

The changes in the political landscape in France

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The French situation has often been approached as an “exception” in Europe. We speak of the French exception, referring to a history still marked by the French Revolution of 1789. This term covered, in fact: a certain type of social gains, a strong public service, a strong state, a strong and dynamic worker’s movement, a high level of class struggle, social rights and democratic and secular freedoms won through historic popular mobilizations.

Although the strong state has been maintained, all the social conquests have been challenged in recent years.

The long period of liberal counter-reforms from the mid-1980s in France, their acceleration with the open crisis in 2008, the austerity policies and corporate social demolition implemented by the Socialist government of Holland, have deconstructed and dismantled what constituted this French exception. It is not a collapse, but a deconstruction, a gradual dismantling.

Socio-economic upheavals

The austerity policies conducted in recent years have not been just the umpteenth austerity policies; they have a completely different magnitude. They have two objectives: The first is to liquidate what remains of the “French social model” which is considered by the ruling classes as a major obstacle in global capitalist competition. The second is to reorganize society, moving from the “generalized market economy to the market society”, privatizing, deregulating and rendering economic and social existence precarious. Hence the centrality of “reforms of the labour market”, with a deregulation of social relations and a deconstruction of the Labour Code that weaken the positions of workers and reinforces those of the employers. These policies are also accompanied by massive unemployment - in reality, nearly 20 per cent of the working population - by a decline in purchasing power with the blocking of wages and pensions and by substantial tax increases. There has been an explosive growth of precarious work.

The policies of reduction of social spending, of central government funds allocated to local

authorities, of the budgets for the health system and public education, exacerbate the living conditions of the working classes. The policies of aid and hand-outs to employers have resulted in a transfer of wealth of tens of billions of euros, from ordinary households to capitalist profits. Admittedly, the consequences of the crisis are not as severe as in Greece, Portugal or Spain. France is the sixth world power: it still has significant positions in the world market; faced with the crisis, it has been able to make a series of social shock absorbers function, but the effects of austerity policies are devastating. The economic recovery experienced in Europe and in France is not being felt on the level of employment and purchasing power. There is an impoverishment of the working classes, and indeed processes of social decay in certain working-class suburbs and neighborhoods. To austerity policies have been added authoritarian tendencies; in the name of counter-terrorism policies, basic democratic rights are being undermined. We had not seen in France such a situation, where the Left mounts attacks on civil liberties, since the Algerian War.

But to the economic and social crisis there has been added a political crisis, precisely because it is the Left (the Socialist Party, PS) which is conducting these policies, which has attacked the workers, which has lost a part of its social base and which therefore can only rely, to govern the country, on a very much diminished social and political base.

The bourgeois transformation of the Socialist Party

In 2012, the Socialists occupied all the positions of power in elected institutions: the Presidency of the Republic, a majority in the National Assembly, the Senate, in the main cities, in the departments and in almost all regions. Today they have lost them or are going to do so. In the last departmental elections, where the rate of abstention was almost 50 per cent, the PS was only the third-biggest party, with 21 per cent of the vote, behind the National Front with 25 per cent and the conservative Right with 29 per cent. They went from 280,000 members in 2006 to 130,000 in December 2014. Only 70,000 "active members" voted for the upcoming congress of the party. But the French PS is not experiencing "Pasokisation". They still have more than 20 per cent of the vote. There is no collapse. France is not Greece. That relates to differences in the level of the crisis in the two countries. But there is a considerable weakening of the PS and above all a change in the fundamental nature of that party. There is what could be called an acceleration in the bourgeois transformation of social democracy. A process that started a long time ago, but which is speeding up. This transformation has led to an unprecedented integration of the apparatuses of social democracy into the leading circles of the state and the globalized economy. The socialist parties have become "less and less working-class and more and more bourgeois." The brutality of the neoliberal policies endorsed by social democracy is undermining its social and political bases.

Some theoreticians of the PS in France - the leaders of the "think tank" Terra Nova - drew the conclusion that it was necessary to change the social target audience of social democracy. Blue- and white-collar and technicians had to be replaced by managers, the liberal professions and the upper layers of wage-earners. In short, it was necessary to "have a change of people." The composition of the leading bodies has also been modified: teachers, trade union bureaucrats, lawyers, (the "café-owners", Trotsky added in his time), have given way to "énarques" [\[1\]](#)], technocrats and financiers. To a point where socialist parties are experiencing a kind of devitalization, a break with whole sections of their history. Adherents are replaced by professional politicians: elected representatives and their assistants. The policies of the European Union (EU) have aggravated this qualitative change. In different forms, the socialist parties are being transformed into bourgeois parties. Does that mean that they have become bourgeois parties like the others? Not quite, the practice of parties alternating in government demands that the socialist parties mark out their differences with other bourgeois parties. They remain linked, by their historical origin, to the workers' movement, but it is

only a question of traces that are fading away in the memories of activists. This nevertheless creates contradictions and oppositions in these parties. They can maintain a certain relationship with the "people of the left", although it is increasingly distended. This qualitative change, if it was carried through to its conclusion, would transform these parties into "American-style democratic parties."

This neoliberal bourgeois transformation - it is more correct to call it neoliberal than social-liberal, because there is not much that is social in the evolution of social democracy - is now crystallized, but it is not sufficient for the most right-wing current of social democracy. In France, for example, Manuel Valls (Prime Minister under President François Hollande) has stated several times that "it was necessary to liquidate all social democratic references." Emmanuel Macron, a banker and Holland's finance minister, went further, calling also to abandon "all the old-fashioned ideas of the Left." What they want is to transform the changes that are underway into a finished process, even if it means breaking the Socialist Party. This is an approach that, if there is another debacle at the next presidential election in 2017, could win a majority in the PS. The right-wing currents of the PS are now on the offensive, but it has to be recognized that faced with the advocates of a forced march towards neoliberal transformation, the various oppositions are not reconnecting with classical reformism and still less with the ideas of the historic left currents of social democracy. Neoliberal policies are rectified only at the margin. The leaders of the internal opposition in the PS voted for the "European Fiscal Compact" (Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, signed in March 2012.) They voted in the National Assembly for the ANI (Agreement on competitiveness and security of employment) - a deregulation of social relations - and the increase in the retirement age. The years of neo-liberal counter-reforms and the setbacks experienced by the workers' movement in Europe have left their mark. The horizon of those within the socialist parties who are opposed to the most glaring "betrayals" is bounded by the fundamental tenets of neoliberal policies.

The Right and the far Right on the offensive

As a result, this policy leads to electoral defeat. At this stage, the Right and the far Right are on the offensive. It is always risky to embark on predictions. But what is most likely, for the next presidential election in 2017, is a second round between the candidate of the Right and Marine Le Pen. The Socialist candidate will be eliminated in the first round. The PS can only rely on "judicial affairs" that can liquidate Sarkozy or on divisions of the Right, such that it would not be able to take part in the second round of the presidential election. These divisions are a real problem for the French Right. In almost all European countries the Right has the wind in its sails, but in France there is the National Front (FN), which is exerting all its influence - 25 per cent of the electorate - on the traditional Right, and which is producing cracks. There are thus two main currents within the Right. A current embodied by Sarkozy that goes hunting on the political terrain of the FN, "in order to contain it and win back voters". There is also in a series of regions a real porosity between the electorates of the Right and the far Right. This part of the Right takes up the racist and authoritarian themes of the FN. And then there is a current of the Right and centre that keeps its distance from the ideas of the FN. Both currents place themselves in the framework of the EU, unlike the National Front. Up until now, the Right has contained the rise of the far Right, but how long will that last?

The National Front already occupies a central place in political life. With 25 per cent, it has sunk roots. It now has a popular electorate. One question remains open - what are the consequences of the present crisis in its leadership and in the Le Pen family, because today the global political crisis is affecting the National Front. This crisis expresses the interests of clans and cliques, and also financial conflicts, but it is also the expression of an internal political struggle. The National Front is not a fascist party as existed in the 1930s, because we are not in the 1930s. The origin of its leadership is fascist, its national-socialist themes repeat the classic themes of the far Right, the

national preference (priority for French people), the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism, are central to its policies. It is not a fascist party, but it is not a bourgeois party like the others. With 25 per cent, it is faced with the problem of power. And there is obviously a violent debate: there is the old Jean-Marie Le Pen, for whom coming to power is linked to the collapse of the system and its replacement by the nationalist movement. And there is another strategy, which has a majority in the FN, presently grouped around Marine Le Pen, that aims to conquer positions in the system in order to split the traditional Right and make it explode, so as to subordinate a large part of it to itself. But it is not, as in Italy, a project of the type of Gianfranco Fini. The latter, coming from the Italian Social Movement and then becoming the founder of the National Alliance in 1995, joined in 2009 Berlusconi's party, the People of Freedom, before separating from it in 2010. He was a minister in Berlusconi's second and third governments.

The majority of the FN does not want to make alliances where it would be in a subordinate position. Its leaders want to break the Right and replace it. As a result, they are in an impasse, because by not making alliances they cannot go beyond a certain threshold, unless the crisis worsens and the traditional Right explodes. For now the Right is containing this pressure, but for how long?

Of most concern, beyond the electoral phenomena, is a far-reaching change in French society. A whole system of social, cultural and ideological representations is exploding. There is frenzied individualism, the rejection of solidarity, racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, the war of the poor against the poor, with a hysterical denunciation of "handouts". A few years ago, the PCF used a formula to express the rise of reactionary phenomena, "society is shifting to the right." We could argue about the formula, but there is a movement of this type that is the consequence of the bankruptcy of the Left. Thus, although the protests (on 15 January 2015) against the attack that hit "Charlie" (7 January) sparked a democratic and humanist reaction of several million people in the streets of the country, it did not result in a decline of racism. Encouraged by the attitude of governments and of the European Union, the reactions towards the migrants in the Mediterranean, as recorded in opinion polls, are quite dreadful. They clearly show the degree of "inhumanity" that has been reached among sectors of the population.

Suggestions for an anti-capitalist alternative

"You do not want classes or their struggle? You will have the plebs and the anomic multitudes. You no longer want the peoples? You will have bands and tribes. You do not want the party? You will have the despotism of public opinion!" (Daniel Bensaïd, *Eloge de la politique profane*.)

And in this context, what is the situation of the workers' movement: a deterioration of the relationship of forces. The curves of the class struggle are turning downwards. In France today we are at one of the lowest points since the 1960s. The membership of trade unions and left parties – all of them – is declining. The CGT (General Confederation of Labour), the biggest union organization in the country, has experienced an enormous leadership crisis around questions of corruption. Nevertheless, social resistance exists: there are struggles on wages, on jobs, there are demonstrations of teachers and health-workers, and ecological mobilizations. However, up until now they have not been able to block the neoliberal counter-reforms and the attacks of the employers. Yet when all political and institutional ways out are blocked, there can be social explosions; but as the quote from Daniel Bensaïd indicates, the problem is the meaning of these explosions. The class struggle continues. It is now mainly being conducted by the employers. It gives rise to elementary resistance; it can lead to brutal social eruptions. The problem is in its political expression, in terms of consciousness and organization. And here there is a real problem in the present situation in France.

There is a difference with Greece and Spain. There is no Podemos or Syriza in France, taking into account, of course, the political and historical differences between the two formations. Since 1995, there have been three political-electoral experiences, and I insist on the electoral form of these experiences. In 1995 with Arlette Laguiller and Lutte Ouvrière; in 2002 and 2007 with the LCR - then the NPA - and Olivier Besancenot; and in 2010-2012, with the Left Front and Jean Luc Mélenchon, who received in 2012 more than 4.5 million votes. Three experiments that have shown the potential for political reorganization to the left of the Left, but also its limits and its failure and. That also explains the space left free for the National Front.

The radical Left is fragmented, in retreat, divided over its relationship to the PS. The French Communist Party (PCF) relaunched itself with the Left Front, but it continues to decline. It has fewer than 40,000 members. Especially, it does not manage to break with the PS. Admittedly, it refuses to follow the neoliberalism of François Hollande and Manuel Valls, but it is willing to relaunch a "union of the left" with the Greens or the internal opponents in the PS, who voted the main counter-reforms of the government. Mélenchon occupies a position more to the left, more clearly defined, than the Socialist Party. But some of his positions are marked by anti-German nationalism or sympathies for Putin in the Ukrainian conflict, which makes the conditions for discussing a political alternative more complicated. How can we rebuild a social and political anticapitalist alternative? That is the difficulty that we have, trying to avoid sectarian pitfalls or adaptations to the dominant left reformist forces. Let us try to respond to them:

- By building social struggles or mobilizations, trying to get partial victories on social questions, particularly on wage issues, where there has been a series of struggles over the last period. The terrain of the democratic struggle against all forms of racism as well as the fight against the FN - especially against the effects of discriminatory policies in the cities it controls - must be taken up by activists. By engaging in all the new configurations of social movements: urban spaces and not just factories, squares, occupations. In the 1990s, Daniel Bensaïd warned against "the social illusion" and the underestimation of political questions. Today, while taking advantage of all possibilities on the political and institutional level, we must rather be wary of "political and electoral illusions," and remember that any process of radical transformation must rely on self-emancipation of the workers, on their self-organization, on direct action.
- By a unitary policy in struggles as well as in political action, to bring together all the forces that break with the PS. This is a serious question. In a situation of confusion, of rejection of the PS, we must at the same time put forward an anti-austerity emergency programme with an anticapitalist dynamic and maintain a clear demarcation from the PS, even if it's difficult.
- We have no experience of the kind of Syriza or Podemos - although we must stress that these two phenomena are not identical - but there is a strong idea there, which is the necessity of rebuilding a social and political movement, something new, which is outside the old traditional organizations of the workers' movement, a new political representation. This will involve a series of unitary actions and debates, for which we are not always prepared, or which are refused by the sectarians.

Some conclusions...

The combination of the long period of the neoliberal counter-reforms that began in the late 1970s - and which deepened with the crisis of 2008 - the destruction caused by Stalinism, the effects of the "balance sheet of the century" for the workers' movement, including all of its components, the very partial reorganization of a new movement, its differentiations, its fragmentation: all of this adds up to the end of the historic workers' movement. This is related to the end of a type of capitalism that

shaped the workers' movement over a period of decades, which is in a certain fashion the end of an era ... Not the end of the class struggle, which continues, but which will give rise to new expressions, to new organizations, with the admixture of segments of the old and the new.

We must therefore participate in this process of rebuilding, in a situation of the deterioration of the relationship of forces, but especially in a period of history that is unstable, in a situation of "what is already no longer there" - post-war capitalism, the workers' movement of the last century - and "what is not yet there" - social struggles and policies of a breadth and magnitude that generate politics, but especially new experiences of building social and political movements.

François Sabado

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] A neologism used to describe graduates of the prestigious ENA, the National School of Administration