

COVID-19 pandemic exposes France's New Anti-capitalist Party

Alex Lantier
21 May 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic, by exposing the staggering incompetence and indifference to human life of capitalist governments worldwide, has vastly intensified class conflict. This spring, workers from Italy to the United States and Brazil launched a wave of wildcat strikes and walkouts to demand protective equipment and the right to shelter at home. As governments, banks and trade unions internationally organize a politically criminal campaign to get workers back to work without sufficient testing or protection, the pandemic is unmasking the pro-imperialist middle class groups that the ruling class has long falsely marketed as the "left."

Workers can only fight the pandemic through a political and organizational break with these parties and affiliated unions, who are complicit in policies leading to mass deaths. This emerges from the reactionary statement, titled "Let's build the transition to ecosocialism now," issued last month by a coalition of petty bourgeois parties including France's Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the Anticapitalistas in Spain's Podemos government, Denmark's Red-Green Alliance (RGA), the Socialist and Liberty Party (PSOL) in Brazil, the Nava Sama Samaja Party in Sri Lanka and Socialist Action in the United States.

While they style themselves the "Executive Bureau of the Fourth International" (EBFI), their hostility to the working class and to Trotskyism—that is, to Marxist internationalism—is virtually self-evident. Their statement maintains a deafening silence on the reactionary back-to-work policy, on war propaganda against China and obscene bank bailouts agreed in the imperialist countries, and on plans for mass layoffs and austerity amid the economic collapse triggered by the pandemic. Instead, they issue a nationalist, backward-looking attack on global supply chains that employ hundreds of millions of workers and are transporting food and medicine to billions worldwide:

COVID-19 is a pandemic of neoliberalism, a product of this globalized phase of capitalism. Capitalism, driven by neoliberal globalization, has extended its mantle over the entire planet. Global production chains, which are provided for corporations to increase their profits, make each country vulnerable to the slightest crisis, and the hyper-mobility that sustains them has eliminated any health and ecological safety mechanism. A predatory relationship with nature, based on the use of fossil fuels and large capitalist agriculture, with its green deserts, destroys both the balance of the fundamental cycles of the Earth system (carbon, water, nitrogen) and the relationship of human beings with the biosphere, with the web of life of which we are only a part.

The claim that the COVID-19 pandemic is punishment for globalization and for industry's immoral relationship to nature is a lie. The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus caused the pandemic, but responsibility for its scope and impact lies with capitalist governments, above all in the imperialist

centers of America and Europe. They did not promptly fund shelter-at-home policies, instead handing bailouts of trillions of dollars and euros to the banks, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and greater spread of the virus. The premature return to work will claim thousands more lives.

International industry and science are not causes of the pandemic, but tools the working class can use to fight it. International travel has vastly increased since the 1970s and the emergence of transnational industrial production was made possible by advances in computer, container and transport technology. This does accelerate the initial spread of diseases. However, to conclude from this that globalization causes pandemics is absurd. A highly contagious virus like SARS-CoV-2 would spread internationally, with or without modern travel and trade. Going back to the 1918 flu pandemic, the Middle Ages and even the Roman Empire, pandemics of smallpox, influenza, cholera and plague spread internationally, killing millions.

Compared to these earlier eras, 21st century technology gives humanity astonishing scientific and manufacturing capabilities to mobilize against a pandemic. In a few weeks, international teams of scientists identified the SARS-CoV-2 virus, published its genome and provided diagnostic tests for COVID-19. The ways it is transmitted were identified. The globalization of industry also means that dozens of countries can make protective equipment, respirators and medicine that previously would have been difficult to mass produce outside the imperialist centers. Billions of working people legitimately expect and demand such resources be harnessed to fight the pandemic.

By directly and urgently posing the task of using economic resources to meet social needs, the pandemic put the existing social order to the test. Capitalism, which organizes the economy based on private profit instead of social needs, failed miserably. It was well known in ruling circles, for nearly two decades since the 2002 SARS epidemic, that such a pandemic was a danger. Yet work on vaccines and treatments for coronavirus was underfunded and largely abandoned. This year, even in wealthy countries, testing, respirators and protective equipment were not ready for the population. Even masks were often unavailable, including for medical staff in the front line of the fight.

Another key failure of capitalism, no doubt, is the fact that its development of the productive forces harms the environment. Agribusiness has been the subject of devastating exposures and burning fossil fuels to generate energy has triggered unprecedented global warming. However, these are global problems, requiring the international mobilization of scientific and industrial resources to produce healthy food, eliminate pollution and halt global warming. Such problems cannot be solved with calls to turn the clock back to the era before globalization, end large-scale agriculture or limit economic exchanges to the borders of the nation-state.

The force that can be mobilized to use global industry in a planned, scientifically guided way is the international working class. By organizing

in committees of action, independent from the unions in their workplaces and via social media, workers can not only ensure workplace safety, but take control of industry and use it to launch a global fight against the virus based not on profit, but medical science. However, this means an international struggle to expropriate the financial aristocracy, take state power and build socialism. It requires, in particular, a conscious political break with the reactionary layers of middle class academics, union officials and media operatives represented by the EBFI.

The EBFI's "ecosocialism" is but a green veneer designed to cover up its support for bank bailouts and other right-wing policies of the ruling class. Its statement declares, "In this situation, the vast majority of governments have been forced to take extreme measures. We must defend measures that attack the form and substance of neoliberalism and the capitalist system." Even as mass layoffs are being prepared, it denounces industry, saying: "The current crisis shows clearly that a significant part of capitalist production is purely predatory, totally superfluous and wasteful." It adds that "a massive industrial readjustment can be done in a relatively short timescale, depending on political will."

These charlatans imply that capitalist states' bailouts and payment of unemployment insurance attack the substance of capitalism. They claim the pandemic "shows that significantly decreased working hours can produce essential goods and that wage and income guarantees and universal access to health and educational systems are totally viable in a transitional regime, in which the energy and productive systems are totally replaced, and enormous contingents of workers are shifted to different economic sectors compatible with an ecosocialist transition..."

What a fraud! The pandemic has demonstrated not that the existing order is capable of progressive change, but its bankruptcy, its inhumanity and the necessity of its overthrow.

Far from ensuring universal access to health and welfare, capitalist governments left millions at home without care, denied elderly people life-saving treatment based on barbaric age criteria and are now forcing workers back to work amid the pandemic. In wealthy European countries, even as trillions of euros are lavished on bank bailouts, workers survive on miserly benefits and millions go hungry or depend on charity in working class districts of major cities. Internationally, a quarter-billion human beings are in danger of starving due to disruptions in global agriculture and trade and hundreds of millions of workers are in danger of losing their jobs.

The pandemic has exposed the ecosocialism of the EBFI and a whole host of similar pseudo-left groups. It exploits ecological questions to repudiate class politics, socialism and Marxism. If it is still marketed fraudulently as an "anticapitalist" strategy by petty-bourgeois, anti-Marxist groups, that has nothing to do with left-wing let alone socialist or working class politics.

It is two-thirds of a century since the political ancestors of the EBFI broke with Trotskyism and split in 1953 with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, they demanded that the Fourth International be politically dissolved into Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist parties that had dominated the mass revolutionary movements of the 1940s against fascism and colonialism. Through these parties—which had blocked the working class from taking power and thus preserved capitalist rule in decisive parts of Europe, Africa and Asia after World War II—the Pabloites adapted to the post-war capitalist set-up.

The Pabloites' rejection of a struggle for power by the working class won them a following among petty-bourgeois layers of the 1960s youth movement that emerged in the anti-Vietnam War movement and in the run-up to the 1968 French general strike. The leading figures in the EBFI parties are largely members of this generation, recruited into the Pabloite movement based on gender, racial and ethnic identity politics. This outlook also brought them into alignment with anti-Marxist petty-

bourgeois intellectuals developing various forms of Green politics.

These conceptions were spelled out in a 1964 work, *Workers Strategy and Neo-capitalism*, by André Gorz. A French-Austrian postmodernist who in 1980 published an attack on Marxism titled *Farewell to the Proletariat*, Gorz was a proponent of political ecology. He wrote that "from within the capitalist system," the left should make proposals "to radically transform society... with structural reforms," such as in environmental policy. While explicitly advocating reforms under capitalism, Gorz claimed that these were revolutionary, or even socialist measures: "It is not necessarily reformist... to demand reforms not based on what is possible within a given social or managerial system, but what must be made possible given human needs and demands."

Gorz was laying out a form of theoretically conscious political cynicism: while supporting continued capitalist rule, he advanced demands he admitted were unrealizable within this social order. He ambiguously called his theory "a progressive strategy for a taking of power by the working class that does not rule out the possibility or perhaps the necessity of a revolutionary seizure of power at a later stage." This was Gorz's way of signaling that he intended to relegate the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class to a faraway, indefinite future. In practice, this meant a green light to various bourgeois or petty-bourgeois parties to cover their reactionary politics by advancing radical-sounding demands without having any intention of fighting for them.

After 1968, such corrupt writings provided a theoretical justification for alliances between the Pabloite organizations and a raft of newly-founded bourgeois parties, like France's Socialist Party (PS), founded in 1971, Greece's Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) founded in 1974 and Brazil's Workers Party in 1980. These bourgeois parties promised radical, "socialist" and ecological policies to win support and votes and then invariably betrayed these promises once in office. Propped up by Stalinist and Pabloite parties, however, they played leading roles in bourgeois politics for decades.

Over the three decades since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, the antagonism between the working class and this corrupt political order has become impossible to suppress. Stalinism's restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union fully vindicated Leon Trotsky's warnings of its counterrevolutionary role. Amid rising social anger and political disillusionment among workers internationally, events also fully vindicated the ICFI's principled opposition to the pseudo-left politics of the Pabloite organizations.

At its 2009 founding congress, the NPA formally renounced even a symbolic link with Trotskyism and hailed its already close and longstanding links with the PS. This eliminated the last ideological obstacle to an enthusiastic embrace of right-wing policies by the NPA. Leading NPA member François Sabado responded to the obscene European bank bailouts in 2009, after the Wall Street crash, by calling to increase them: "According to Nobel economics laureate Paul Krugman, Obama's plan for a bailout of over 5 percent of GDP will only deal with half the probable impact of the recession... To put it mildly, the European bailouts are undersized: 1.3 percent of GDP in Britain, 1 percent in France, 0.8 percent in Germany, 0.1 percent in Italy."

Sabado welcomed the 2009 bailouts as "more state intervention in the economy, to save banks, for industrial and financial concentration and restructuring. It's a change compared to the free-market policy of 'less and less government' of Reagan and Thatcher."

In fact, trillions of dollars and euros handed over to the super-rich were a signal for an international assault on the working class of unprecedented ferocity. Internationally, the social democratic and nationalist parties with which the EBFI parties had allied themselves collapsed amid growing outrage among workers at their austerity policies. PASOK suffered an electoral disintegration into a small rump in 2015, followed by the French PS in 2017. The Workers Party in Brazil was ousted from power in 2016

by a right-wing regime-change operation, after its popularity had collapsed.

Since then, the ruling class has increasingly integrated pseudo-left parties like those of the Pabloite EBFI into the state machine to wage war and austerity against the workers. They backed the 2011 NATO war against Libya, the arming of “rebel” groups in Syria and the NATO-led regime-change operation and resulting civil war in Ukraine in 2014. In 2015, the EBFI hailed the election of its Greek ally, Syriza (the “Coalition of the Radical Left”), which imposed draconian social cuts and set up mass refugee detention camps. EBFI parties are in two austerity governments in Europe: the Spanish *Anticapitalistas* joined the Podemos-Spanish Socialist Party government, while the RGA is part of the Danish government’s parliamentary coalition.

The EBFI’s role in hailing and implementing right-wing policies makes it ever more acutely aware of its violent hostility to Marxism. One of the students won to Pabloism in France after the 1968 general strike was the Franco-Brazilian NPA member and co-author of a 2001 “Ecosocialist Manifesto,” Professor Michael Löwy. Asked to discuss ecosocialism in a 2012 interview with the ex-Stalinist magazine *Mouvements*, Löwy replied: “Of course, ecosocialism is not in solidarity with the so-called socialisms of the 20th century, social-democracy and Stalinism. It also calls for questioning and criticizing the limits of Marxism.”

Among what he saw as the “limits” of Marxism, Löwy stressed its conception of a revolutionary crisis and the necessity of socialist revolution arising from the growth of humanity’s productive forces: “The most important limit is the concept of ‘development of the productive forces’ and the idea that socialism must suppress capitalist production relations because they have become ‘obstacles’ or ‘chains’ that block their development. Ecosocialism breaks definitively with this conception.”

Löwy added that his ecosocialism is closely linked to his support for “romantic anticapitalism.” He defined this as “a cultural protest against modern capitalist and industrial civilization in the name of certain values of the past. Romanticism protests against mechanization, instrumental rationalization, reification, the dissolving of communal ties and the quantification of social relations.”

The pandemic has exposed the historical bankruptcy of these backward-looking, pessimistic politics of the pro-imperialist petty-bourgeoisie. For decades, the risk of pandemics, the threat of global warming and other urgent environmental problems were well known, yet virtually nothing was done; the cost in human lives from the COVID-19 pandemic alone could easily run into the millions.

Environmental problems cannot in fact be solved without the international working class first seizing power in a struggle for socialism against the capitalist nation-state system. To wage such a struggle, however, the developing movement in the international working class must be armed with a clear understanding of the class gulf separating revolutionary Marxism from the “ecosocialist” politics of the middle-class pseudo-left organizations.

Already before the pandemic, an unprecedented global wave of protests and strikes against social inequality was unfolding. The year 2018 saw mass teachers strikes in a rebellion against the American union bureaucracy and France’s “yellow vest” protests organized via social media. Last year saw the first national teachers strike in Poland since the Stalinist regime restored capitalism in 1989, strikes organized via social media by Portuguese nurses, and mass protests in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile and beyond. The era when the impact of the Stalinist regime’s restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union was enough to suppress the international class struggle and the struggle for socialism is over.

Now, the back-to-work policy amid the pandemic is creating conditions for a powerful new struggle mobilizing the working class internationally. In 2017, there were nearly 1 billion workers in industry alone. As masses

of farmers across Asia and Africa traveled to the cities to find work, the ranks of the working class grew by 1.2 billion between 1980 and 2010. The struggle to impose a rational, scientific plan against the pandemic unites the working class across racial, national and gender lines in irreconcilable opposition to the financial aristocracy.

This brings the working class into ever more direct conflict with the parties of the EBFI. They do not support, but fear workers’ struggles—which is reflected in the fact that the French NPA initially denounced the “yellow vests” as “far-right mobs.” And so when the EBFI statement does propose a movement, it is one that leaves out the working class and omits industrial action of any sort or any struggle to take political power. Instead, hailing initiatives from “movements of women, young people and the environment,” it states:

There are examples of these initiatives from the population or organized sectors, such as peasants, indigenous peoples, unemployed people and communities on the outskirts of large cities, the networks of feminist solidarity, among others. These initiatives are forging very interesting alternatives, such as the collective manufacture of fabric masks to donate to the population in order to ensure the prevention of contagion, the donation and alternative production of food, the defense of the public health system and the demand to access it universally, the requirement of guaranteeing labor rights and the payment of wages, the denunciation of the increase in the escalation of violence against women and the grueling work of care done by them during isolation at home, among others.

Such policies—mobilizing farmers’ confederations, organizations based on racial or ethnic identity, and feminist groups, as substitutes for the working class—are inadequate on their face to deal with the pandemic. Why should workers beg for charitable donations of “alternative” food, when it is the working class that transports, works up and markets food in the main industrial food chain? How can the bourgeoisie’s austerity drive and its devastating impact on public health systems worldwide be ended only by local movements of peasant, indigenous and women’s groups? And why should the population be satisfied with handmade fabric masks, when safer, more effective masks and other protective equipment can be more efficiently manufactured in factories?

If the political operatives who run the EBFI spoke honestly, they would reply: The population should accept handmade masks so factories can be left under the control of the banks and the ruling class, and so stock dividends can continue pouring into our own portfolios. If this costs millions of lives, they would add, so be it.

The pandemic threat to billions of lives has revealed the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of working people and those represented by the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left. This conflict underlies the ICFI’s decades-long, principled defense of the traditions of the October Revolution and of Trotskyism against organizations like the EBFI.

The decisive question facing the international working class as it enters into struggle is to ensure its political independence from these middle class forces. As they see workers build safety committees, committees of action and other organizations of struggle outside the grip of the union bureaucracies, they will seek to intervene. However, it will be to divide the movement and tie it to the capitalist nation-state system. The revolutionary alternative for workers seeking to defend their lives, their living conditions and their organizations of struggle is the ICFI’s defense of Marxist internationalism against the pseudo-left.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact