

New Anti-capitalist Party seeks to strangle French rail strikes

Alex Lantier
10 April 2018

On Saturday, amid a growing strike wave in France, the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) held a meeting in Paris to mark 50 years since the May-June 1968 general strike. The featured speakers were 1968 student leader Alain Krivine and a union official, Mathieu (he gave only his first name) who spoke on the strikes against President Emmanuel Macron's move to privatize the French National Railways (SNCF).

The meeting was a case study in the utter bankruptcy of the NPA's petty-bourgeois politics. It was not a mass meeting to prepare workers and youth for struggle by drawing lessons of the great revolutionary struggle a half century ago. The NPA did not mobilize even the hundreds of members they have in the universities and union bureaucracies of Paris. Only a few dozen people showed up to a meeting, hidden away in a back room of a restaurant in a small side street in the Paris suburbs, to hear Krivine and Mathieu make perfunctory, demoralized remarks.

Those in attendance seemed most interested in the potato chips, boxed white wine and cheap cocktails served over gossip after the speakers had finished. Looking at the meeting, one would never have known that workers are striking against a government that is slashing social rights established over generations of struggle, to divert hundreds of billions of euros into war and tax cuts for the rich. The affluent middle-class people who clashed with police as students a half century ago in Paris are indifferent, indeed hostile to the social interests of the working class.

The NPA speakers presented a reactionary, politically absurd perspective, insisting that there is no revolutionary situation either in 1968 or today, and demanding that workers subordinate themselves to organizations which, they admitted, are working to strangle the strikes.

Krivine spoke after screening a video featuring NPA members' reminiscences of street fighting with police and gender issues, like problems involved in buying condoms, in 1968. The film underscored the two distinct social forces at work in 1968: the middle-class student movement, to which the future NPA members belonged; and the mobilization of millions of workers in the general strike. The lifestyle and gender issues that motivated the middle class were distinct from issues of democratic rights and wages that drove masses of workers into struggle.

At the meeting, Krivine summarily wrote off the revolutionary potential of the general strike and the necessity to fight to build for a revolutionary leadership in the working class. According to his sophisticated argument, since the Stalinist French Communist Party

(PCF) and General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union did not want to take power, there was no revolutionary situation, and so workers did not need a revolutionary party.

"We shouted 'power to the workers,'" he said, "but the tragedy was that no one wanted it. Because the best known people, Alain Geismar, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Jacques Sauvageot, were men first of all; and they were students, professors, they were not workers. The working class had confidence in them ... to hold protests, but not to take power. The people who could have taken power at the time were the PCF and the CGT, but they did not want to do that."

"For me, it is not a revolution," Krivine said, adding: "You can have a popular explosion that is not revolutionary but is popular and spontaneous. There is no need for a party for that."

Krivine's counterrevolutionary analysis of 1968 is absurd and false. That year, mass anger over police repression of student protests boiled over into the largest general strike in European history. Over 10 million workers went on strike, hoisted red flags over factories across France, and brought General Charles de Gaulle's regime to its knees. The Paris police disintegrated, and when de Gaulle fled to Baden-Baden in Germany to discuss ordering French troops stationed in Germany to march on Paris, his generals indicated they could not guarantee the loyalty of their troops.

The revolutionary character of this situation is self-evident. French capitalism was saved only by the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class: the PCF and the CGT blocked the seizure of power by the working class. They fought for weeks to force workers back to work based on wage concessions granted by the bosses, and ultimately backed new elections called by the government. Using the economic resources of European capitalism at the height of the post-World War II boom, as well as the political services of Stalinism, the bourgeoisie had managed to keep power.

A quarter century after the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR and the disintegration of the PCF, French imperialism no longer has the resources to make such concessions. Amid the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, as Europe rearms and the NATO powers threaten war with Russia, China, and the Middle East, Paris is restructuring class relations along authoritarian lines, taking hundreds of billions of euros from workers to fund the military and tax cuts for the rich, to join in the scramble to redivide the world. There will be no "reformist" outcome to the class

struggle.

Krivine's dismissive view of the 1968 general strike is bound up with the NPA's reactionary political role today. Hostile to a revolutionary struggle against Macron, they promote a strategy of crushing and selling out workers struggles against him.

The unions have called impotent rotating strikes for two days per week until June, allowing Macron to wait out the strikes while the unions continue to negotiate the austerity with him. While admitting that these maneuvers are bankrupt, Krivine argued that the situation is still not revolutionary, and that workers still do not need a revolutionary political leadership. Instead, workers should rely on the unions and an alliance of pseudo-left groups like the NPA—hoping they might suddenly turn 180 degrees, start opposing Macron, and force him to “retreat” and make concessions.

He said, “There can be a popular insurrection, it can come, it is growing in universities everywhere. But indeed there is an absence of one or several political organizations that help—and do nothing more than help—to coordinate and advance the demand for a general strike. Because we will not make them retreat with occasional strikes like that every 15 days, with bla-bla-bla protests.”

Mathieu spoke to amplify Krivine's remarks. He said, “There is an entire series of difficulties, which come mainly from the strike schedule proposed by the CGT and the CFDT, which the majority of rail workers is respecting today, but may be modified in line with the level of social struggle in the company and in the country. ... About this schedule, I will admit that when I saw it come down on my mobile phone, I told myself, ‘Well, that's a betrayal.’ I mean, that is obvious.”

The unions know very well that they are proposing a strategy that will lead to defeat, Mathieu stressed, and they do not want to shift to another strategy.

Inside the unions, Mathieu said, “for the time being, the sentiment is that everyone is looking at everyone else a bit, saying, ‘Well who is going to start?’ No one really wants to be the one that goes out first. ... Many CGT comrades are sort of sitting on two stools, because they know very well that if they want to win, they can't strike two days out of five, but there you go. Everyone is just looking at each other and waiting.”

A WSWS reporter attending the meeting asked what lessons the NPA drew from 1968 for the class struggle today. Krivine insisted that the only way forward was for workers to support an alliance of political forces who, as he and Mathieu had just admitted, strangled the struggles of the working class in 1968 and today.

Krivine endorsed former NPA presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot's call for unity with the big-business Socialist Party (PS), the PCF, and the union bureaucracy: “Olivier, and he is not alone, he is doing it with NPA approval, he is trying to bring as many organizations as possible together against Macron. I think everyone wants convergence and unity, but it's not obvious that we will get there. And we can't just have the political parties, we need the trade unions, too.”

Krivine refused to say what perspective this alliance would advance: “On this issue, we have a fraternal debate not only with the PCF, which is completely divided today ... The same thing more or less is happening but in a different form among the

Greens, and there is more or less the same thing in what is left of the PS. So it's complicated, very complicated to intervene in this.”

In fact, it is not hard to see that the forces to which Krivine is oriented are supporters of capitalism and austerity that would prove bitterly hostile to the working class.

A class chasm separates the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, and the NPA. In their youth, the ex-student radicals joined Pabloite parties that had broken with Trotskyism and split from the ICFI in 1953, adapting to the stabilization of capitalism after World War II and the post-war boom in Europe. A fundamental element of Pabloite politics in France was the view that the Trotskyist movement should dissolve itself into Stalinism, to which the Pabloites attributed a revolutionary role, writing off the independent revolutionary role of the working class and of the Trotskyist movement.

The 1968 general strike itself demonstrated the bankruptcy of this perspective: the PCF emerged not as the locomotive of the revolution, but a dead weight blocking the struggles of the working class. Krivine's claim that there is no revolutionary situation in 1968 or today because the workers did not have a revolutionary leadership leaves out one central issue: the role of the Pabloite movement itself in blocking the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Over the ensuing decades in which they defended the PCF or the PS, masses of people in France were told to identify Trotskyism with the reactionary antics of Krivine and Company, which took various forms, including the LCR (*Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*), founded in 1974 as the French section of the Pabloite movement, and its successor, the NPA, founded in 2009.

Fifty years later, the growing movement in the working class is blowing apart the rotten political foundations of the Pabloite pseudo-left tendency. They are not revolutionaries or representatives of continuity with Trotskyism and the October Revolution, but vicious opponents of Trotskyism, working to strangle working class opposition and tie the workers to austerity and war. The way forward in the struggle against Macron's cuts, as the ICFI has insisted, is a revolutionary struggle of the working class against not only Macron, but also the reactionary pseudo left parties.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact