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France : The New Anti-capitalist Party shakes up the left - A viewpoint from Catalonia

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The political panorama of the French left has been shaken in recent months by the announcement of the creation of a New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) at the initiative of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) of Olivier Besancenot.

The NPA was launched just after the presidential elections of April 2007, which confirmed Besancenot as the most solid option to the left of the Socialist Party (PS), with 4.1% of votes, far ahead of the 1.9% of the Communist Party (PCF), 1.5% of the Greens, 1.3% of the Trotskyist Lutte Ouvrière and 1.3% of the global justice campaigner, Jose Bové.

The launch of the NPA tries to translate the social and electoral support of Besancenot into an organized activist force. The new party, whose name is still provisional, is defined as anti-capitalist, internationalist, ecological and feminist. It locates the struggle against neoliberalism in a perspective of a break with Capitalism and sees itself as an activist organization and not an electoral-professional party.

Independence and not collaboration with social-liberal governments and the PS will be one of the distinctive strategic orientations of the new formation. In fact, this was the main element of divide for the candidacy of Besancenot in the last presidential elections with respect to other formations of the left like the PCF, Greens or Jose Bové, which did not exclude collaboration, in variable degrees according to the case, with the Socialists.

The launch of the NPA, which will be formally set up at the end of January 2009, has raised a broad sense of expectancy, with the new formation attracting to its ranks combative trades unionists, students, young people from the popular neighbourhoods, disappointed former militants of other left formations, intellectuals and so on. Up until now, 300 local or sectoral committees have been set up involving about 9,000 people (the LCR has at present about 3,000 members).

Besancenot has become one of the most popular figures on the French left and the main visible face of the opposition to Sarkozy, in a context where the PS does not represent a real alternative policy to that of the government. A poll by CSA in the past month indicated that 49% of those polled considered Besancenot as the main rival of Sarkozy. The popularity of Besancenot has, according to a study by the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, been consolidated in three processes : the "No" campaign in the European Constitution in 2005, the mobilization against the First Employment Contract (CPE) in 2006 and the presidential elections of 2007.

Faced with the emergence of the NPA, the French left has been shaken up. The Socialists, who are in the midst of a struggle for the leadership of the party, recently started a working group to study the consequences of the emergency "of a pole of radicalism". The Communist Party, sunk in a broad historic crisis, has decided to bet anew on a line of collaboration with the Socialists in name of unity against the right, excluding agreements with the NPA. The Greens, also in crisis, are trying to recompose a new ecological bloc, framed in a strategic perspective of collaboration with the PS,

through the alliance between Daniel Cohn-Bendit, representative of their more rightist wing and former partisan of the European Constitution, the popular journalist Nicholas Hulot and Jose Bové. For the moment, nevertheless, it is the emergence of the NPA which is setting the pace in the ranks of the French left.

P.-S.

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