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Interview with Olivier Besancenot

France: Coming together to build something new

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SolidaritéS: Is there in the history of the French or international workers' movement more or less distant precedents to the construction of a new "anti-capitalist party", as initiated by the LCR congress?

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Olivier Besancenot: We have no claim to reinvent everything. But it's true, this project is rather unique. First, it is not so usual for a political organization that has not been discredited - and has even experienced some success – to pose the problem of its disappearance! Of course, this is not about assessing the profits and losses in the history of the political current that the LCR represents. But instead, to write a new page, with others. With many others.

And neither is it about a merger between political movements, even if we are ready to discuss with all those who might be interested in this project. In fact, this project is based on an analysis of a new situation, in particular the extent of the crisis of the workers' movement.

And on the idea that it is both urgent and possible to take a giant step. This is urgent because of the violent attacks from the employers and the emptiness of the institutional left. This is possible because, despite the points scored by the MEDEF [1] and the right the popular layers still show remarkable abilities of resistance and there is an expectation of something new.

The NPA aims to integrate currents from various traditions of the radical left. Does this integration have as its condition an explicit discussion on the legacy of these traditions, or can it only be done through practice and the convergence of concrete struggles?

The discussion on the various ideological and historical "legacies" can be interesting. It will also undoubtedly be long. But we cannot start with that! Especially since the objective is to bring together men and women who, rightly, do not have a long history of party political commitment and do not identify with any of these traditions particularly...

One of the main reasons – although not the only one – for the failure of previous attempts to bring together the various anti-capitalist currents is that there was a "top down" approach and that inevitably came up against the past of various people, their old differences. This time, we will try to do it differently. And starting from common practices, all the resistance struggles that bring us together on a daily basis. And that, in outline, sketches the contours of a radical and revolutionary change in society.

What will be the attitude of the new party towards existing political institutions? Does it, for example, intend to take part in the management of municipalities or regions, as part of alliances with other left-wing parties or independently?

Participating in institutions and management is not a matter of principle. The social liberals and their allies accuse us of now wishing to "get our hands dirty" with political responsibilities. That is not correct. We are not simple "witnesses"; our goal is to participate in the implementation of measures and policies that we defend. But not to serve as a left cover for social liberal policies! And herein lies the basic problem, and what differentiates us from many "anti-neoliberal" currents, we have no plans to participate in a coalition (with the PS), which, "in power" (local, regional, national), applies every day of the week... the policies against which we demonstrate at the weekend!

The Greens and particularly the PCF tried, a few years ago, under the Jospin government. With the results that we know, their shipwreck and an additional discredit cast on political commitment. Imposing - as we advocate - the redistribution of wealth in favour of the vast majority of the people who produce it by their labour will inevitably lead to confrontation with the small minority which currently scoops it up. This means a real relationship of forces in society... and not just in the institutions.

Will the new party be a revolutionary party, like the LCR, and if so what meaning does this word have in the current context?

Revolutionary and "revolutionary like the LCR?" Probably not... Otherwise, we could merely continue - and continue the LCR! - as before, but better obviously! We need of course, a common foundation: the defence of radical proposals, opposition to the capitalist system, a strong commitment to mobilizations, political independence from the PS. This common platform will not answer a priori any questions, tactical or strategic. Some will remain open. But we believe that there are tens of thousands of men and women that are available to build a party for struggles and mobilizations.

A left that is not afraid to face down the attacks from the right and the renunciation of the left. A new political representation for the world of work, young people and victims of various oppressions. A left that does not confine its ambitions to limiting the damage of capitalist globalization, but which still wants to do away with the system and radically change society. And, indeed, change society! On these tens of thousands of men and women who are ready, like us to "revolutionize society," we do not impose our past, whether the general history of Trotskyism or the specific history of the LCR. But put them together to build something new!

We reproduce here an interview he gave to Razmig Keucheyan during the 17th congress of the LCR, held in Plaine-Saint-Denis from January 24-27, 2008, for the Swiss bimonthly SolidaritéS.

[1] 1. The Mouvement des Entreprises de France, known as MEDEF, is an employers' organisation representing the leaders of French companies. It was created on Oct. 27, 1998, when it replaced the National Council of French Employers (CNPF). Since July 2005 it has been chaired by Laurence Parisot