitalist parties. They built ties with opposition parties of all political colorations, both of the official "left" and the Islamist right.

In 2005 in Tunisia, the Maoist PCOT and the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid party formed the October 18 coalition, in which they worked with the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), Tunisia's main liberal opposition party, and other bourgeois formations, including the Islamist Ennadha party.

In an interview with the NPA, PCOT leader Hamma Hammami explained that his party "was always there to defend the workers and the popular masses, especially in the trade unions. Since 2005, it has played an important role in the October 18 collective, struggling to avoid ideological dissension—especially with the Islamists, whose sectarian character interferes with attempts to build a political and social movement against the dictatorship."

Similarly, though the NPA had fewer connections in Egypt, the initial analysis it posted on its web site ("The Slow and Determined Conflagration of the Egyptian Intifada," posted on January 28) mooted the possibility of building ties with the Egyptian right. It explained: "In terms of opposition parties, the most solidly rooted and influential party is the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood exists since 1928, it is the oldest party in Egypt, and it claims to have one million members and sympathizers. Its politics are closer to reformism than to Islamism."

This is absurd and false. Not only is the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt an Islamist party, it founded political Islam internationally. The goal of this statement, however, is to enable the NPA to paint the Brotherhood in "left" colors.

The statement continues: "Its positions are ambivalent; the Brotherhood sometimes initiates movements, often anti-imperialist ones, while trying to not challenge the regime too directly. One can explain this ambiguity by the gap between the leadership, which seeks respectability, and the militant membership, which participates in strikes and demonstration: their class interests diverge."

This is nothing other than an attempt to conceal the bourgeois and right-wing character of the Brotherhood.

The NPA's hostility to the struggle for socialism and its promotion of right-wing or ex-left parties inevitably brought it into opposition to the working class once revolutionary struggles developed in North Africa. Indeed, the political machines of the deposed dictators—President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt—have largely taken over the perspective advanced by the NPA as they attempt to stay in power.

In Tunisia, the government of President Fouad Mebazaa, a former RCD official, bases itself on the promise to hold an election on July 24 to establish a constituent assembly.

Authority is also vested in a "High Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution, for Political Reform and Democratic Transition." This body—which brings the UGTT, official opposition parties and professional organizations together with the UTICA employers' federation—meets in the buildings of the Tunisian Economic and Social Council (CES). It is modeled on France's Economic and Social Council, set up after World War II by union official Léon Jouhaux with US support, and meets in the same venue where the bosses and union bureaucrats met to discuss contracts and social policy under Ben Ali.

In recent months, the High Commission and the CES have been the targets of repeated popular protests against institutions widely viewed as being non-representative. However, the affluent social layers on whom the NPA bases its politics support the High Commission.

Asked by the NPA to compare the attitude of the UGTT and the opposition parties to the High Commission to their attitude to popular self-defense committees created to fight police violence in the final days of Ben Ali's regime, Ahlem Belhadj said: "We are seeing a growth of institutionalization… the UGTT, the Lawyers [Associations], and the League for Human Rights were enthusiastic about the High Commission."

The NPA has always stressed the importance it placed on the role of the UGTT, a long-standing prop of the Tunisian regime. UGTT leader Abdessalem Jerad routinely endorsed Ben Ali in elections. On January 5, as mass protests grew against Ben Ali, the NPA wrote: "The only force that organizes the country, in the absence of a real opposition, is the UGTT… But we must deplore that the UGTT leadership has officially declined to support protests led by some of its members and anti-regime slogans that are shouted there."

The UGTT's role as an agent of class collaboration with the bosses and the dictatorship is so widely known in Tunisia that, in its most recent statement ("On the UGTT," April 30), even the NPA admits it, writing: "Since Ben Ali's putsch in 1987, new relations developed with the state. Considerable funds were devoted to buying off union officials from the syndicalist left… The new official orientation of the UGTT is to pass from a confrontational culture, now seen as 'archaic,' to relations between 'social partners' leading 'constructive' negotiations."

One might add that the UGTT's basic orientation is widely shared by trade unions internationally, including France's General Confederation of Labor (CGT), which has repeatedly betrayed strikes in France by tying them to the perspective of negotiating social cuts with the government. However, as in the case of the UGTT in Tunisia, the NPA has always carefully abstained from criticizing the CGT.

Indeed, the NPA seeks at all points to promote the view that the union bureaucracy is the only legitimate leadership of the working class. In its April 30 article on the UGTT, the NPA declares, "It's largely on the UGTT's attitude that the fate of the revolution now rests."

Anyone with a shred of political honesty is forced to ask: who, other than opponents of genuine revolution, would argue that the revolution's fate rests on bought-and-paid-for union bureaucrats hostile to the struggle against Ben Ali?

As workers in North Africa enter into political struggle with dictatorial regimes, the social content of this orientation is ever more clearly exposed. It is bourgeois and counter-revolutionary. It defends the basic class interests of the capitalists and of imperialism against the threat of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class leading all of the oppressed masses.

In regard to Egypt, where state power passed to the military after Mubarak's February 11 resignation amid a massive strike wave, the NPA

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similarly argues for reforming the existing regime—even though it has passed legislation banning strikes and protests and carried out mass arrests, beatings and torture of opponents.

The NPA cites Egyptian blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy's advice that the revolution should appeal to "better" sections of the officer corps, that is, of the military dictatorship. "We must take into account," el-Hamalawy writes, "the fact that hundreds of army officers are not satisfied with the current situation. We are in fact facing two armies and this division must be made. Officers and soldiers who believe in a better and cleaner Egypt must clean up their own institution."

In another passage in the interview, el-Hamalawy draws a revealing portrait of Washington's current strategy in Egypt: "The United States cannot militarily intervene, they cannot invade Cairo to stop the revolution. But they can get involved in the counter-revolution. In fact, they are the ones financing the Egyptian army. And they are investing a great deal of money in civil society, through democratic civil organizations, to win over and convince people from certain layers."

The only point to be added to el-Hamalawy's comment is that the NPA and its associated "human rights" organizations are behaving precisely as the imperialists hoped they would.

Whoever attends the NPA's conference in Marseille will not find a revolutionary perspective, but one tailored to the needs of French and global imperialism in a time of mass social upheavals. They will be hosted by a party which, far from being an opponent of capitalism, specializes in justifying the suppression of the working class by affluent bureaucracies in the defense of capitalism and war.

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