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France

An alternative on the left

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The panorama of the French left has been shaken up by the birth of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) impelled by the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) whose candidate in the last presidential elections in 2007, Olivier Besancenot, emerged as the main option to the left of the Socialist Party (PS) with 4.1% of the votes.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/jm_antentas.jpg]

Josep MarÃ-a Antentas

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 to the policy of the government, in spite of its purely cosmetic turn to the left. His popularity is no fad and according to a study by the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, it has consolidated over three processes: the campaign against the European Constitution in 2005, the mobilization against the First Job Contract (CPE) in 2006 and the presidential elections in 2007.

With the creation of the NPA, which already has more than 9,000 members, an attempt is being made to translate Besancenot's social and electoral support into an activist force. The foundation of the new party is the culmination of years of effort by the LCR to advance towards the construction of a new instrument of struggle adapted to the present historical period.

The impact of the NPA shows that, for the first time in a long while, there is in France a current of popular sympathy for the radical left outside the traditional political apparatuses that goes beyond the usual more organized and combative social sectors. A space, albeit contradictory, unstable and with limitations, for a new anti-capitalist alternative has been opened up.

It involves two elements.

First, the renaissance of popular struggles against neoliberal globalization, from the strikes of November-December 1995 against the "Juppé Plan" for social security reform to the recent mobilizations against Sarkozy.

Second, the erosion of the big parties of the left and their shift to the right. The PS has been adapting for a long time to the interests of big capital and has woven strong ties with business sectors. The Communist Party and the Greens have become subordinate forces, disconnected from the social struggles, absolutely institutionalized and have borne responsibility for policies opposed to the interests of their own social and ideological base. The balance sheet of the already distant plural left of Jospin is there as a reminder.

The project of the new party is, as Besancenot puts it, "to bring about the emergence, from what already exists at the social level, of a political reference point that is not captured by the machinery of government and that is not dominated by the PS." The NPA locates the fight against neoliberalism within a perspective of a break with capitalism, and has environmentalism, feminism and internationalism as constituent elements of its program. Its "anti-capitalism" is not simply a negative reflex. It involves the formulation of alternative proposals for the construction of another society and a "social emergency plan" to resolve the crisis, with measures like the nationalization of the banking system, the prohibition of tax havens, a general wage increase of 300 euros and the defence of public services.

The challenges of the new party are huge. It will have to pass the test of practice and prove itself an effective

instrument. For Besancenot “to only resist is not enough, a political instrument is lacking, and today the NPA is the best one than we have”. Now it faces decisive weeks and months in the struggle against the anti-social plans of Sarkozy and to obtain victories it must initiate a new cycle of a favourable accumulation of forces in the popular sectors.

The foundation of the NPA has generated a great sense of expectancy and curiosity on the international anti-capitalist left. Three factors explain this: the important role played by France in the ascent of the resistance to globalization from the mid 1990s, the credibility of the LCR which has for a long time been one of the emblematic radical formations in Europe, and the political conjuncture of the moment marked by the impact of the global systemic crisis.

This makes international collaboration among anti-capitalists committed to another agenda opposed to the logic of capital, attempts to make the masses pay the cost of the crisis, and the rhetoric of the “refoundation of capitalism” of Sarkozy and company more imperative than other. On the scale of the European Union the challenge is to reinforce the “Europeanization” of struggles and resistance, to formulate a true continental strategy, and to crystallize an anti-capitalist pole which is not subordinate to social liberalism. There is no doubt that the NPA can give an important impulse to this task.

The NPA is not a model to copy or to export mechanically, but a reference point and a powerful stimulus in the search for a way in each country to raise an anti-capitalist alternative. Behind the project of the NPA lies a very simple idea; to construct, in the words of Daniel Bensaïd, one of its key intellectuals, “a new party, as faithful to the interests of the dominated and the dispossessed as the right is to the possessors and the dominators, and that makes no excuses for being anti-capitalist and wanting to change the world”.

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