

France: As National Front support grows, strategy struggle erupts in Left Front

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November 6, 2013 – *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — October was a month of sharp shifts in French politics. On October 4, a poll in the French weekly *Nouvel Observateur* showed the xenophobic and racist National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen leading voting intentions for the 2014 European elections with the support of 24% of those interviewed—up 3% in six months.

On October 13, in the second round of the by-election for the canton of Brignoles (in the Mediterranean department of Var), the FN easily defeated the mainstream conservative Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), by 53.9% to 46.1%. Until 2011 Brignoles had had a Communist Party (PCF) mayor, but in this election the main left candidate, with a PCF background and supported by the Socialist Party, could only manage 14.6% in the first round.

On October 19, a BVA poll revealed that 65% of those interviewed thought that Rom school girl Léonarda Dibrani—taken off a school excursion bus by police on October 9 and deported with her family to Albania—should not be allowed to return to France. That poll result became public even as thousands of school students and their supporters flooded central Paris for three days to protest Léonarda's expulsion.

On October 20, when President François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS) (down to 23% in the latest polls) appeared on national television to offer Léonarda right of return to France without her family, he simply made matters worse for himself. “With her mother and sisters”, insisted PS secretary Harlem Desir. This difference between government and party didn't matter for long. From Albania the 15-year-old Léonarda told Hollande where he could put his offer.

As Hollande's authority nosedives even with PS faithful, that of interior minister Manuel Valls, the “hard man” stuck with the thankless job of expelling “illegals”, keeps rising. An October 24 *Figaro* poll had Valls as preferred president after the next election (2017), at 33% to Hollande's 9%.

The rise of the FN at the expense of the UMP and PS has been deepening divisions within all main political trends. UMP leaders and candidates have been trying to beat Le Pen at her own game of race hatred and exclusionary nationalism while ministers within the ruling Socialist Party (PS)

government have been at loggerheads over the treatment of Léonarda.

Left Front alliance debates

Within the opposition Left Front (Front de Gauche) a debate has opened up over how to orient to the rightward-moving PS. This debate is also being driven by the failure of the Left Front to make any major gains in by-elections held since the May-June 2012 presidential and National Assembly elections.

Most importantly, between October 17 and 19, Paris region members of the Communist Party (PCF), the main force along with the Left Party (Parti de Gauche) in the nine-party Left Front, voted to maintain their party's present alliance with the PS in the Paris council for the March 2014 municipal elections in France.

This decision, taken by 57% to 43%, represented a break with the strategic line of the Left Front. This is to have Left Front tickets in all towns with over 20,000 inhabitants and to support the inclusion of other left forces on these tickets only if they take a clear stand against the austerity policies of the national PS government of Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault.

(In municipal elections, the two-round French voting system allows the Left Front to stand in its own name in the first round, while supporting PS candidates against right-wing tickets in the second round if its own vote is less than 10%. If the Left Front vote is more than 10% it is free to withdraw, stand again, or seek to negotiate a joint ticket with other forces.)

The PCF's Paris decision was possible because the party's national leadership had earlier decided that the alliance policy for the 2014 municipal elections would be decided by local membership vote. Yet the Paris decision, supported by national secretary Pierre Laurent, has been causing angst among Left Front supporters, opening the most serious crisis in its four-year history. It has also opened sharp conflicts within the PCF itself.

The reaction from the Left Party leadership was one of outrage. Left Party national secretary and deputy mayor of Paris's 12th arrondissement (ward) Alexis Corbière asked: "Now that the young people have risen up against the inhuman consequences of the policies of Manuel Valls, how is it possible to be on a common ticket with his friends in Paris?"

Paris is not France

Will the Paris region PCF vote remain an exception, or does it prefigure a return to the pre-Left Front norm of PCF-PS alliances, especially where these have run major towns?

While many PCF town branches have still to vote on their approach, decisions to date indicate that the Paris decision may well turn out to be more exception than rule. On October 25, *L'Humanité* carried the news that PCF members in Lyon, France's second largest city, had voted 52.9% in favour of a Left Front ticket for the municipal poll, rejecting a deal over program and seats similar to that accepted in Paris.

According to an October 27 *L'Humanité* article by Left Party national secretary Eric Coquerel, in "nearly three-quarters of the towns with 100,000 inhabitants" local PCF ballots had supported the option of a Left Front alliance.

At the time of writing (November 5), PCF members' decisions in towns of more than 100,000 inhabitants was as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. PCF decisions on alliances for 2014 French municipal elections (towns over 100,000, at November 5, 2013)

Town	Region	Inhabitants (2010)	Decision or likely decision
A. Towns with existing SP- or Greens (EELV)-led majority (in many cases including PCF councilors)			
Paris	Île-de-France	2,250,000	With PS
Lyon	Rhône-Alpes	484,000	With Left Front
Toulouse	Midi-Pyrénées	442,000	Undecided, but leadership has rejected Left Front. Decision on November 16
Nantes	Pays de la Loire	285,000	To be decided, with leadership favouring PS
Strasbourg	Alsace	282,000	With Left Front
Montpellier	Languedoc-Roussillon	257,000	With Left Front
Lille	Nord-Pas-de-Calais	228,000	To be decided
Rennes	Brittany	207,000	To be decided, with leadership favouring PS
Reims	Champagne-Ardenne	180,000	Still to be decided. Council group leader leaning towards the PS
Saint-Étienne	Rhône-Alpes	171,300	Local leadership leaning towards PS
Grenoble	Rhône-Alpes	155,600	With Left Front
Angers	Pays de la Loire	147,600	With PS
Dijon	Burgundy	151,200	With Left Front
Brest	Brittany	141,300	With PS
Le Mans	Pays de la Loire	142,600	With Left Front
Clermont-Ferrand	Auvergne	140,000	With Left Front
Amiens	Picardy	133,400	With PS
Tours	Centre	134,800	Still to be decided. Proposal to go to citizens meeting, November 7
Limoges	Limousin	139,100	With Left Front
Villeurbanne	Rhône-Alpes	145,000	With PS
Metz	Lorraine	120,700	With Left Front
Besançon	Franche-Comté	116,900	With PS

Town	Region	Inhabitants (2010)	Decision or likely decision
Caen	Lower Normandy	109,000	To be decided
Rouen	Upper Normandy	110,900	With Left Front
Argenteuil	Île de France	103,100	With Left Front
Montreuil	Île de France	102,700	With Left Front
Saint-Denis	Île de France	106,700	Left Front supporting PCF mayoralty
B. Towns with existing right-wing majority			
Marseille	Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur	850,000	With Left Front
Nice	Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur	343,300	With Left Front
Bordeaux	Aquitania	239,200	With Left Front
Le Havre	Upper Normandy	175,500	With Left Front
Toulon	Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur	164,500	With Left Front
Nîmes	Languedoc-Roussillon	142,000	With Left Front
Aix-en-Provence	Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur	141,400	With Left Front
Perpignan	Languedoc-Roussillon	117,400	With PS
Orléans	Centre	114,167	With Left Front
Mulhouse	Alsace	109,600	With Left Front
Boulogne-Billancourt	Île de France	114,200	Not yet decided
Nancy	Lorraine	105,421	Not yet decided

Sources: Regional French media, regional PCF and Left Party web sites, L'Humanité, Libération, Le Monde, blog Politiquemania, web site Regards.fr.

The vote to date has exposed the tensions between the recommendations of local PCF leaderships and the sentiment of many PCF members, who place more value on the political potential of the Left Front than on maintaining the PCF's present council representation.

(The PCF has 1709 council seats in metropolitan France, and 1857 when the "overseas territories and departments" such as Tahiti are included. There are 88,298 council positions in France and its "overseas possessions".)

To date membership votes overturning leadership recommendations have taken place in Lyon, Montpellier, Le Mans and Évreux. Lead PCF candidate for Lyon, Aline Guitard, explained the vote like this: "The members judged that what was being proposed with the PS didn't allow a stronger fight against austerity."

In response to that decision, according to the October 30 *Le Monde*, eight local PCF councilors denounced the "vote of split", threatening not to take part in a "reductionist" ticket. In Le Mans, outgoing PCF councilors said they would continue to negotiate with the PS majority.

In other centres, like Perpignan, the threat of a victory of the right or far-right (FN) convinced members that a first round alliance with the PS was a political necessity. According to lead candidate Philippe Galano: "It's reckless to say that the forces of the left, if disunited in the first

round, could compete with the UMP and the FN in the second.”

In the light of these trends an interesting question is whether the Paris line would have carried if there had been a single national ballot of the whole PCF membership.

PS—best builder of the FN

How are all these dramatic developments related? The underlying issues are how to reverse support for the FN and how to orient to the PS when rapidly deepening disillusionment with the Hollande presidency—elected 18 months ago for its promise of “Change, Now!”—is what has most fed the growth in FN support.

Le Pen’s outfit is seen by increasing numbers of angry people in France as the one party untainted by connections with the political establishment and with an understandable message.

Nonetheless, for sociologist Eric Fassin, writing in the October 24 *Le Monde*, the rise in FN influence “refutes the hypothesis of a rightward shift in society—cultural or economic”. Rather the FN is gaining a hearing because of the growing desperation of people ground down by austerity, because of the persistent, 30-year-long retreat of the official “parties of government” before the FN message, and because the alternative left message isn’t yet audible or believable enough.

The FN’s “discourse” evokes a mythical French paradise lost that flourished before the arrival of globalisation, the European Union and the euro currency; when the country had its franc, there was discipline in the classroom, respect in the family and order in the suburbs, and the necks of serious criminals met the guillotine.

That *belle époque*—destroyed by one-parent families, homosexuality and homosexual marriage, lax immigration laws and oppressive political correctness—can be restored by a sane and healthy “people” led by the FN rising up against the “politicians” and their parties.

Over the years the reaction of the governing elites has been to sneer and pretend outrage at this message, while combing through the concrete issues on which to make the concessions that could hopefully steal away some of the FN’s support base.

Predictably, the area where FN policy has most passed into the mainstream is that of migrants’ and refugees’ rights. French policy is among the most restrictive and discriminatory in Europe.

The long-run political effect of this combination of empty moralising and concrete concessions to the FN’s racist policies has been to add to the political authority of the FN as the party that has been doggedly putting its finger on French society’s “real problems” for decades.

Now, UMP candidates openly compete with the FN in racist vileness while the media feel no shame in pillorying entire communities such as the Rom.

The events of October produced a speed-up in this syndrome, a race to the bottom between the UMP and PS over migrants’ and refugees’ rights. On October 24, UMP leader Jean-François Copé proposed that the right to French citizenship of children born to migrants be repealed—a 25-year-old demand of the FN—and that free medical service for “illegals” be confined to emergency situations.

One day later, minister Valls announced that he would produce a “reform” of the system of political asylum by mid-November.

To complete the pantomime, PS national secretary Desir (once leader of the powerful campaign movement SOS Racisme!) declared: "I say the FN is a party of the extreme right!"

As for Leonarda Dibrani, the saturation message from the mainstream commercial media was that she had it coming. What could you expect from someone whose father was a classic "gypsy bad dad"—happy to live on social security payments, showing no sign of looking for work or interest in jobs offered him, not sure whether his kids are at school, and with three different versions of why he couldn't produce an identity card?

(For sense of the present French political mood, see the accompanying TV interview with Mélenchon [Not introduced here].)

Debates in the Left Front

Such is the atmosphere in which the Left Front has been battling to get its anti-capitalist message through to people drawn to FN simplicities. It helps explain why the strategy debate within the Left Front, centred on where and how to look for the broader alliances that will win it hegemony over the PS and enable the Left Front to be seen as an alternative for government, has become so sharp.

In an October 21 blog comment, Mélenchon summarised his view of the situation facing the organisation after the Paris PCF decision: "At the level of Paris, the situation is simpler than it appeared—the Left Front continues with [lead candidate] Danielle Simonnet. There will be a pluralist ticket for the municipal elections, hundreds of activists and sympathisers will get involved among whom no doubt there will be a considerable number of communists.

"But at the national level, the situation is much more complicated. The loss of visibility is terrible for us. It helps the extreme rights present itself as the only alternative to the system."

In the October 16 *L'Humanité*, before the PCF Paris vote began, the Left Front leader had insisted: "We are not in a logic of wheeling and dealing, but of political and ideological conquest. For us the local and the national are the same reality."

Asked about local tickets between the Left Party and the Greens, he contrasted these with what the PCF was proposing for Paris: "The line is to bring together everything we can against austerity and for solidarity rather than curling up on the old turf of alliance with the 'Solferians', who repel anything that moves or fights in the country... I am opposed to the unilateral surrender of our forces for the sake of a single town."

The PCF leadership viewpoint previously had come in an interview in the October 14 *Le Parisien* where Pierre Laurent said: "It's not a question of allying with the people who are carrying out the government's choices, but of creating on the ground a coalition of men and women of the left who don't identify with this austerity policy. These voters, who could come from the ranks of the socialists or ecologists, have the feeling of being trapped. It's not the time to shut ourselves off in our own domain, but to extend them a hand."

Concretising the PCF perspective at the September *L'Humanité* Fair, Laurent had said: "To build 500,000 extra public housing units, to open health centres, to build new systems of public transport, to create new networks of solidarity where communities are being torn apart, for my part I am ready to take part in the broadest coalitions of the left if that is in the interest of the people."

As for the future of the Left Front, thrown into doubt by this conflict between its two main affiliate

organisations, Laurent said: "I fight with all my strength against the idea that a difference of assessment over the municipal elections opens a crisis in the Left Front. We need the Left Front for today and for the future. So let's stop polemicising, dramatising, and caricaturing each other's positions."

An October 21 statement by the PCF leadership, called "A Big Ambition for the Left Front", proposed that the front adopt four campaigns in order to revitalise its work and draw in broader forces. These are an exposure campaign around the cost of capital; a campaign for fiscal justice; a campaign around the need for new solidarity- and democracy-based foundations for Europe; and a campaign for a Sixth French Republic.

Mélenchon has not been so sanguine. Describing the PCF Paris choice as "strategically incompatible" with the Left Front's approach, the PG leader was appearing to signal a struggle against "a small minority, yes prestigious and well placed, that has abandoned us" even while "the unitary dynamic of the Left Front remains overwhelmingly in the majority in the rest of the country".

Mélenchon also reminded readers of *L'Humanité* that the PS, while making endless calls for the "unity of the left", was conducting a sectarian crusade against Communist and Green mayors, especially in the Paris "red belt" around Seine-Saint-Denis, Argenteuil and Saint Denis.

In an October 26 article on his blog titled "For whom tolls the bell?", the Left Party leader reflected on the impact of the of the PCF Paris decision and on Pierre Laurent's possible motives for conducting negotiations with the PS without informing other Left Front organisations.

"A lot of my friends are flabbergasted and bewildered. All are struggling to work out what has happened. How could Pierre Laurent lie to us for months while he was selling the Eiffel Tower to [PS lead candidate and Paris deputy mayor] Anne Hidalgo?

"With what criteria and what collective goal? If alliance with the Socialists is his collective goal, why not trade off Paris for peace in towns with communist leaderships, under attack from the Socialists in the municipal elections? Why did he get personally engaged to the point of pushing for a national dramatisation of the stakes involved? Why such brutal arm-twisting of local communist leaderships? On [national TV station] France 3 we saw a communist elector say he was voting for the alliance with the socialists 'under compulsion and duress'!

"All that merely, as the press says, to save the senator's seat that he has been occupying since the departure of Senator [former PCF senator Nicole] Cohen-Seat? [\[1\]](#) A lot of people around me couldn't believe it. There must be another factor. Maybe a psychological one? A pressure which, for the moment, we don't know about.

However, for Mélenchon the important issue was not to reflect on Laurent's psychology, but to grasp the political ramifications of the PS-PCF deal.

"For the moments the goal of the 'Solferians' has been achieved. In Paris, disarray is total. Among the communists, hundreds of members are demoralised. But our people have also taken a big hit. Campaigning without the communists was really not what they wanted. But that the communists will be forced to campaign against them, that's really depressing...

"At a national level the leaks in the commanding vessel can be seen from afar. The general staff has been decapitated: how can you hold campaign coordinating meetings with people who are active on opposing tickets? Moreover, our public message gets distorted: all our interviews are taken up with explanations concerning 'the end of the Left Front', demanded with gluttonous jubilation. And what is certain is that this is just a foretaste of what awaits us in the local elections."

The Paris agreement

The strength of the shock to PCF ranks is reflected in this resignation letter of Maeva Nicotra, the branch secretary in the 15th arrondissement, after the Paris decision in favour of joining PS lists.

"I am a revolutionary Left Front militant, committed to implementing [its program] Above All, the Human and to the Sixth Republic.

"Given such irreconcilable differences, there is no way I can continue to lead the branch.

"I can't on the one hand condemn the PS's machinations and on the other support it in its campaign, even at the municipal level.

"If I had wanted to be a social democrat I would have directly joined the PS.

"I respect the decision of the majority, but cannot in any case renounce my ideals."

Part of the reaction of the Paris PCF leadership to this sort of response has been to insist that the PS's Paris administration has not been applying austerity.

In an October 21 interview in *Libération*, Ian Brossat, PCF lead candidate for Paris, said: "The policy carried out in Paris is not one of austerity. The level of public investment has more than doubled since 2001. The policy carried out in Paris is not that implemented by the government. That's why the majority of communists have judged that convergence is possible in the capital but not nationally."

The programmatic agreement for the 163-seat central Paris council assigns the PCF 13 councillors in electable positions (up from eight) and as well as 32 councillors in electable positions in the city's 20 arrondissement councils (364 seats in all).

The agreement commits the two parties to:

- Increase the rate of social housing construction so that by 2030 30% of all housing is social housing (proposal of PCF—the present level is 17.4%);
Create 5000 new childcare places;
- Create a network of direct food distribution allowing cheaper prices to consumers and higher returns to producers (proposal of PCF);
- Guarantee a minimum supply of free water per household (proposal of PCF);
- Develop community health centres, especially in the poorer suburbs and oppose the closure of the emergency department at the Hôtel Dieu, Paris's oldest hospital;
- Improve cleaning services and keep those that are still public in council hands;
- Follow the example of the PCF-run council in Seine-St Denis in providing extended support services to domestic violence victims and their children, as well as boosting education around the extent of violence suffered by women;
- Create mechanisms for greater social participation, including a participatory budget structure;
- Reject "all austerity policy" and refuse to accept financial arrangements with the state that would prejudice the ability of the council to carry out the undertakings on which it was elected.
- End the freeze on hiring of council staff (proposal of PCF).

In an October 14 opinion piece on the Mediapart web site (“A Cheap Agreement with a Heavy Political Price”), Alexis Corbière commented that the 30% social housing target was nothing more than that stipulated by law and one whose implementation was impossible to guarantee, given the distant target date. In addition, the PCF-PS deal contained no commitment to return privatised cleaning services to council ownership, its childcare places target fell well short of need and it had abandoned the Left Front demand for the €1.6 billion owed to Paris by the state for services provided be paid.

As for the undertaking of “no austerity in Paris”, how could that be guaranteed when seven PS Paris councillors were also MPs who had voted for the €75 billion austerity package of Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault? “Can they oppose, in the Town Hall, the measures they support in the Borbon Palace [seat of the National Assembly]?”

On October 24, seven Left Front affiliates announced the main points of the front’s Paris campaign, led by Danielle Simonnet. It focusses on rent controls and prohibition of evictions, requisitioning of unoccupied housing, priority to social housing, re-establishing council ownership of privatised services, increased extracurricular activity for school children, as well as reforms to the health system, an extensive program of housing insulation and free public transport—all to be financed by greater use of taxes on capital.

Their statement said: “Paris is a rich city (with a budget of more than €7 billion) which has the means of financing an ambitious solidarity-based anti-crisis program, at the local and metropolitan level.”

The statement ended: “We want to make Paris the capital of resistance to austerity, of struggle against real-estate speculation, of eradication of casual work, of promotion of new forms of solidarity, of implementation of real equality of rights, of an ambitious collective urban development process, of international cooperation with the South, and of a democracy that serves citizen participation and allows Parisians to take back their town!”

PCF differences elsewhere

The internal PCF discussion has also been sharp outside Paris, such as the department of Hérault and its capital, Montpellier. In the October 16 edition of *L’Hérault du jour*, PCF departmental secretary Michel Passet criticised the party’s Montpellier branch for voting to support a Left Front ticket when “in Montpellier there are things that need changing, but the town is on the left and that’s where it should stay. It would be terrible if elected communist representatives didn’t take part in the new majority.”

Two days later the secretary of the Montpellier PCF branch, Claude Avenante, replied: “Why the rush to be on a PS ticket at any price, run by [PS mayoral candidate] J-P Moure, whose proposals are still unknown but whose political practices and neoliberal orientations can be measured?”

He added: “Today we are engaged in a process of jointly evolving an alternative project for Montpellier that will be up to meeting the social needs, expectations of democracy and environmental requirements of the people of our town. We do not look for convergence around the Left Front, but look for a convergence of the majority, with the Left Front as the tool that we communists have chosen to bring that about...”

A similar contest broke out in the Brittany department of Finistère when departmental secretary Eric de Bour came out in support of an alliance with the PS from the first round, provoking the

circulation in the PCF's Brittany region of a pro-Left Front petition, "For a Clear Left Alternative".

Repercussions in the far left

These struggles are also beginning to affect France's far-left forces, particularly the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), whose predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) promoted "100% Left" tickets in the 2008 municipal poll and achieved results like 15.3% in Clermont-Ferrand, 7.5% in Nancy, 7% in Limoges and 6.5% in St Denis.

To date the NPA has yet to announce a general approach to the 2014 municipal poll, but has already taken several local initiatives, including the creation of a ticket with the Left Party in Évry. Évry is the base of Manuel Valls. The PCF in Evry voted not to maintain its alliance with the PS but is critical of the NPA-Left Party ticket and is proposing a Left Front ticket.

In St. Denis the NPA is promoting a far left "mobilisation" ticket against the PCF-Left Front list.

In Arles, the NPA has joined the Left Party and other Left Front affiliates in supporting an opposition ticket to the incumbent PCF mayor. According to Christian Schwab, member of the Left Front affiliate Anti-Capitalist Left, "The orientation of the municipality is not what you would expect from the Left Front, there's no break from what the PS could do."

In the Channel port city of Dieppe, the PCF mayor could face a PG and Greens challenge over the issue of the transition to sustainable energy.

Some underlying issues

Above and beyond the heated debate of motives revealed by the PCF's Paris decision lie important differences on the key issue—how to broaden the Left Front's base of support, specifically which sections of a potential broader social base to focus on winning. Disappointed PS members and voters? The less "political" disillusioned masses being tempted by the FN? Young people, especially the unemployed?

The prevailing approach within the PCF is to try to build anti-austerity and anti-right majorities that are as broad as possible, involving, wherever possible, parts of the PS, especially its official left tendencies. The call is on these currents and the PS membership and sympathisers to drag the Hollande and Ayrault government away from austerity policies.

Supporters of this approach often find Mélenchon's tone towards the PS too abrasive. On October 28, author and PCF local councilor Antoine Blocier wrote on his blog: "His main argument revolves around the idea that Hollande's policies are disastrous and must be fought at all levels and that Hollande must 'be punished' (his words).

"Obviously, I share his point of view on the policies being carried out at the moment and the cruel disappointments they bring. But I find this business of 'punishing' too strong a coffee for me.

"Who indeed would be 'punished' if the elected representatives of the Left Front (and in particular the communists, whose competence is recognised in the municipalities), were absent from local councils? Not François Hollande, not the employers, but the people living in the towns..."

Blocier then asks: "Do we go along with Mélenchon's injunction or do we decide case by case?"

"If it's to play a bit part and have no impact on the real debate, I'm against agreements with the PS...But, yes, wherever it's possible for us to have agreements with the PS and the Greens without selling our soul but on the basis of clear human values and ambitious social objectives, I am for...

"I don't want to demonise PS members as a whole. Some of them are real left citizens. Some of them are just as angry as we are with the backsliding of the government. There are mayors who have resigned from the PS. In short, they are the sort of people we can get somewhere with."

Among the comments on Blocier's piece appeared this note (from Paris PCF member Christophe Adriani):

"I agree on the basic point, even if I didn't make that decision [in the Paris vote] because I didn't find it relevant. The [Paris] majority decision breaks the momentum of the Left Front not because one should never ally with the PS nor ever govern with them, but because accords between chiefs-of-staffs (even with 'steps forward') rob us of a Left Front campaign—participative, inventive (you'll remember 'the order is—there are no orders'), broadening the base of the movement by bringing together not just organisations but citizens ...

"Your arguments are above all valid to justify technical mergers in the second round, to move towards taking part in executive (yes, let's be useful), but after having campaigned for a project as a whole, for a political alternative."

In an "Open Letter to the Communists of Paris and Elsewhere" on the Mediapart web site PCF member Jean-Jacques Barey made a similar point before the Paris vote: "If we stand broad Left Front tickets in all the arrondissements on the basis of our analysis and program and we run an aggressive, popular and dynamic campaign (something, pardon the reminder, that will not be the case in the event of a joint first round list with the PS), we will confront the question of a merged ticket in the second round with a strengthened balance of forces. And if we get over the 10% threshold, a realistic goal, we'll achieve very good negotiating conditions for obtaining a lot more elected positions."

Underlying such positions is the sense that the Left Front can't advance much without helping build a popular fight back against the demoralising impact of the PS government, and that its election campaigns and tone have to aggressively promote that. That is what Mélenchon embodies, including for thousands of PCF members. In the words of Corbière: "What Hollande is doing weighs upon people's morale. His message has ideological consequences: he disorients people and the first result is abstention. To be understood you need strong voices."

In the October 25 *L'Humanité* PCF executive committee members Isabelle Lorand and Frédérick Genevée published a "Letter to Jean-Luc Mélenchon" that, while regretting the decision of the Paris PCF majority, sought to bring out underlying issues.

"If what bring us together is stronger than our differences, it remains the case that we have differences. Some are trivial. Others are more serious. We see two—over convergence and centralism. In an interview with *Inrocks* you show that your intellectual point of departure is a choice that's thought-out, tenable and one for which you take responsibility: 'What interests me is the most determined fraction of our people, that part that is ready to mobilise to construct an alternative. I build on what keeps going.' And you add: 'I believe conflict creates consciousness'.

"The least that can be said is that your point of view is coherent. But you can't be unaware that another point of view, sustained for a long time by the PCF, exists inside the genuine left. The majority of the people of the left must be brought together. Rather than divide, it is necessary to

seek out the highest levels of convergence, in order to struggle and win together.”

The PCF leaders continue: “As for centralism, it will be at the heart of our future debates. From the autonomy of parliamentarians to that of campaign and policy areas we don’t have the same approach. We communists broke with democratic centralism in 1994. That wasn’t so it can be revived in the Left Front ...”

The writers end with an expression of support for Laurent and an appeal to Mélenchon to stop flirting with the idea of a rejigged Left Front including the Greens and the NPA.

“Like so many others, we don’t want that because it would be a feeble Left Front without a future. What would France be without the Left Front? Deadly thought! Of course, the Left Front is going through a turbulent patch and some put that to good use: the Left Front will be dead, and Mélenchon and Laurent with it. We must put an end to these speculations.

“The astounding election campaign that you led produced a dynamic that overcame our differences. It did not erase them...Let’s never lose sight of the essential, let’s carry out the debate fraternally so that the Left Front lives.”

What phase?

What can be realistically expected for the Left Front in the present phase of French politics? Mélenchon has set the organisation the task of getting a higher vote than the PS in the 2014 European elections, but is that really feasible? It seems clear that such a perspective cannot be met unless there are favourable changes on the ground of social struggle and boosted support for the Left Front arising from that.

In an October 17 note on his blog, Christian Picquet, spokesperson for Left Front founding affiliate the Uniting Left, explained that the rise of the FN was an inevitable phase among “the weakest and most disoriented sectors of the popular classes”.

“That’s doubtless what explains why the Left Front, while henceforth a point of reference on the political chessboard, has not been able to expand the influence acquired at the last presidential poll ... We are therefore prey neither to a crisis of dissolution that some interested parties proclaim, nor to a growth crisis that a bit of agility would allow us to overcome.”

For Picquet, the Left Front has now to focus, on the basis of “that unity which is our greatest achievement”, on showing the mass of people that even partial victories against austerity are possible and helping prepare them.

“For the popular sectors to overcome their lethargy and or a devastating feeling of powerlessness, it is critical that hope returns and a perspective is reopened of victories, be they partial in the immediate term. The present weakness of mobilisations, as revealed in the battle over retirement and pensions, is basically explained by the feeling of wage earners and citizens that they don’t have the means to turn the situation to their advantage.”

Whether the Left Front, after the turmoil of the last period, is in condition to provide the inspiration, organisation and leadership necessary to turn the tide will become clearer in coming months.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, on the basis of the trend to majority PCF vote for Left Front tickets, is lately more hopeful: “I am not afraid of seeing communists in the streets distributing leaflets alongside Paris socialist MPs who voted for the National Interprofessional Agreement [2], retirement at 66 and

all the rest. It will not happen. Never. No way. Hidalgo has bought the wind! The communists are in the resistance. They are massively and fundamentally Left Front and not Huists [3].

“As for us, let’s be patient. The split in the PS and the Greens is inevitable, just like the decomposition of the official left... But hold firm, because none of that will happen if we do not advance down our chosen road.”

Dick Nichols

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3582>

* Dick Nichols is Green Left Weekly’s and Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal’s European correspondent, based in Barcelona.

Footnotes

[1] In France senators are elected indirectly, by a combination of local and regional councilors and deputies (150,000 electors in all). The more local councillors a party wins, the greater its chance of having senators elected.

[2] The National Interprofesional Agreement (ANI) is the Ayrault government’s “labour market reform”, negotiated between the main employer confederation (MEDEF) and some of the French union confederations.

[3] Huists, followers of former PCF national secretary Robert Hue, who came to believe that the class struggle had ceased to exist.