

France: A Sea Change on the Left

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IN CONTRAST WITH the United States, where the political arena has been dominated by two entrenched parties for a century, France has gone through major changes since the end of World War II. Back then, workers' demands were mostly put forward by the French Communist Party (PCF) which had over 30% of the vote, and the fear of a revolution forced the ruling class to concede to demands such as universal healthcare (called *Sécurité sociale*).

The Soviet "de-Stalinisation" in the 1950s, the anti-authority rebellion of the youth in 1968, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 were major events that eventually brought the PCF down to 2% of the vote in the 2007 presidential election.

In the meantime, the Socialist Party became the major party of the left, winning the presidency with François Mitterrand and the support of the Communist Party in 1981. After an electoral defeat in 1993 and the general strike of 1995, the left came back to power in 1997, this time led by the Socialist and former Trotskyist Lionel Jospin, supported by both the Communist Party and Les Verts (Green Party).

This new government, called *Gauche plurielle* (Plural Left), lowered the work week from 40 to 35 hours, but it also engaged in a record number of privatizations in the public sector. The current posture of the Socialist Party leadership is far from any anti-capitalist stance (except for the name of the party), and can be seen as "social-libéral," which in France means pro-capitalist reformist.

Both the crisis of the Communist Party and the evolution of the Socialist Party have left a vacuum in the "anti-capitalist space" that is now, little by little, being taken over by the revolutionary left. The main promoter of the regroupment of that left is the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR), the French section of the Fourth International.

The ancestor of the LCR, the *Parti Communiste Internationaliste* (PCI), was until the 1960s one among several small Trotskyist organizations existing in France. In 1966, a fraction of the youth of the Communist Party led by Alain Krivine rebelled against the PCF leadership and joined the PCI, which eventually became the LCR, an organization that reached 10,000 members and had a daily newspaper in the early 1970s. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the LCR did not escape the general erosion of the radical left, but it resisted more than others (Maoist organizations, for instance, have disappeared).

The "long march of the LCR" has more recently taken a new twist. In 2002, Olivier Besancenot, a 28-year-old postman representing a new generation of anti-conformist activists, became the presidential candidate of the LCR, replacing Krivine as the main spokesperson of the organization.

The main slogan of LCR's campaign was "Our lives are more valuable than their profits." Besancenot's irreverence and self-confidence when dealing with the questions of the mainstream media brought a lot of attention among a disoriented youth, taking 4.25% of the vote (over 1.2 million votes). With another 5.72% of the vote cast to Arlette Laguillier, the veteran candidate of *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle, another Trotskyist organization), that election year became an historic one for the Revolutionary left.

A New Anti-Capitalist Unity

The successful 2005 campaign against the ratification by France of the European Constitutional Treaty was an important step toward the regroupment of the left. This campaign, in which Besancenot played a central role, denounced the new European Constitution as designed to promote financial short-term profits rather than democratic, workers' and immigrants' rights.

The victory of the "No" in the referendum was a major blow for the "parties of power," including the leadership of the Socialist Party, demonstrating the efficacy of a large coalition of dissident Socialists, Communists (led by Marie-George Buffet, first woman leader of their party), Trotskyists, Environmentalists and Alter-globalization activists (including José Bové).

As millions of voters were expecting this coalition to unify their forces for the 2007 presidential election, the Communist Party instead chose its traditional agreement with the Socialist Party (mutual local electoral support) in order to limit their losses in elected officials in Congress. The subsequent decision of the LCR to have Besancenot run was seen by many, including some members of the LCR, as sectarian. But Besancenot obtained almost 1.5 million votes and finished ahead of any other candidate to the left of the Socialist Party, including the candidates of the Communist Party, the Greens, Lutte Ouvrière and José Bové. And as rightwinger Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president, Besancenot appeared in the polls as popular as Ségolène Royal (presidential candidate of the Socialist Party) as the spokesperson of the opposition.

Since the 2007 election, the LCR has been promoting the creation of a New Anti-Capitalist Party, thus calling Socialists, Communists, Libertaires (Anarchists), Feminists, Environmentalists, and Alter-globalization activists to join. So far, the process has been successful, bringing together over three times the current number of LCR members (a total of around 10,000 participants).

In order to prevent this new party from becoming a "new LCR," LCR members represent no more than one third of any decision-making committee. The party's creation is scheduled for January 2009. The LCR expects that the new organization (whose name has not yet been decided) will help translate the popularity that Besancenot has gained over the years into more sustained political activism, to ultimately build the political tool that the social movements in France need.

P.S.

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