

Letter from France

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The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) was formed in 2009 as a coalition of several groups on the radical left in France. Its formation was hailed as a breakthrough for left unity and was seen by many in Europe as a blueprint for organising against the system in their own countries. Against the backdrop of global economic crisis the NPA was a welcome breath of fresh air and a new style of struggle in a country renowned for its workers' fighting attitude.

The main component of the newly formed NPA was the Ligue des Communistes Revolutionnaires (League of Revolutionary Communists, LCR) with its charismatic leader Olivier Besancenot at the helm. Following a result of almost 1.5 million votes (4.08 percent) in the presidential elections of 2007 the LCR was at the height of its electoral popularity, however many of its members and others on the left realised it could only achieve its potential and ultimate aim of revolution by working within a broader coalition of forces.



The founding congress of the NPA saw over 9,000 optimistic and energised ac-

tivists sign up for their membership cards triple the size of the LCR. The apparent unification of forces on the extreme left in France, excluding the traditionally sectarian Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle, LO), heightened the mood on Europe's radical left. Today, the NPA's membership has dwindled to around four thousand at a time when more than ever voters and citizens across the country are looking for alternatives to the main pro-austerity parties. Why has this come about, and can the NPA return to its position as the alternative force in French politics?

One reason for the decline in support for the NPA has been the emergence in popularity of the Front de Gauche (Left front, FdG), a coalition of the historically powerful Parti Communiste Français (French Communist Party, PCF) and a split from the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, PS), France's equivalent of our Labour Party. The split was led by former Vocational Education Minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who left the PS in 2008 and entered the coalition as part of his Parti Gauche (Left Party, PG). The FdG's first electoral outing came in the 2009 European elections where it polled respectably. However, it was during the mass mobilisation against pension reform that the FdG stole the spotlight from the NPA and Mélenchon took centre stage.

The FdG puts itself forward as a radical alternative to austerity but is not explicitly revolutionary. Instead, it uses the language of the Bolivarian 'civil insurrection' to draw people to its cause. Mélenchon's fiery speeches during his candidature for this year's presidential elections have catapulted him to the forefront of French politics. Calling 'for a sixth

republic' the FdG managed to mobilise huge numbers of supporters for its rallies, the most breathtaking being the hundred thousand people crowded into that symbol of the French Revolution the square of the Bastille. Here Mlenchon continued his passionate rhetoric to an audience draped in red flags, illuminated by the glow of flares and chanting 'resistance'. Mlenchon recalled the Paris Commune of 1871 which saw Paris in the hands of the working class for two months in the spring before being violently suppressed by the state. The surge in support for the FdG was expected to translate into electoral success with opinion polls putting Mlenchon as the third most popular candidate behind the incumbent Sarkozy and Francois Hollande of the PS.

The first round of the recent elections has, however, painted a different picture. Marine Le Pen's fascist Front Nationale (National Front, FN) picked up almost 20 percent of the vote, installing her as the third most popular candidate. Traditionally seen as a fringe party under her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party has undertaken a revisionist approach to its history and has toned down its more overtly fascist and racist tendencies. Adopting terms used by the British National Party relating to 'identity' and 'culture', the FN has managed to veil its rampant islamophobia and has picked up support with its anti-austerity rhetoric, blaming the economic crisis on immigration and the non-French workforce.

Mlenchon was relegated to fourth place with around 11 percent of the total vote. However, the combined left vote is the largest since the election of Francois Mitterand (PS) in 1988, and the combined vote of the radical left shows gains from the 2007 elections. Within this radical percentage was the NPA's candidate, Phillippe Poutou, a motor factory technician from

Bordeaux in the west of France.

Phillipe Poutou was chosen as the NPA candidate for the presidential elections after the postal worker Olivier Besancenot declared he would not run a third time. The far left's poster boy took a back seat in the elections, appearing sporadically in the media or at public meetings to show his support for his unknown successor. From the beginning of the campaign it was clear that Poutou did not have Besancenot's appeal. His lack of charisma and his inexperience in handling the media saw many of those who had voted NPA in the past move towards the FdG.

Besancenot had become a household name by the time of the 2007 presidential elections when he was nicknamed the 'Red Postman' on both sides of the political divide. With over four percent of the vote it was clear that Besancenot was pulling in votes from those across the left who were disillusioned by conventional politics. Almost one and a half million people voted for a candidate with explicitly Marxist revolutionary views; the figure showed the huge support for Besancenot but also the great potential for the formation of the NPA. Poutou's candidature, however, showed the danger and limits of faith in a personality and not a movement. Poutou's relative obscurity and his apparent reluctance to be put forward saw opinion polls prior to the first round of elections stagnate at under one percent with the final result being little over the one percent mark; the other far left candidate Natahlie Arthaud of LO achieved only half that.

To get on the ballot for the French presidential elections it is necessary to obtain the signatures of five hundred or more mayors from the 36,000 cantons in France. This led to the NPA putting on hold practically all grassroots campaigning to scour the countryside and villages of France to find sympathetic mayors or

those who hadn't yet signed for one of the main candidates. This collecting of signatures ran down to the wire and is indicative of the negative emphasis on and obsession with electoralism in the NPA. This is only one of the internal crises which face the NPA's membership, with many questioning the outcome of placing so much importance on elections, particularly with the emergence of the FdG's far superior party election machine.

Past and present shows us that this type of emphasis on electioneering for a relatively small force can lead to the neglect of the real key to change: involvement with communities, trade unions and students with the aim of real mass mobilisation. Electoral success for the radical left does not necessarily translate into feet on the street. This may not be of particular consequence to parties that hold parliamentary aspirations for change like the FdG or the radical left coalition SYRIZA in Greece, but for the NPA it has led the organisation to lose sight of the real incarnation of progress 'the mob', as James Connolly put it.

From my experience studying and working with the NPA in Lyon I have become frustrated with their attitude towards elections and their lack of work in communities and universities. My time here has seen not one public meeting aimed at disaffected students nor any consistency or coherence in organising public meetings in communities or looking to recruit new members. In a period such as this the NPA should be putting itself forward as an open, accessible alternative, not a talking shop for revolutionaries. Elements of substitutionist thinking and a lack of ideological coherence has caused problems. Lyon is the second largest city in France with a metropolitan population of over two million yet the NPA has failed to make any ground here politically and

has no full time activists to co-ordinate with Paris.

The NPA's message is one which would resonate hugely with the historically radical French university students if they were given access to it. 2010 saw a wave of student protests across France in solidarity with the pension strikes, with 40,000 taking to the streets of Lyon, running battles with the police and many school children barricading their colleges. Political tensions were high and a natural awareness of solidarity should have been as great opportunity for the NPA to make gains in the three large universities in Lyon. This was sadly not the case and the tensions turned to disinterest and defeatism when the pension reforms passed and the students had no coherent, radical political bodies to turn to. The university left has, instead, been influenced by the FdG and a combination of disparate anarchist groupings.

The lessons and realities of the student situation can be translated to wider society and, in particular, to the Arab and Muslim communities. The NPA were, of course, very vocal in their support of the Egyptian and Arab uprisings but they again failed to translate this support into tangible solidarity with the Arab communities in Lyon. Detachment between the party and those minorities it supports leaves neither side better off.

The coming months will be decisive for the future of the NPA and the revolutionary left in France. The last national party conference saw a small minority split off to join the FdG. Many anticipate that a more significant minority will follow suit, depending on the FdG's legislative election results and its attitude towards Hollande's government. The idea is being floated that the NPA would be better off finding a home in the FdG and agitating from within. The fact remains, however, that the FdG is a party which isn't

afraid of using revolutionary rhetoric yet which advocates the politics of a ‘workers’ government’ and remains ambiguous on many social and international issues. It is officially allied with SYRIZA in Greece which is already buckling under the pressure of international finance with a significant minority of the party looking at the possibility of coalition with the social democratic PASOK. In contrast, our comrades in the Greek SWP who are part of the extra-parliamentary coalition ANTARSYA are maintaining their revolutionary convictions while growing steadily and reaching greater audiences.

We on the left must watch the situation

in France closely and maintain our revolutionary currents wherever we find ourselves. The problems facing the NPA are significant, but not too great to overcome. The ongoing polarisation of politics all over Europe means the revolutionary left must be coherent and ready to rise to the challenge when faced with it. The rising popularity of the FdG shows a radicalisation among the French population; the victory of Hollande shows a swing to what is considered to be the left. People are looking to reject austerity in France and the organisations and comrades within the NPA must look to lead the fightback as a solid, coherent, revolutionary force.

Further Reading

Website of the French section of the IST within the NPA

<http://quefaire.lautre.net/>

Video of meeting hosted by British SWP on the French elections.

<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=28306>

Analysis from the British SWP.

<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=794&issue=134>