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France

Preparing for the presidential elections - a minority report

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REPORT ON THE SITUATION IN FRANCE

Given at the meeting of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in the name of the minority of the LCR.

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The context of the 2007 elections in France cannot be understood without reference to two political and social events which happened in the last two last years: - the victory of the "no" in the referendum on the liberal constitution for Europe, a victory obtained by the voters of the left (a majority of Socialist Party voters voted "no" whereas the leadership of the PS defended "yes") and by a mobilization of the anti-liberal Left (PCF, LCR, left socialists, global justice campaigners, left ecologists).

For months, Olivier Besancenot, Marie George Buffet (PCF), José Bové, figure of the global justice movement, J.L.Mélenchon (left wing of the PS) multiplied joint meetings, mobilizing thousands of participants. Consequently, the question was widely posed: how to concretize this relationship of forces, this overturn within the left, to the disadvantage of the social-liberal orientation defended by the leadership of the Socialist Party.

[-] The powerful movement of workers and youth, in spring 2006, for the first time made the government of the liberal Right retreat. The government wanted to impose on everyone under 25 insecure employment contracts (First Employment Contract, C.P.E., which gave employers the right to sack them without giving any justification). On two occasions, three million demonstrators took to the streets, after 3 months of massive mobilizations, making it the strongest movement, in term of demonstrations, since 1968. This movement confirmed that resistance to liberalism was dominant within the country, a year after the referendum.

There then arose on the left, on a mass scale, an immense hope that we could succeed in expressing this anti-liberal aspiration on the electoral terrain in 2007. The idea of "Unity of the anti-liberal left" was popular, as opposed to the multiplication and the dispersion of candidacies just for the sake of it, which would defend virtually identical political proposals. The idea was born of an electoral coalition between all these forces, to present candidates in common for the 2007 elections - presidential (April), and legislative (June).

A new appeal was made, calling to bring together all the forces that were in agreement with this objective and to create unitary collectives at the base in the localities. At their height there were between 600 and 700 collectives, spread across the whole country, involving approximately 15.000 people. Not only did we see the whole arc of forces that had made the common campaign for a "no" from the left in the referendum, but especially many militants, trade unionists and organizers of social movements, who saw, at last, the outlines of a political space in which they could take their place, to express on the political level their day-to-day struggles.

It was then necessary to move from a campaign based on refusal of liberalism to the positive formulation of an alternative programme, of political proposals, of a strategy implying the clarification of the relationship with the Socialist Party, the attitude towards the Right and towards a government of the Left and a left parliamentary majority.

It was also necessary to solve a difficult problem within the specific framework of the institutions of the Fifth République: in France, elections take place in two rounds.

For the legislative elections, there are approximately 580 constituencies, which each elect a deputy, in a uninominal

system with two rounds. There is no proportional representation. And France is one of the rare European countries to elect its president by direct universal suffrage. There is not even, as in the USA, a vice-president, which makes it possible to compose a "ticket" of two candidates; there is only one name on the ballot paper. It is a hang-over of Gaullism and the strong state, where the candidate-president meets the people and the citizens over the head of the parties and the elected assemblies, is able to name the Prime Minister, has exorbitant powers, not controlled by a parliament which he even has the right to dissolve if he wants to. These institutions have modelled political life for many years, and the political parties have almost all had to adapt to this framework.

Everyone then thought that if the political questions were resolved, we would find a solution for the candidate: find a personality accepted by all, a name on the ballot paper, around whom the best-known figures (Buffet, Besancenot, Bové, etc...) would gather, in meetings and common media interventions.

For the legislative elections, it would be possible to vary the candidates coming from the various political forces in the 580 constituencies.

The LCR did not play the game

While affirming that it was in favour of such candidatures, the LCR organised a national conference in June 2006. A majority (60%) decided to launch the candidacy of Olivier Besancenot, while affirming that it would withdraw it if a unity agreement was concluded later. The minority (40%) defended the idea that it was necessary first of all to be integrated into the unitary movement and to throw all our weight into obtaining the best possible agreement, before launching our Besancenot campaign, which made us appear to not really want unity.

This divergence within the LCR was concretized in two possible orientations. And differently from preceding debates in the LCR - which is however accustomed to internal debates - the divergence was expressed publicly, by different interventions in public meetings and in the movement of the collectives, by the "majority of the LCR", and by the minorities who spoke in the name of the "unitary current of the LCR". The unfolding of events accentuated these different public expressions, without up until now calling into question the unity of the organization, because the two orientations each had legitimacy, in the LCR and outside it.

In September a first stage was accomplished: a meeting of 500 delegates from collectives and from political forces adopted a document which specified the political framework:

[-] To regroup all the forces for an alternative anti-liberal Left in the elections in order to challenge within the electorate of the left the domination of the social-liberal policies of the PS.

[-] To defeat the Right and the far Right in the second round of the elections by voting for the best-placed left-wing candidate, without conditions or negotiations. It was obvious that it was necessary to respond to the powerful desire to beat Sarkozy: if the Right was victorious again, following on 2002, we would see a situation which would resemble the second term of Mrs. Thatcher in the United Kingdom, with an offensive aiming to destroy the powerful resistance to liberalism.

[-] To define an attitude towards a government of the Left, after the experience of the "plural Left" between 1997 and 2002, when the PCF took part in the government of Lionel Jospin. It was a key question, to verify what the PCF's policy was. The text of the agreement specified clearly:

"We will not be part of a government dominated by social-liberalism, which, by its composition and by its project,

would not give itself the means of finally breaking with liberalism, would not respond to what people were waiting for. The Socialist Party, in particular, has adopted a programme which turns its back on a clear break with liberalism. It is out of the question, for us, to negotiate on this basis a contract of government whose action, letting people down once again, would lead ineluctably to the return of a harder Right"

The text further specified:

"If we do not take part in the government, our group in Parliament will not take part in a majority made up to support this government, but will vote in favour of any legislative provisions going in the direction of the interests of the population. We will also use our parliamentary strength, along with all those who will take part in social mobilizations, to get a certain number of positive measures adopted or to get negative measures withdrawn; to translate our programme into law and reality. We reserve the right to judge and to discuss publicly how the government and its majority act in the course of the legislature".

So we were very far, for example, from what Rifondazione had accepted in Italy: to take part in a government of coalition, not only with the social-liberal Left, but also with the centre-right of Prodi, and in a majority that supported it. The refusal of the PCF to take part in a social-liberal government demonstrated a certain break with its traditional positions. Having fallen to a very low electoral level, it did not want to go even lower by endorsing unpopular social-liberal governmental policies. Of course, that did not mean that the PCF, on another occasion, would not change its mind, nor that there were not within it currents which regretted abandoning this policy of alliance with the PS. But the success of the "no" and the anti-liberal resistance had convinced it that it should use the coming period to regain strength and credit and to win again the positions it had acquired, by relying on the unitary anti-liberal movement, in which it wanted to remain dominant.

It was however an important occasion, for the LCR, to take a full part in this movement, to act and to exert pressure on the contradictions that it entailed within one of the two big left parties in France.

The LCR withdrew

The majority of the LCR clumsily put forward two amendments to the agreement, which were unconvincing: that participation in a government and a majority with the PS was excluded, but since the text of the agreement already said that, it seemed like a pretext. It asked for the passages to be removed which envisaged defeating the Right by calling for a second-round vote for the best-placed left-wing candidate, but this was rejected as unacceptable in the current situation. From then on, the majority of the LCR put itself in a situation of "observer" in the movement, and stopped being seriously involved in the collectives, while the minority "unitary LCR" continued to act within the movement to push it in the right direction.

In October, another stage was reached: a national meeting of 600 representatives of the unitary collectives adopted a document of 125 programmatic proposals, taking up the best of the demands elaborated by the social, anti-war and global justice movements. All the principal measures proposed by the Left that was in favour of social transformation and by the social movements were there (on sackings, wages, services, immigration, the right to vote for foreigners, refusal of any military intervention, in the Middle-East as well as in Africa, support for Palestine etc...).

Only one important point continued to provoke debate and was resolved by a positive compromise: on civil nuclear power, between the traditional position of the PCF, favourable to nuclear power, and the ending of nuclear power that was defended by us and the ecologists, it was proposed that the question would be decided by a referendum after a public discussion throughout society, accompanied by a moratorium on the construction of new power stations during

this debate.

The majority of the LCR did not have much to say in this debate, it did not take part in it, having put itself on the sidelines in September. The minority was there, strongly present, defending the traditional political positions of the LCR, generally successfully.

It remained, after the political agreement, to solve the question of the candidacy by a debate within the collectives. Olivier Besancenot and the LCR put themselves on the sidelines, Olivier never wanted to be a candidate for the candidacy within the movement, but in spite of that, during all these months there were very many calls for the LCR to come back into the movement. In addition to the two principal figures (Bové and Buffet) the debates saw the emergence of other candidates who did not represent a particular party, but could be agreed by all: Clementine Autain, Yves Salesses, Claude Debons, figures of the unitary movement. It was necessary to make the PCF understand that the candidacy of its general secretary could not unite the movement, because she would reduce it, people thought, to a small circle around the Communist Party.

The discussion and the consultation began in the collectives. José Bové withdrew without much explanation, criticizing the practices of the PCF which wanted to impose its general secretary, but especially taking note that his candidacy was not being chosen in priority in the collectives. He would remain absent from the movement for two months, reappearing in mid-January supported by a petition initiated outside of the movement.

It only remained to make the PCF agree to a non-PCF candidacy, in a situation where it had become the dominant force within the movement after the withdrawal of Besancenot and Bové, with the aim of making the two of them come back. On December 9-10, an assembly of more than 800 delegates did not succeed in solving the question, but the movement was strong enough to prevent the PCF, which was in a majority in the meeting, from imposing Marie-George Buffet as the candidate of the collectives.

The PCF then underwent an unprecedented crisis: it decided just afterwards to force its way through, against the will of the unitary movement, and to present Buffet as candidate, in the name of the party, by having recourse to an internal vote. In this internal vote, 10.000, out of the 50.000 militants of the PCF consulted, voted against the candidacy of the general secretary, preferring another candidate who would respect the unity of the unitary movement. Entire federations, sections, those most committed to the movement, voted against the majority of the leadership, which, knowing the internal workings of the PCF, was an event. Some left the party, but still more still decided to organise to continue the debate. Those who call themselves "unitary communists" are organised in a public association.

It was the first time that the PCF had undergone such a crisis, and the opposition was organised on a basis that was anti-liberal and left. Once again, the majority of the LCR was absent from this confrontation and this debate, and by its refusal of a unitary policy it missed an occasion to influence and make links with this movement of contestation. The unitary minority of the LCR was by the side of the unitary militants of the PCF and the collectives.

Rancour against the leaderships of the parties held responsible for the failure

Immediately after this failure, many militants, but also many voters, were disappointed and felt great bitterness. The political logics proper to the parties were judged to be responsible the division, whereas a political agreement was possible and would have produced a considerable electoral and political dynamic.

The LCR found itself isolated: not only in broad sectors of its electorate, but also among the sympathizers and actors of the social movements who had previously looked on it with sympathy. Within the LCR, well-known militants, of long standing, leading representatives of the political influence of the LCR, even if they were not members of the minorities, repudiated this policy of wanting to impose an LCR candidate at all costs, in direct opposition to the unitary dynamic.

The leadership of the PCF was considered to be responsible for the failure, the crisis is open, and the solitary campaign of Buffet does not have any dynamic behind it.

Why did the PCF choose to force its way through?

The PCF is paying for forcing its way through by a crisis without precedent. Initially, many people thought that it made this choice in order to return to its policy of alliance with the Socialist Party. An influential current within the party and its leadership defend this perspective, but the present leadership does not seem to be following it on this issue. It appears that the PCF, already reduced to the lowest level in electoral terms and with a decreased number of elected officials (22 deputies, whom it is not guaranteed to keep, and municipalities which are threatened with being taken from it by the Socialist Party), considers that a "cure of opposition" would be more beneficial to it. All the more so as the situation after the presidential election does not offer many other choices; either the Right wins, and the question of going into government is not posed. Or the candidate of the PS wins, and it will be rather an opening to the "centre" that a recentred PS will seek. The refusal to give way to another unitary candidature is due to two reasons:

[-] For the PCF, the interest of this movement was not only to find itself with the radical Left, but to lay the foundations of a movement which would include sectors of the opposition within the PS, and to thus aim at the heart of the left electorate. Many references by the PCF to the German situation attest to this, as does the presence of Oskar Lafontaine at the meetings of M.G. Buffet. The PCF was waiting to see how the currents of the PS which had defended the "no" to the constitution would react, after the designation of Ségolène Royal as candidate of the PS, which demonstrated an inflection to the right on the part of the PS. In fact, precisely nothing happened: after this designation, the "no" currents, apart from some very minority exceptions, have had to agree to form a united bloc with the party against the Right. The only current present as such in the movement, the PRS group of Mélenchon, gave up at the end of December. It is certain that the contradictions within the PS were attenuated on the eve of an election where it is a question of defeating a government of the Right, and that they will re-appear with even more force if the PS is confronted with applying its policies in government. That was the case of Germany, it was in fact under a Schröder government that the rupture around Lafontaine occurred. Taking note, moreover, of the withdrawal of Besancenot and Bové, it only remained to the PCF to accept a coalition with small currents of the radical Left, without any counterweight coming from the Socialist Left. The PCF preferred to run its own campaign, breaking the consensus of the collectives. More than a disagreement about participation in government, the real difference between the PCF and the LCR lay there: what should be the contours of the movement? "Radical anti-liberal Left", or "left of the plural Left" as Olivier Besancenot argued, or "left of the Left" as the PCF proposed? It is a debate to be continued, but it was not an irremediable divergence which prevented the LCR from entering a coalition - on the contrary, the debate would have unfolded in the course of the campaign.

[-] the second reason is due to the traditions of this party. To leave behind it the Stalinist period which marked its functioning and its conception of the party that had to be built, the current leadership undertook only a timid reform which did not go far. The "opening" of the PCF was limited to agreeing, during preceding elections, to make common lists with some small forces around the PCF, which remained the centre of gravity. By wanting to reproduce this schema with a powerful unitary movement, it ran head-on against this movement, showing its incapacity to understand the meaning of it. As for reflection and debate within the party on "transcending" itself to build another force, there are only some mumblings. The culture of the party and its militants remains very attached to its "identity", in defence of the "Party", and these reflexes also pushed towards a clash with the collectives.

It remains the case that the crisis that has opened up is extremely profound. The future of the PCF remains a question that is impossible to circumvent for all those who pose the question of a new political organization on the left. The PCF, in spite of its decline, remains one of the forces on the left which still has the most links with ordinary working-class people (much more than the LCR with its equivalent presidential results, and not yet supplanted by a PS which is struggling to implant itself among these layers of the population at the same time as it regularly takes on government responsibilities...)

The candidacy of José Bové cannot be the candidacy of the unitary movement

After having withdrawn his candidacy in the collectives, José Bové came back at the end of January, announcing that he was now a candidate. He was backed by a double movement: a petition of 30,000 signatures organised outside of the collectives by militants who had either a project of creating a political current behind him (some particular currents of the ecologist and global justice movement), or the idea that this was the last chance to force the PCF and the LCR to unite around him. A part of the collectives, on the basis of the rancour that had accumulated against the LCR and the PCF, chose to use this candidacy, hoping to maintain the unitary pressure, while another part of the collectives chose not to support any candidate, maintaining the objective of uniting the whole anti-liberal Left.

Bové's candidacy did not shake the LCR: when the minorities proposed that Besancenot should meet Bové to discuss a common candidacy, thus effecting at least partial unity, the majority of the LCR refused. So the Bové candidacy, legitimate for a layer of militants, cannot appear as enabling the unity of the movement. By establishing itself as the third candidacy coming from the unitary movement, it underlines even more its failure. In the opinion polls, the three or four candidates who speak in the name of anti-liberalism are stagnating, with between 2 and 3 per cent each. The collectives are divided on the appropriateness of the Bové candidacy. Some are trying through it to constitute an alternative political force which would occupy a space by building itself between and against the PCF and the LCR, giving up the objective of a unitary movement for an objective that is still not very well defined.

So there will be no unitary anti-liberal candidate at the 2007 presidential election, and that is a failure, felt as such by thousands of militants and millions of voters.

Why did the LCR stick to its course?

The political differences invoked by the leadership of the LCR have been seen as pretexts to justify at all costs its separate candidacy. All the more so as the agreement made it possible to accept a coalition where each party or political force would keep its autonomy. The reasons, in our opinion, for the refusal of the majority of the LCR to integrate into the movement, are of several kinds:

[-] the majority of the LCR did not draw the balance-sheet of the policy that it pursued in 2003-2004, based on a far-left agreement with Lutte Ouvrière, which had led to an electoral failure, and had subsequently not produced any effect of political regroupment. Going from 10 per cent of the votes in 2002 to 4 per cent at the 2004 regional elections and 2,5 per cent at the European elections, this policy led to isolation, equating the Right and the Left, refusing to enter into dialogue with the anti-liberal forces existing on the political scene.

[-] the LCR has also become a victim of the French presidential system: having a young and media-friendly candidate, it overruled the political objections of its sympathisers, hoping that at the end of the day its candidate would obtain an honourable result (between 3 and 4 per cent), and reduced its objective to a competition with LO and the PCF. Rather than making it possible to take a step forward in the building of a unitary movement, (which would

have been able to unleash a dynamic and to get more than 10 per cent of the votes), it preferred the affirmation of a candidacy guaranteeing the identity of the current which we represent. That will not lead to any step forward in regrouping activists, and even a good result will not be repeated, since we know that in the legislative elections, the LCR has neither the political implantation nor the popular support to attain the same relationship of forces.

[...] Especially, the LCR has been a victim of a form of conservatism. With 2500 members and results which can sometimes be up to 4 per cent of the electorate, many sections of the International could envy this situation. However, it is not the sign that we have reached the Promised Land, and that it is enough for us to occupy this space while waiting for the social crisis in which we will make a revolutionary party emerge. Years ago, in the LCR and the International, we became convinced that it was necessary to unite currents and militants in order to create broad parties, mass parties, to carry forward the perspective of a radical change of society, even if revolutionaries were in a minority to start with. We no longer thought of the building of the revolutionary party as a linear growth of our sections. It is this political advance, which was common to us, which is being called into question by the majority of the LCR. However, it is not a question, in France in 2006-2007, of starting by discussing the building of a new party. The anti-liberal unitary movement did not resemble the processes which have given rise to what we have called "broad parties" of the anti-capitalist Left. In several European countries, groups coming from the far-left have been capable of pursuing an intelligent, open policy (Portugal, Britain, Scotland, Denmark...). In France, all the attempts at a broad party with the forces of the far Left have failed, all the attempts at agreement between the LCR and LO ran up against the sectarian politics of L.O.. This time, it was a question of something else: of building an electoral coalition, to test out an initial stage of broader unity, on the basis of an anti-liberal anti-capitalism, rather like in Germany with the WASG coalition at the elections in 2005. Of course, if the electoral coalition had materialised in France, immediately afterwards the question would have been posed of the political space that had to be organised, passing perhaps through a stage of a federation of parties, currents and collectives, and in any case moving in time towards a united political movement. But the LCR refused to enter into even the electoral coalition, did not want to take the first step, the first stage. For fear of being "sucked in", in order not to take any risks, it preferred to fall back on organising its own space around its party and its candidate.

This policy poses the question: if we do not have confidence in our ideas, in our programme (which is not intended to be kept in the refrigerator, but whose function is to convince a significant sector of the working class so as to become a force for action and transformation), if we are not able then to confront it with social reality, if we do not seek to change the relationship of political forces within the Left, then that becomes a form of conservatism that is not very compatible with our announced objective of transformation of society.

Comrades in the International have a tendency, in discussion, to isolate the building of a political movement and the question of social struggles: it is enough, according to them, to have a nucleus that is determined and firm on principles, in order to intervene in social struggles, which will in the end be the decisive element. That is to forget that the

concretization of an alternative on the political terrain encourages social struggles, and that, reciprocally, social struggles should help political construction. To build a useful political space, in the sense of providing a vehicle for thousands of activists in the trade unions and associations, to organise a political space with which they can identify and which will organise a significant part of the working class and youth, we need regroupment: militants who are not in parties, currents coming from different traditions and with different histories, coming from the far Left, from the Communist and Socialist parties, from ecologist and alternative currents. A regroupment which will have to confront the questions that every party that begins to represent an important sector of the population has to face: questions of government, parliamentary majority, presence in local and regional councils, without betraying its anti-liberal principles, without compromising itself by alliances which would denature the struggle that has been undertaken and would prevent new social conquests.

The abandonment of such an active unitary policy in France will have repercussions in Europe. It is necessary to avoid a generalization of a "French turn" which would put us on the margins of phenomena of recomposition in

Europe. We do not need to make the demonstration that in the country where Trotskyist political forces have acquired sizeable autonomous strength, they "freeze" any possibility of unitary regroupment for an alternative on the left.

The end of the story has not yet been written

It is still possible to modify the policy of the LCR, and we are going to try to do that. There will be no unitary candidate in the presidential election, and in these conditions it is necessary that Olivier Besancenot is present. But it is still possible to discuss an approach and an agreement for the legislative elections in June. There will be 580 candidates, there can be an agreement, so that in 150 to 300 constituencies, the LCR, the PCF, the forces around José Bové, the unitary collectives which have survived these turbulences (and there are many of them), would agree to present common candidates. It is of course necessary to have an agreement to defeat the Right, to defend an anti-liberal policy in complete independence in Parliament, not to take part in a government and a parliamentary majority on the basis of social-liberal policies. The French situation is unstable.

If the Right wins, the entire Left, including the PS, will explode and have to be rebuilt. If the Left wins, an agreement between part of the PS and the "centre" of the Right (Bayrou and the UDF) is possible, as in Italy or Germany. A "unitary turn" by the LCR, after the candidacy of Besancenot, is necessary. The failure to achieve unity for the presidential election does not invalidate the need to persevere with this type of regroupment, on the level of the immediate situation in France, but also, no doubt, for a whole period in Europe. If an agreement was reached for the legislative elections in France, the anti-liberal Left would also become the non-governmental left, since for the moment the PCF does not envisage going into a Socialist government (if it changed its mind, the crisis in the party would be at its height, and once again thousands of militants would rise up against the leadership of the party. It would then be necessary to be there, in the process of discussion, to have some influence on this crisis).

Furthermore, it is a situation which is tending to be found on a European scale: the more the liberal offensive develops, the more the traditional parties are under pressure and accentuate their social-liberal turn. But even more, in reaction, crises of perspectives take shape within these parties. In Germany, the policy of Schröder in government, and then the establishment of the grand coalition, led to the unification of a wing of the SPD with the PDS and a part of the radical Left. In Italy, the coalition government of Prodi is provoking a crisis within Rifondazione. In France, unable and unwilling to repeat the experience of the "plural Left", the PCF today, and the PS tomorrow, will face strong contradictions. It is necessary to be ready to intervene actively in these crises, which will multiply.

What our Italian comrades are doing is a good example. Considering their limited forces, it was necessary for them, 15 years ago, to go into Rifondazione, which was a product of the breaking up of the Italian CP. Confronted with Rifondazione joining the Prodi government, they demonstrated at the same time their independence in relation to the government and their loyalty to the social movement, without however creating a worst case scenario and becoming responsible for a return to power of Berlusconi. This Italian debate will be important in France for the legislative elections, with a PCF which for the moment refuses to follow the road of Rifondazione, but remains hesitant on what policy to carry out. All these debates will involve the European Left. It is up to us to know how to respond, not only not by the reaffirmation of principles that we declaim from the side of the road, but by a policy of concretely building regroupments which respect the principles of class independence and encourage workers to get involved in the discussion on alternative policies to those of social liberalism. In these processes, we will put forward our ideas.

February 27, 2007