

The French petty-bourgeois “left” and the rise of the neo-fascist vote

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In the 2012 French presidential campaign, the two bourgeois parties that have alternated in power for the past quarter century, the conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement, previously the Rally for the Republic—RPR) and the Socialist Party (PS) each are polling just barely above the neo-fascist National Front (FN).

The FN finished second in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections, ahead of the PS candidate, the then-prime minister, Lionel Jospin. This created a serious political crisis between the first and second rounds of the election, when the youth in particular mounted mass demonstrations against the FN. The official “left” parties, as well as the petty-bourgeois Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), which set up the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in 2009, supported the right-wing candidate Jacques Chirac, the outgoing president, against FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen.

This year, the FN may well get enough votes to directly influence the formation of the next government. The party has recently adopted the slogan “defend secularism” (*laïcité*). It has profited from the fact that all the parties, “left” and right, cynically wielded this slogan in anti-Islamic campaigns and attacks on democratic rights such as the banning of the burqa—an undemocratic and discriminatory, hence anti-secular, measure.

The bourgeois “left” parties, the unions, and the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left bear the main responsibility for this situation.

The NPA plays a particularly noxious role. The NPA’s response to the neo-fascists is characterised by complete demoralisation, on many counts. The NPA was marked from its inception by an orientation to the union bureaucracy and to various layers of the petty-bourgeoisie and, consequently, by a complete lack of confidence in the working class. Its demoralisation is deeply connected with its perspective.

The NPA’s main message on the subject is that the

working class can do nothing to fight against the advance of the neo-fascists and that there is no alternative on the left.

On the whole, the NPA says that because the FN candidate Marine Le Pen is the biggest demagogue, she will be able to convince workers suffering from the crisis: “The FN pushes its demagogy to the limit, claiming that it is speaking for the working class. The ‘parade of impostors’ which are the campaigns of the major parties ... benefits whoever is the most cynical impostor, that which unashamedly encourages every prejudice. Le Pen outdoes Sarkozy” (NPA magazine *Tout est à nous*, January 19).

The demoralised and false conclusion that flows from such an analysis is that as more and more workers are being hit by the crisis, Le Pen will have greater and greater success.

NPA presidential candidate Philippe Poutou comments, “It’s a struggle to restore one’s hope to change things! If the NPA has no chance of changing things through the election, the vote will serve tomorrow to restore confidence.” He continues, “We are for the idea that people need to fight, but people don’t believe that any more, even if they share our ideas” (*Libération*, January 11).

This is a heap of lies. It is precisely because of bitter social discontent that voters are deserting the UMP and the PS. What must be explained is why these voters “no longer believe” in the NPA as a means to fight social austerity and the world capitalist crisis. The reason must be sought in the actions and perspectives of the NPA and the rest of the petty-bourgeois “left.”

The NPA has defended the imposition of social austerity, President Sarkozy’s war in Libya, and the threats the French government is making against Syria. The NPA has carried out no fight against the racist “secularist” propaganda, such as the anti-burqa campaign, promoted by Sarkozy, the PS, the French Communist Party (PCF), the FN and others. Hostile to the workers’ strikes against the pension reform in 2010, having only called for a “symbolic” protest against state strikebreaking, and hostile to the revolutions in North Africa in 2011, they served as an instrument of imperialist

reaction. They thus encouraged the rise of the National Front.

After such experiences, the workers have every reason to distrust the NPA.

The decision of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) to build the NPA in 2009 as an explicitly non-Trotskyist party was a signal to the ruling elite. Hostile to the construction of a revolutionary Marxist party, the NPA wanted to bring forces from the universities and the trade union bureaucracy together to create a sort of replacement for the PCF, discredited by the fall of the USSR. This party would attempt to set itself up as a lasting electoral force on the “left” of the French parliamentary scene, using rhetoric inherited from the former students of the 1970s.

Thus, the essential aim of the exercise was to erect a new barrier between the working class and the building of a party based on a revolutionary perspective.

But this new party, which the LCR had hoped would constitute a pole of attraction, has not had the hoped-for success. As petty-bourgeois political circles were more and more openly carrying out policies hostile to workers, workers did not see the NPA—which had relied on the media popularity of its main spokesperson, Olivier Besancenot—as an instrument of struggle.

For their own reasons, the media turned away from him. Some months ago Olivier Besancenot decided not to stand again as presidential candidate.

The new NPA candidate, Philippe Poutou, tells all and sundry that there is no alternative on the left, not even himself. All the LCR has achieved is to give a slight boost to the PCF vote and its Left Front—led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who is at present given much media attention—which is now polling around 7 percent, up from its lowest-ever score in 2002.

Incapable of explaining the reasons for its own defeat, the NPA blames the workers for its own demoralisation. Poutou told *Libération*: “All this contributes to demoralisation and a feeling of impotence. People are preoccupied with keeping their jobs and making ends meet. We are for the idea that people must fight, but people don’t believe in it, even if they share our ideas. This despair is what the National Front exploits.”

Again, he accuses workers of not fighting and tries to blame them for the advance of the neo-fascists: “Le Pen repeats ‘I will do’, this has an effect on people who need to be taken by the hand because they don’t have the strength to fight.”

In fact, if the mass of the workers do not yet see a revolutionary socialist perspective, it is entirely the fault of

the NPA and the other parties of the bourgeois “left”. The NPA makes criticisms of the bourgeois “left” parties like the PS, because the right-wing character of their policies is too obvious to deny. But it does so merely to hide its own responsibility in this situation, where its political perspectives are less and less distinguishable from those of the bourgeois “left” like the PS.

For the NPA, “a democratic perspective based of the solidarity of the people ... is the only way to counter the rise of reactionary populism.”

In fact, this brings the NPA into line with the perspective of a “democratic” capitalist Europe, which is indistinguishable from today’s European Union. As article 3 of the constitutional treaty of the European Union says: “The aim of the Union is to promote peace, its values and the wellbeing of its peoples... It promotes the economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity between the member states.”

This does not prevent the NPA from cynically claiming that its perspective for a capitalist Europe is “internationalist.”

The NPA’s perspective has nothing to do with socialist internationalism. Such a perspective means establishing throughout Europe by the common struggles of the European working class the Socialist United States of Europe, that is a union of states where the working class has taken power and the economy is reorganised on a socialist basis.

For the NPA, capitalist Europe is stable and the neo-fascist ideology unrealisable. A collapse of the EU is unthinkable: “This [Le Pen’s] policy, which could only be applied in the context of the collapse of capitalist Europe, would be a regression of which the workers and the population would be the victims.”

What the comfortable, complacent petty-bourgeois of the NPA have clearly not realised is that capitalist Europe is collapsing before everyone’s eyes, and that the workers have already had enough of being the victims of regressions negotiated between Sarkozy and the trade unions, with the support of the NPA.



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