

Party and Movement - On the challenges facing the French left

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Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste's Olivier Besancenot on the challenges facing the French left.

Olivier Besancenot is a postal worker and a member of the leadership of France's Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA). He first came to prominence in 2002 when, as an unknown twenty-eight-year old trade union militant, he ran for president as the candidate of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR), and managed to win 1.2 million votes (4.3 percent), including an impressive 14 percent of the youth vote.

In 2007, he again ran for president on the LCR ticket and secured an equally impressive result (1.5 million votes, or just over 4 percent). By 2008, he had become one of France's best known and most popular political figures: in polls conducted that year, 60 percent of the public expressed a favorable opinion of him, and voters preferred him over most leaders of the more moderate Socialist Party when asked who should be the Left's standard-bearer in 2012.

In May 2011, however, Besancenot, by then a spokesman for the NPA (into which the LCR was dissolved in 2009) announced that he would not be running for president a third time. Soon afterward, he stepped down from his official role as the public face of the party.

Still, there is no doubt that he is among the most important figures on the far left in France today: a reliable voice for labor and the Left in the political controversies of the day, Besancenot is known as an excellent speaker and talented debater. He is regularly invited onto television to participate in discussion programs, and is often quoted in the news media.

At the same time, the NPA, which he helped to found, has struggled since its earliest days. Initiated by militants from the LCR who hoped to create a broad-based socialist organization, they saw in the NPA the basis for a mass party, capable of attracting a wider layer of activists and appealing to an audience beyond the traditional constituencies of the far left.

In that sense, the new party was formed with the intention of creating something genuinely new, not simply rebranding the LCR. At its inception, it attracted considerable attention from the public and claimed nine thousand members — three times that of the LCR — when it was launched.

Just six years later, however, after a succession of splits and a steady loss of membership, it is a much smaller organization, with a much harder ideological profile. Many of the NPA's original members have left, either drifting into inactivity or entering the Front de gauche.

While the party still has a base of militants who are able to do significant local organizing, it no

longer inspires the same excitement that it did on its founding. Some sections of the membership are predisposed to suspicion (or open hostility) to any and all forces to their right. Internal divisions are often sharp.

In part, these dynamics reflect the political trajectory of the NPA since 2009. Between its establishment and the 2012 presidential election, the party suffered a series of splits, culminating in the departure of the “Gauche Anticapitaliste” current. All of these splits centered around the same basic question: relations with the Front de Gauche and the broad left. Composed principally of the Communist Party (PCF) and the Parti de gauche (PG) — the latter headed by the charismatic former socialist firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

In 2012, Mélenchon ran for president as the candidate of the Front and garnered almost 4 million votes (more than 11 percent of the total). That was actually a disappointing outcome, given that polls had suggested he would approach 16 percent — in fact, he finished well behind the National Front’s Marine Le Pen, who Mélenchon had spent much of the campaign attacking.

The Parti de gauche leader compounded the consequences of that mild defeat by going straight to the constituency of Hénin-Beaumont, her home ground, to challenge Le Pen in legislative elections held just a few months after the presidential — and ended up suffering an even more embarrassing defeat.

At the same time, Mélenchon’s score in 2012 was well above that of the NPA’s candidate — an autoworker and long-time labor militant named Philippe Poutou whose vote, in lieu of Besancenot at the head of the ticket, barely exceeded 1 percent. That left many to wonder precisely why the NPA had tried to challenge Mélenchon at all, in an election in which it had absolutely no chance of achieving a significant vote.

If 2012 represented a setback for the NPA, there is no evidence that the group’s fortunes have recovered in the years since. And meanwhile, the situation in the Front de gauche has worsened. It’s unclear how Mélenchon and the PCF will be able to settle their differences or what the future of the Front will be after the 2017 elections. The PG itself is in disarray with a dramatic loss of militants over the past couple years.

What’s more, the political differences between the PCF and the PG have come to the fore even more clearly since the Paris attack — in recent weeks, for instance, the Front de gauche delegates in parliament, all of them current or former PCF members, voted to extend the state of emergency by three months — a controversial measure, which Mélenchon opposes and which the rest of the coalition is split on.

Thus, the picture across the French far left is not a pretty one. All of which points to the question — what explains this general decomposition? And where should we look for openings today?

It is precisely those questions that Besancenot addressed when he spoke with *Jacobin* contributing editor Jonah Birch this summer, before the November 13 attacks.

Jonah Birch - You said at the fête of the NPA-Paris in June that French political life is “blocked” at the moment. Can you explain what you meant by that, and what’s behind the dynamics you’re referring to?

Olivier Besancenot - We’re saying that from the perspective of radicalism and social protest, France is a laggard in Europe. Consider the beginning of the 2000s: there were a series of important political developments — the victory of the No vote in the 2005 referendum on the European

Constitutional Treaty, followed the next year by the defeat of the CPE (or First Employment Contract, a measure that would have reduced employment protections for younger workers), which seemed at the time a significant blow against rising precariousness. We should also mention the revolt of working-class youth in the fall of 2005 [when two months of angry protests by the largely black and Arab youth who reside in France's segregated suburban banlieues, was sparked by a dramatic case of police brutality - ed].

In some ways, France was then the epicenter of social struggles continent-wide during these years, even if in retrospect these movements failed to make lasting social or political gains. But this period of struggle came to a close with the defeat of the movement against Sarkozy's pension reform in 2010 — an important movement, built on mass demonstrations more than strikes, but which witnessed mobilizations on a scale not seen since May '68.

The mobilizations of 2010 introduced some of the dynamics that would later define the movement of the *Indignados* in Spain — except that in France, there was nothing comparable to the degree of popular self-organization, grassroots activity, and characteristic emphasis on democracy you saw in the Spanish case. During the movement against the 2010 pension reform, the struggle was still led by the old organizations of the labor movement, who ended up suffering a major defeat as a result.

Clearly, all this was quite damaging from the point of view of working-class combativity, and politically, the victories of previous years were never translated into new forms of popular political organization. After 2010, the Left that coalesced in opposition to the European Constitutional Treaty has increasingly lost hope about the prospects for creating organizations capable of bringing together the far left and representing its social demands politically.

When, from our wing of the LCR — the one with Daniel Bensaïd, who had formulated the problem this way — there emerged the idea of creating a new political instrument, because when one proposes a new program, one proposes a new political instrument to bring it to life, and therefore a new party.

We knew we had to balance between the old and the new: that is, on the one hand, we had to incorporate the "old" social organizations, the unions and the political formations which would provide elements for a recomposition; and, on the other, we had to create space for the new — for a new process of radicalization, new forms of struggle, new types of political ownership.

But that conjuncture of the old and the new, despite moments when it might have occurred, has not happened. I am thinking particularly of the social movements, where the effort to bring together mobilizations of the dispossessed (the "sans," composed of various groups defined by what they lack) with trade union struggles and movements fighting capitalist globalization, never really came to fruition.

And today we face a situation which, even if it isn't as permanently blocked as it appears to be, still seems to be stuck in one place. In France, the result is a rather nauseating set of circumstances, marked by a broad political radicalization to the right, where everyone is busily competing who can move right the quickest, until finally it is the extreme right that is able to benefit most — thus, the biggest winner from this whole situation has been the National Front of Marine Le Pen.

It's true that over the last two years, as the Socialist Party government has continued to move rightward, and implemented increasingly drastic austerity measures, the Left has only continued to decline. And meanwhile, Marine Le Pen has skyrocketed to the top of the polls for the 2017 presidential election. Why do you think the far right has been the main beneficiary of this confluence of circumstances?

First, it's important to be clear that this isn't just a French problem. When you look from something like an honest perspective at the balance of forces at the European level, there has really been a more general breakthrough of populist movements, movements of the extreme right, even neo-fascist movements. Hence the importance of solidarity — without being uncritical — with the Spanish and Greek experiences: because they were the first two counter-examples we've had which prove that the crisis of capitalism could potentially benefit the anticapitalist left and not just the extreme right.

If we return to France now, I should say that I don't believe in the concept of "hydraulic politics" (where one party goes up as another goes down). In other words, it's not enough for the traditional parties to move to the right for it to generate some kind of left politics.

It's clear that this rightward shift creates a space. But at that point, we're confronted with a strategic problem which divides the radical left, both in France and in Europe: since politics abhors a vacuum, and since the Left isn't what it once was, some on the radical left are tempted to return to the old political models — to try to recreate the kind of reformist left, in a more or less radical packaging, which prevailed before it mutated into today's social-liberal left.

It's an institutional version of left politics which is deadly, because we know it is doomed to failure and does not correspond to what might emerge from new generations, new forms of struggle, etc. So that's the first problem.

And the other problem is that even when there are embryonic forms of struggle, they do not themselves produce their own politics. There have been two counter-examples to the rapid growth of the Right during the crisis, that of Greece and Spain.

But the movements that emerged in these two countries were not born brand new in 2008 — that idea reflects a very media-driven view of things. In reality, they were marked by a particular history of social struggle, and a unique trajectory of radical organizing. There are, of course, many new elements in Syriza and especially Podemos, and these two groups are certainly much newer than many other European left organizations, but within them there are experienced activists and numerous political currents.

What was characteristic about these forces was their willingness to work systematically to establish connections with new social movements, and to forge relationships of mutual influence and political training. Those are important experiences. Which isn't to say they've settled the question of what to do — we see how complicated things are in Greece and Spain today.

I would add one more thing. There is a very French problem we need to confront — the problem of provincialism, which leads to a certain inability to think beyond our own borders, especially when it's a country on the outskirts of the Europe, and then there's a way of understanding what is going on that plays out either as an instrumentalist view or as the perspective of a know-all.

Thus, for those who are interested (because there are those who are not really interested), some try to say "this is just what we should be doing in France," but in reality only to recreate old electoral combinations (which is, somewhat unfortunately, the temptation of the Left Front); or else there are those who are actually interested, but mostly only to give lessons, like some kind of red professors, lecturing from afar about all the things the Left in Greece and Spain doesn't understand and waiting for the decisive reversal — that is to say, awaiting, above all, future treasons to denounce.

Some of these red professors are to be found in the far left, unfortunately in all the organizations. Because the context lends itself to that too. But objectively, if the Greek experience ends in defeat, it

is potentially Golden Dawn that's coming down the road — the danger represented by this group, which is widely acknowledged to be a neo-Nazi current, if it can tap into popular anger, is obvious.

A defeat of that magnitude in Greece would constitute a negative example for those struggling Europe. For us here in France, such a setback would lead to a severe worsening of the balance of forces. Even if the consequences of a definitive defeat for the Left in Greece were not quite so drastic, that eventuality would have a real material impact, on the Left and on the prospects for movements here; the same goes for Spain. So, by any measure, we have a real stake in those battles.

And yet, what we see today in terms of concrete solidarity with Greece and Spain is incredibly weak. That's not because there's no interest: among the general public around us, people are discussing what's happening. But it hasn't led to much in the way of effective solidarity. That's a real issue for us: especially in the case of Greece, where there was actually a showdown with the European institutions, we, here in France, ought to have been contributing whatever possible to make sure the program on which Syriza was elected would be implemented.

In terms of thinking about the potential for broad-based mobilizations against austerity in France: one of the big problems right now is that the unions seem weak and rudderless, and incapable of mounting sustained resistance to neoliberalism. Of the country's largest union confederations, only the CFDT appears to have a coherent policy; in their case, it's one that centrally involves negotiating with business and government officials over the terms of liberalization.

In this context, I found the April 9 demonstration organized by several of the unions who oppose the CFDT's strategy, notably the CGT (France's largest union federation, traditionally aligned with the Communist Party and the Left) quite striking: on the one hand, there were four hundred thousand unionists marching through Paris — members of the CGT in particular were quite visible.

On the other hand, it apparently had no impact whatsoever on the government. Is this reflective of some kind of larger dynamic — does it point to a sort of yawning gap between collective expressions of popular anger, like strikes, and the Left's inability to stem the tide of neoliberalism?

I would say what is missing now in France, beyond the issue of what form this will take (strikes, demonstrations, occupations, etc.), is for the social question to burst to the front of the political scene. There are, in France today, sometimes demonstrations, sometimes mobilizations, and they may even succeed on occasion. But they are too stage managed and too classical. This is not meant to be pejorative, but in this game where so much is already agreed on, local and sectoral struggles, which are undeniably very real, but cannot be generalized and unified.

In these circumstances, it is not enough just to have the unions call for national demonstrations or one-day general strikes. Simply changing the forms of struggle in that way isn't an effective response to the depth of the attack we're facing. The problem goes well beyond the balance of power with the French bourgeoisie, because not even days of successful general strikes in Greece were enough to bring down the government or force a withdrawal of austerity plans (even if that happened once in Portugal, in September).

What's necessary is the kind of social explosion which can push social conflicts well beyond these narrow channels. Such an eruption of the social question in Europe is noticeably absent today. But eventually it will come, one way or another: not because a mass movement has been decreed, but because all the elements necessary to fuel such a movement are already present. Our job is to prepare for the eruption that is likely to occur in these conditions, to be available for future contests.

And in this sense, we're confronted with a problem: for, at this moment, in everything we do, we are if anything even more traditional, more repetitive, than before. We are holding ever more tightly to strategies that are outdated and ineffective. That leaves us ill-equipped to fight the battles yet to come.

Nonetheless, the more workers are squeezed, the more they are repressed, the more everything appears calm, the greater the explosion will eventually be — and when the explosion does come, the more things are likely to burst out in all directions.

Indeed, it's probable we haven't yet imagined all the forms this eruption will take: in October, news of the invasion by workers at Air France of the company's central works council, in protest of the elimination of thousands of jobs, reverberated around the globe — the image we were left with from that day, of the two human resources directors exiting the complex with their shirts shredded into pieces, is a reminder of how volatile the situation remains.

You're a political activist but you're also a militant in your workplace, at the post office. Have you seen a decline in militancy among postal workers since, for example, the defeat of the 2010 movement?

No, in the post office there is a lot of mobilization, and even a lot of local strikes: there are major work stoppages, including both minority and majority actions, and very strong workplace solidarity at the base, even if there is no national movement. But for me, the importance of these postal struggles is that they can go beyond the ranks of workers themselves, and become social movements that draw in wider segments of the public.

I think one of the tasks, among all the avenues we're exploring in France, is to develop case studies, as in Spain, of the peace marches, the environmental marches, the great movements fighting in areas like education and health — that is to say the very strong sectoral mobilizations — and around the question of housing.

In France, for example, struggles in Air France were never isolated from larger social and political concerns: notably, in both 1988 and in 1993, they were the harbingers of broader mobilizations. The ruling class remembers that too, hence the anxiety and repression that characterized their response to the workers who invaded the works council meeting. Especially since the idea of the labor leaders being exposed by their own workers is politically unbearable.

That's not to exclude the possibility that this also happens in health, given what is happening now in Paris hospitals; in fact, in any number of sectors, the preconditions for social mobilizations that bring together workers and the public already exist.

There are also massive mobilizations around ecological questions. For example we will see the impact of the mobilizations organized in conjuncture with this December's climate summit in Paris. Still, at present, the most advanced struggles we see — both in terms of their radicalism, and in their unity and capacity to join together the new and the old — are the mobilizations sparked by large-scale development projects: the protests at Notre-Dame-des-Landes against the airport construction, against the dam at Sivens (where the protestor Rémi Fraisse was killed by police), or the movement launched by the farmers' association against plans to build a high tech industrial-scale dairy in Picardie.

If you go to political meetings in France today, not one passes without mention of these struggles: I was recently in Grenoble, where there's currently mobilizations happening against a proposal for new Center Park construction — through that struggle, we came into contact with left-libertarian

activists, who ended up coming to a public meeting of a radical organization for the first time ever, and arguing perspectives with us.

This is the sort of thing that gives you a sense of how politically diverse this generation is — a generation in which you find a bit of everything and then the exact opposite — but which also points to the willingness of young activists to embrace big themes, big struggles, and new forms of mobilization when they explode. In any case we've taken so many blows...

At the same time, questions about what the Left will do in the 2017 presidential elections are already being hotly debated. This has been a big issue in the past, and seems likely to become so again. Former Parti de gauche presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon will certainly run again, and I suspect there will be widespread calls for unity, especially in the context of the growing menace of the extreme right.

This problem will remain in the next elections, whether it's regional elections this December or in 2017. But the issue is that the situation is blocked for everyone. There, for example, one might have imagined a Podemos effect on the French radical left, and that includes for the regional elections. For many reasons, that hasn't gone anywhere.

On the contrary, the Left Front's electoral lists, when they present a united slate, are always running against the governing party (i.e., the Socialist Party) in the first round. But then they end up running with the government afterwards, and so will end up co-heading a slate with the PS in the regional elections. For us, that's a real problem, even assuming the Left is trying to be careful about how they're approaching the Socialist Party.

On our side of things, the NPA operates on the terrain of grassroots militancy, and is attracting a few more people to our meetings, but we do not have the financial means to present an electoral list by ourselves.

Some of our comrades would almost prefer to isolate themselves from the rest of the Left; they are already a little tired of all these failed unity efforts, which can take time and energy. Meanwhile, LO (Lutte Ouvrière, or "Workers' Struggle," a relatively large and well-organized Orthodox Trotskyist group with a reputation for being rigidly sectarian and dogmatic among the rest of the Left - ed.) does not even want to talk about unity.

As for the social movements, there are, as yet, no representative actors ready to embark on a new kind of political battle. Potentially there could be — it would be enough to have just a little something start to take shape for it to have a big impact. If you had ten people from a significant social movement, jumping out of the first row saying "listen up, now: you're going to cut the crap," maybe we could get out of our current impasse. But for now there is nothing like that.

Mélenchon will run again, with or without the PCF, in all likelihood, since he believes he has a "rendezvous with France." But if you're going to use elections, it should be in the name of a larger project. When you start to occupy the electoral scene only in order to exist, whatever your project, you're just adding fuel to the political crisis. We will not stand for this. It would go against our current's basic approach.

The electoral issue is omnipresent in France and it is suffocating. It is not simply that it's going to take over political life during the few months before the election, or even the whole year before the election — it is every single day. The French political situation is weighed down by this electoralism in every possible way, up to and including the way poll data gets used.

So the problem, if you think in terms of an emancipatory project, is how to get out of that kind of political temporality, how to try to create another space, another time, another calendar — which does not necessarily mean that you boycott. But if you manage to create a mass movement with other forces, which can escape that electoral pressure, which can attack the parties of the bourgeoisie on another plane, then you can think about standing in the name of a more general project.

For 2017, it would be necessary to run a different kind campaign — the “alternative campaign” — in the manner of the Zapatistas: a campaign for a non-presidency, because in France there is the Fifth Republic. The electoral question is itself suffocated by the centrality in the French institutional system of the presidency of the republic.

That’s why you’re writing a book right now about the “cost of capital,” to build closer links to the social movements?

Personally, it’s true that I have a tendency to be totally focused on what’s happening in the social movements, because I still think that is the most fertile terrain for new forms of political expression to potentially emerge. This is probably a fault of mine, because it sometimes leads me to underestimate the role of political mediations.

I’ve made mistakes in judgment because of it. For example, I did not appreciate the significance of the Left Front when it first appeared, not out of sectarianism, but because I think its not my particular sensibility to look towards political coalitions first.

Yet this defect is actually an obsession with me now, because even if I remain a party militant, that’s my story and I’m proud of it. I remain convinced that the social movements are going to hatch new kinds of political representation. My anxiety is that we are going to end up outside of the real movement — the key thing is for us to be there, without reproducing the hierarchical relationships between party and social movement. It’s a question of having a complementary approach.

When I see the comrades from Spain, that is an obsession for them too. It reflects a particular history of militancy. I think the Greeks and the Spanish were ahead of us in the global justice movement: from that experience, a new generation emerged in many countries, but not really in France. Although there have been anti-globalization mobilizations in France, we always have faced the same problem: I remember that when we would prepare for summits in places like Nice or Genoa in 2000 or 2001, we’d always put together a list of who was there. I remember the numbers: 1000 Italians, 1500 Spanish, 800 Greeks. And then from France, 40. There emerged, especially on university campuses a new political generation in those other countries, obsessed with relating to social movements in this militant way, in relating to the movements in a way that wasn’t the same as us, a way that was really productive.

If we do not become extremely proactive in asserting the need to be available, to be open, the importance of learning and not just substituting ourselves (“I speak in the name of . . .”), we won’t get there. It’s complicated, because given the complexity of the situation in France, it is always tempting for us to say “we have the solution.”

Wouldn’t you say that the creation of the NPA reflected an effort to organize and represent newly radicalized generations, to reframe old questions and debates, and so on?

Yes, we made the effort there. Unlike others, I think we really opened the gates of the organization to forces beyond our own ranks. That was exciting but it was also very challenging. We were nervous. When you open the gates, you end up with a bunch of trade unionists who come with their

own culture, militants from the working-class neighborhoods who come with their own culture, etc. And that is the proletariat as it is, not as we imagine it — not as it is written in books — but as it is, today in France: fragmented, explosive, diverse, but marked by the seal of a common exploitation and oppression.

What I'm going to say here is undoubtedly controversial, but I think that the affair of the candidacy of Ilham Moussaïd at the regional elections in 2010 synthesized that problem, in a way that went beyond just the question of Islamophobia. Because in fact you have to find the right balance between the movement for women's rights, secularism, and the necessary struggle against Islamophobia.

But beyond that, what it symbolizes is a very real problem: you turn to the outside world, you hold a meeting, there are people who come, and you think, the more the better! You do not put bouncers at the entrance, so people come and they come as they are, white proletarians, blacks, Arabs, and therefore also Muslim women who wear headscarves.

They come to a meeting, they listen to what is said at the podium, not just from me but from different speakers, and they are generally in agreement with what is said, so they ask to join. They come back, go campaigning, stick posters on bus stops, distribute leaflets, and eventually run into problems when it comes to representing the party itself. If you cannot speak for the party while others are allowed to, then that's going to cause problems.

So behind that, beyond the colonial question, the fight against Islamophobia, there is the problem of relating to the real working class, as it actually is. To be clearer, if you open the gates and you are seeking to participate in real struggles, to give political expression to the social subject, then you take the social subject on its own terms, without demagogy.

This does not mean that you do not have anything to say, if only to do the work to cohere a collective self-awareness on issues where we seek to move forward together — particularly on the prejudices that we all deal with, because as working-class individuals whose lives predate our radical political activity, we are not cut off from the rest of society.

All this for me is very important, because if you project yourself into the future, there is much to review about what has not worked in the creation of the NPA. I don't have all the answers, but I think a substantial problem is this one: if you open the gates, because you have to maintain the courage to do so, you must not be afraid to let the proletariat, in all its complexity and variation, try to become an emancipatory subject fit for the twenty-first century.

For the unionists in the ranks of the far left, I think it's the same, relatively speaking. It is wrong to think that the difficulties of trade union organizing could be reduced to operational issues, even though these are important. For example, what are you doing to make sure everyone in your party feels comfortable speaking, and not just those who have experienced talking in front of an audience? In other words, how do you not replicate the divide that exists in society between those who speak and those who do not speak?

For example, unionists are less prone to speak in political debates — you rarely see them in the party conventions. You rarely see them at the summer schools of the NPA. You might see them speak at a semi-public national meeting (especially meetings focused specifically on the intervention on workplace) among comrades and other unionists — that is to say in their "domain." But you're less likely to come across them playing a very public role in party political campaigns.

And then there is another problem, because in the political expression of certain trade unionists, there is sometimes very little political mediation. It is the expression of a certain social anger, the

desire to have some kind of political achievement they can point to. And it can sometimes be startling and unfamiliar.

For example, among some of our union activists in the north, in union strongholds, the NPA was regularly described as the new party of the working class. That was their approach. You cannot make that claim when there are other left-wing organizations that represent militants: you can't claim the mantle of the sole working-class political representative — it would be height of a stupid and narrow sectarianism.

But these trade unionists meant something different by it — and in fact, their logic reflected our intentions in forming a new party, even if we were never able to express it properly.

How do you overcome those difficulties?

Honestly, I don't know.

But isn't this a major part of the problem, an objective one that the whole left must deal with? There was a whole cycle of struggle that began with the December 1995 strikes against the Juppé government, and as you said earlier seems to have ended with the 2010 pension reform, or the failed movement against it?

Yes definitely. I'm talking about our own balance sheet, the critical concerns that confront us specifically. In addition, many objective factors worked against us, and I mean that sincerely. We opened the gates at a time when the social and political reflux was beginning. Some thought we should build a new party before that backlash, but it was difficult to predict the defeats that followed. I speak of the criticism which helps us understand what we should avoid reproducing in the future, and this is very complicated.

I'd like you to address the issue of Islamophobia and racism on the Left. A lot of people internationally look at the French left's record on these issues and conclude there's a substantial blind spot here: for example, when one sees how hopelessly divided the radical left was on the 2004 ban on headscarves in public schools, it's quite shocking for us. What's your perspective? Where do you think the problems are?

These debates have always been a feature of the French situation and of the radical left, but what's important is to resolve the issues which remain a sticking point. If you try to settle it solely on the basis of old arguments, conceptions, and ideas, or if you're content to say that it's an outgrowth of France's colonial legacy and leave it at that, you're going to get stuck replaying debates from the past.

That danger runs both ways. Take the example of a young girl in a headscarf: if you perceive what she has on her head either simply as an attack on laïcité or simply as a symbol of the struggle against Islamophobia, I don't think you're grasping the problem, and you're ignoring the social reality of life in working-class communities today. Go talk to people in these neighborhoods and you'll find all sorts — women who wear the headscarf and women who don't, residents who are for the ban and residents who are against it, people of all political persuasions.

But there are also forms of engagement which help to overcome those differences — connections rooted in a common set of concrete, day-to-day experiences. That's not to speak of any shared history, I'm just talking about what happens in the here and now.

We aren't able to engage with people that way, because we aren't equipped with the necessary "software" — and I don't just mean the NPA, but the Left more broadly. It's a characteristic feature

of the situation we face, and it will continue to foster lasting failures unless we're able to address it.

Even in those corners of the Left that are most sensitive to the question of fighting Islamophobia, there is sometimes an involuntary tendency to reproduce paternalistic relationships with people from immigrant backgrounds (or their descendants). Thinking we need to go through religion to access those on the margins of the proletariat does not seem to me to be a good strategy, and it doesn't correspond to the reality of these people's lives, even when they are believers. I think we can discuss politics directly with all those who live in poor neighborhoods.

Besides, it's important to acknowledge that a part of the Muslim community resented us a little vis-à-vis Ilham. We were suspected, even in these circles, of trying to surf on the controversy. This was self-evidently false, since of the dozens and dozens of candidates on our lists, there was only one who wore the headscarf.

Nonetheless, the press picked up the story and created a media firestorm: there was an article, a press release, a TV segment, and soon enough, Al Jazeera was at Ilham's front door. Then things really got crazy! When we went out to canvas in working-class neighborhoods, people were telling us not to try to exploit the debate over Ilham's candidacy to drum up support. The question they asked us was whether there were any concrete actions we could carry out together — they never demanded that we pass some kind of religious "test" first.

At the time that all this was happening, no one defended us in the media, at least not directly. Not one prominent figure from the worlds of politics, culture, intellectual life, or the civic associations was willing to openly support what we had done. On the contrary, many of these people attacked us, because, of course, the issue is such a marker for French society in general — both an extension of Arabophobia and of France's colonial past, and the best alibi the ruling class has right now.

It serves as a firewall on all issues affecting the current social emergency. And it's a firewall that works very well, insofar as it is based on fear. In this, the bourgeoisie has found an effective way to keep the proletariat profoundly divided — divided in the broadest sense of the word.

The challenge for us today is to figure out an effective strategy for countering those divisions. We must conduct specific campaigns, certainly, but that does not solve the problem. One track for dealing with this question may indeed lie in the formation of new types of alliances — not with those that are considered representatives of a predetermined cultural and religious community, but with the actors themselves, who are often concentrated in poor neighborhoods.

We must develop points of convergence and advance on an equal footing with movements of neighborhood grassroots activists. And as for politics, it is there in the neighborhoods too. These communities are far from being bereft of militants.

Moreover, one can also talk about immigration, because, for example, I am in the 18th arrondissement (a working-class district lying along the northern edge of Paris), an area known to be a traditional center of immigrant life. Here we used an election deadline to wage a novel campaign, called the *liste des sans-voix* ("list of the voiceless/voteless"), in which we put forward a slate of candidates that included many people of foreign origin, who do not have the right to vote or stand for election, in a context when the Socialist government had once again backed down on its promise to extend voting rights in local elections to foreign residents.

It was an embryonic movement, organized at the neighborhood level, and our discussions reflected the urgency felt by people who are being forced into a common movement. The list was declared invalid by the prefecture and we installed our own booths in the street to hold a symbolic vote. Many

neighborhood residents came to our polling stations, while there were only a few voters at the real polling stations. It was a joint campaign with the most invisible segments of the working class.

And what about the labor movement? Do you think the trade unions can reverse the trend toward long-term decline, and find a workable strategy for challenging austerity? Particularly in the context of the recent corruption scandal involving the secretary general of the CGT, is there any hope on that front right now?

There is a lot of potential on the side of the unions in France, especially because there are many teams of “class struggle” unionists, who draw support from a much wider layer of militants than we often think — the number of militants involved in these teams probably reaches into the tens of thousands.

The fundamental problem is that we’ve had in France an extended sequence of events — one that has gone on long enough — in which each episode of social conflict revives hopes for labor renewal centering on a more combative pole in the labor movement (a pole to be composed of the CGT, the teachers federation the FSU, and the independent and combative Solidaires confederation). This sequence seems to have ended and what we’re seeing now — in labor and really, across the entire political scene — is a gradual radicalization and evolution to the right. The problem is still the lack of a founding event that could trigger a new sequence in both the political realm and the trade union arena.

We saw the potential for a sustained union revival following the December 1995 movement against the government of Alain Juppé. Juppé had attached his name to proposed legislation which would have cut pensions and reformed the social security system. The mobilizations that eventually forced him to retreat from that proposal came to represent a model and a precedent for labor militants and a warning for business: this example of a mass movement which culminates in a victorious general strike is basically every government’s greatest fear.

If that experience were somehow to be recreated, there are, inside the labor movement today, “teams” from which something new could emerge, even if the sources of such a renewal are hard to identify right now.

What about other struggles or movements, like those movements around issues of ecology, racism, Europe, and so forth. Do you think they can play an important role in helping to change the balance of power?

For the moment, there is a muted pressure on French society, but no sharp cutting edge, because everything is maintained, padlocked, boxed in. Basically there are lots of activities, lots of interesting developments in areas such as anti-racism, housing, trade unionism, but nothing substantial enough to overthrow the current balance of power. Even in these sectors, we have integrated the belief that society is headed in the right direction. So no sector appears on the frontlines to say “stop it.”

That’s a bit of a depressing note for us to end on.

No, because the current situation is untenable in the long run. Everything I’ve described, from the beginning, points to a society that is not yet fossilized. The situation in France and Europe isn’t fixed; the existing balance of forces is not permanently frozen in place. On the contrary, things will change.

The most critical challenge right now is to make sure that activists feel, from the very depths of their souls, the urge to always be in contact with whatever is moving. In that regard, there are aspects of

the present conjuncture that I find interesting and even exciting. Today, we track and we chase anything that looks like a potential bright spot on an otherwise dark horizon.

Political intelligence, in these circumstances, would seem to consist in rethinking a whole bunch of assumptions — not claiming to have the solutions in advance, but taking up the challenge of inventing something new, bit by bit. We should embrace the task of devising new programmatic and organizational responses, adapted to a situation that may move suddenly, even as we wish to build appropriate alliances.

On the question of political representation, I think these considerations necessitate a strategic discussion about the party form. That's a discussion that should be had out openly and seriously, without any attempts to shortcut the debate and without postmodernist demagoguery.

Today we need to revise our approach to the question of political organization — to create new models of representation that would borrow from the party form the consistency on questions of program and strategy, but would avoid the pitfalls of substitution and isolation from real social struggles (problems which have plagued so many organizations). How to go about doing this is not so clear. Maybe finding a solution, or even just thinking clearly about the project, will require that we're attentive, now more than ever, to the new elements and new approaches that will emerge from outside the ranks of our own political traditions.

P.S.

* "Party and Movement". Jacobin. 12.4.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/olivier-besancenot-npa-anticapitalist-france-laicite-melenchon-lcr/>

* Translated by Jonah Birch and Soraya Guénifi.

* The new issue of Jacobin, centering on development and the Global South, is out now. To celebrate its release, new subscriptions start at only \$14.95.

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