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The NPA, a new experience of building an anti-capitalist party

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Alex Callinicos's article shows well the changes that have taken place in the radical left in recent months. The characteristics of the situation, and in particular the deepening of the crisis of the capitalist system and the social-liberal evolution of social democracy, confirm that there is a space "to the left of the reformist left".

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sabado.thumbnail.jpg>] **François Sabado** Photo:
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This space opens up possibilities for the building of new political formations or for initiatives like that of the Conferences of the anti-capitalist left, a process which requires clarifications. Certain experiences involve a diversity of currents. Although the political frontiers between these currents do not always appear clearly, on the other hand, in order to go forward, the question of support for or participation in centre-left or social-liberal governments is a fundamental dividing line in the politics of alliances or regroupment.

There are not only "paths that diverge", but different politics and distinct projects. When [Callinicos evokes](#) "more positive experiences" in connection with Die Linke in Germany and the NPA in France, it is in fact a question of two different projects.

In the case of Die Linke, we are dealing with a left reformist party: a party integrated into the institutions of the German State, a party the great majority of whose members come from the ex-PDS - the party of the bureaucracy of the former GDR -, a party which has come out in favour of a common government with the SPD, lastly a party whose project of society comes down to the "return to the Welfare State". Admittedly, this party also reflects, in the west of Germany, a movement of radicalisation of certain sectors of the social movement, a step forward for the workers' movement. But revolutionaries should not confuse these processes with the leadership of Die Linke, its reformist policies, its subordination to capitalist institutions, and its objectives of participation in government with the SPD.

The NPA on the other hand presents itself as an anti-capitalist party. A party whose centre of gravity is centred on struggles, on the social movements and not in parliamentary institutions, a party whose founding characteristic is the rejection of any alliance or any participation in government with the centre-left or with social-liberalism, a party which does not stop at anti-liberalism but all of whose politics is directed towards a break with capitalism and the overthrow of the power of the ruling classes.

In all these cases, we are confronted with political formations: there are delimitations, programmes, policies, but they are not the same ones.

Anti-capitalist party or united front of a particular kind?

Also, we cannot share the approach of Callinicos on the characterization of the new formations of the radical left as "a united front of a particular kind"... The SWP's conceptions were formulated by John Rees, one of their leaders, in the following way: "The Socialist Alliance [the precursor of Respect] is thus best seen as a united front of a particular kind applied to the electoral field. It seeks to unite left reformist activists and revolutionaries in a common campaign around a minimum programme". [\[1\]](#) This conception, originally linked to the British experience, was generalized as "the SWP's conception of the nature of the new formations of the radical left". We disagree with this conception.

To use the term "united front" for the building of a party or a political formation really is an innovation.

The united front is a response to the problems that are posed by the united action or the unification of the workers or of the social movement and of their organizations. The united front and the building of a party are two distinct things. An anti-capitalist and/or revolutionary workers' party - over and above its precise definition - is a delimited political formation, on the basis of a programme and a comprehensive strategy of conquest of power by and for the workers. An anti-capitalist party cannot be the organic expression of "the whole class". Even though it must seek to constitute "a new representation of the workers", or the convergence of a series of political currents, it will nevertheless not make the other currents of the social movement or even the organizations that are "reformist or of reformist origin" led by bureaucratic apparatuses, disappear. The question of the united front remains posed.

Why should we not regard anti-capitalist parties as frameworks of the united front? Because if that were the case, it would amount to regarding these parties as a simple alliance or unitary framework - even of a particular kind - and thus to underestimating building them as a framework or a mediation necessary for the emergence of the revolutionary leaderships of tomorrow. To consider the NPA as a united front framework would amount to "toning down" its political positions to make them compatible with the realization of this united front. For example, we do not make the unity of action of the workers' and social movement conditional on an agreement on the question of government. Is that a reason for the NPA to give up or even relativise a battle on the question of government? No, we do not think so. The NPA made the question of government - the refusal to participate in governments of class collaboration - a decisive delimitation of its political combat. This example obviously demonstrates, but we could also evoke other examples, that the NPA is not a united front framework. We want to build it as a coming together of experiences, activists and currents but especially as a party. To regard it as a "united front of a particular kind" amounts to underestimating the battles that are necessary in order to build a political alternative. This conception of "a united front of a particular kind around a minimum programme" led the leadership of the SWP to reproach the leadership of the LCR with having "a negative and sometimes ultimatum attitude towards the collectives", when the LCR was putting at the centre of its political battle the refusal to take part in a government with the leadership of the Socialist Party (PS). With hindsight, does the leadership of the SWP still think that these reproaches were well-founded?

And today, when Jean Luc Mélenchon, one of the organizers of the socialist left, leaves the PS, while maintaining the continuity of his reformist conceptions, his positions on participation in or support for the Mitterrand and Jospin governments, and declaring that he wants to build a French "Die Linke", what should be the attitude of revolutionaries? To support him and join in his proposals and projects for alliances with the French Communist Party, which maintains the perspective of governing tomorrow... with the PS, or to take into account his break with the PS, have a positive approach to unity of action with his current, but not confuse the building of an anti-capitalist left with the building of a left reformist party... Once again, yes to unity of action - as we engaged in at the time of the No campaign in the referendum on Europe - and to debate, but knowing that the differences on the relationship to representative institutions and the attitudes concerning the question of government separate the electoral alternatives and the projects of building parties. The building of a French Die Linke, in relation to the history of the revolutionary movement and to what has been accumulated by the NPA, would constitute a retreat for the building of an anti-capitalist alternative. Whereas a whole sector influenced by the anti-capitalist left has taken its distance from the leaderships of the traditional left, to constitute a new left reformist force would represent a step back for the workers' movement. We would once again involve all this sector in "reformist manoeuvres". Conceptions of the type of the "united front of a particular kind" could then disarm us in defining a clear policy vis-à-vis this type of current.

This conception, which underestimates the strategic range of the differences on the questions of government and representative institutions, throws light on some of your international positions. It can thus explain, in the policy of the comrades of the IST in Germany, a relativisation of the critique of the policies of the leadership of Die Linke on the question of participation in governments with the SPD.

In the same way, we can also note the indulgence of the comrades towards the new leadership of bloc Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. At the last congress of Rifondazione, a "left" reaction by its members put the partisans of Bertinotti in a minority. However the policy followed by the new leadership is in continuity with the historical positions of Rifondazione Comunista, and continues to endorse the policy of alliances with the Democratic Party in all the regional executives governed by the centre-left.

Lastly, didn't this conception of "a united front of a particular kind around a minimum programme" contribute to disarming the leadership of the SWP vis-à-vis Galloway, for whom Respect had to "[sustain] alliances with local Muslim notables who could deliver votes"?

Your browser may not support display of this image. Your browser may not support display of this image. Your browser may not support display of this image. To consider an anti-capitalist party as a united front framework can also lead to sectarian deviations... If the united front is realised, even in a particular form, might we not be tempted to make everything go through the channel of the party, precisely underestimating the real battles for unity of action? Because the anti-capitalist party must combine the party activities of a party and an orientation of unitary action... because we have not forgotten, contrary to what Callinicos suggests, that reformism continues to exist, that the movement of the workers has divisions, differentiations, and that it is necessary to intervene to draw it together, to unify the workers and their organizations.

Once again, the united front, in all its varieties, is one thing. Another thing is the building of a political alternative, which is the choice of the NPA.

What kind of revolutionary party?

Alex Callinicos tries to catch us out by explaining to us that, although the NPA is an anti-capitalist party, it is "not a revolutionary party in the specific sense in which it has been understood in the classical Marxist tradition". We can discuss the classical Marxist tradition, extremely rich in its diversity.

Depending on the history, the degree of strategic clarification, on principles and organizational tactics, without forgetting the various interpretations of this or that revolutionary current, there are several models. It is true that the NPA is not the replica of the revolutionary organizations of the period after May 1968. Anti-capitalist parties like the NPA do not start from general historical or ideological definitions. Their starting point is "a common understanding of events and tasks" on the questions that are key for intervening in the class struggle. Not a sum of tactical questions, but the key political questions, like the question of a programme for political intervention around an orientation of class unity and independence.

In this movement, there is a place and even a necessity for other histories, other references coming from the most varied origins.

Does that make it a party without a history, a programme and delimitations? No. It has a history, a continuity: that of class struggles, the best of the socialist, communist, libertarian and revolutionary Marxist traditions. It situates itself in the revolutionary traditions of the contemporary world, basing itself, more precisely, on the long chain of French revolutions from 1793 to May 1968, via the days of 1848, the Paris Commune and the general strike of 1936.

The NPA is also a type of party which tries to answer the needs of a new historical period - which opened at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century - and to the need to refound a socialist programme faced with the

combined historical crisis of capitalism and of the environment of the planet.

Faced with such challenges, the NPA affirms itself as a revolutionary party rather in the sense given by Ernest Mandel in the following lines.

"What is a revolution?"

A revolution is the radical overthrow, in a short time, of economic structures and (or) political power, by the tumultuous action of broad masses. It is also the abrupt transformation of the mass of the people from a more or less passive object into a decisive actor of political life.

A revolution breaks out when these masses decide to put an end to conditions of existence that seem to them unbearable. It thus always expresses a grave crisis of a given society. This crisis has its roots in a crisis of the structures of domination. But it also expresses a loss of legitimacy of governments, a loss of patience, on the part of broad popular sectors.

Revolutions are, in the end, inevitable - the real locomotives of historical progress - precisely because domination by a class cannot be eliminated by the road of reforms. Reforms can at the most soften it, not suppress it. Slavery was not abolished by reforms. The absolutist monarchy of the ancien regime was not abolished by reforms. Revolutions were necessary in order to eliminate them."

"Why are we revolutionaries today?"

Ernest Mandel, La Gauche January 10, 1989.

It is true that this definition is more general than the strategic, even politico-military hypotheses which provided the framework for the debates of the 1970s, which were at that time illuminated by the revolutionary crises of the 20th century.

Anti-capitalist parties like the NPA are "revolutionary", in the sense that they want to put an end to capitalism - "the radical overthrow of economic and political structures (thus state structures) of power" - and the building of a socialist society implies revolutions where those below drive out those above, and "take the power to change the world".

They have a strategic programme and delimitations, but these are not completed. Let us recall that Lenin, including against part of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, changed or substantially modified his strategic framework in April 1917, in the middle of a revolutionary crisis. He went from the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants" to the need for a socialist revolution and the power of the workers' councils... Certainly, Lenin had consolidated over the years a party based on the objective of a radical overthrow of Tsarism, on the refusal of any alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie, and on the independence of the forces of the working-class allied with the peasantry. And this preparatory phase was decisive. But many questions were decided in the very course of the revolutionary process.

Many things have changed compared to the period after May 1968, and more generally compared to a whole historical period marked by the driving power of the Russian Revolution. It is more than thirty years since the advanced capitalist countries experienced revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations. The examples that we can use are based on the revolutions of the past. But, once again, we do not know what the revolutions of the 21st century will be like. The new generations will learn much from experience and many questions remain open.

What we can and must do is to solidly base the parties that we build on a series of "strong" references, drawn from the experience and the intervention of recent years, which constitute a programmatic and strategic foundation. Let us recall them: an anti-capitalist transitional programme which combines immediate demands and transitional demands, a redistribution of wealth, the challenging of capitalist property, social appropriation of the economy, class unity and independence, a break with the economy and the central institutions of the capitalist state, the rejection of any policy of class collaboration, the taking into account of the ecosocialist perspective, the revolutionary transformation of society...

Recent debates have led us to make more precise our conceptions of violence. We have reaffirmed that "it was not the revolutions that were violent but the counter-revolutions", as in Spain in 1936 or in Chile in 1973, that the use of violence aimed at protecting a revolutionary process against violence from the ruling classes.

So in what respect does this new party constitute a change with regard to the LCR? It must be a party that is broader than the LCR. A party which does not incorporate the entire history of Trotskyism and which has the ambition of making possible new revolutionary syntheses. A party which is not reduced to the unity of revolutionaries. A party which dialogues with millions of workers and young people. A party which translates its fundamental programmatic references into popular explanations, agitation and formulas. From this point of view, the campaigns of Olivier Besancenot constitute a formidable starting point. A party which is capable of conducting wide-ranging debates on the fundamental questions which affect society: the crisis of capitalism, global warming, bio-ethics, etc. A party of activists and adherents which makes it possible to integrate thousands of young people and workers with their social and political experience, preserving their links with the backgrounds they come from. A pluralist party which brings together a whole series of anti-capitalist currents. We do not want a second LCR or an enlarged and broader version of the LCR. To make a success of the gamble we are taking, this party must represent a new political reality, follow in the tradition of the revolutionary movement, and contribute to inventing the revolutions and the socialism of the 21st century.

To avoid reformist temptations, really build an anti-capitalist party!

In spite of these delimitations, Callinicos remains sceptical: "The LCR's solution to the problem seems to be to install a kind of programmatic security-lock - commitment to anti-capitalism and opposition to centre-left governments. But this is unlikely to work: the more successful the NPA, the more it is likely to come under reformist pressures and temptations".

Why such fatalism? Why would the development of the NPA automatically lead to reformist temptations? It is necessary from this point of view to make the difference between a "spontaneous trade-unionism" [\[2\]](#), to take up a formula of Lenin, and reformism as a political project and organisation, and even an apparatus... And this "spontaneous trade-unionism", although it can constitute an environment that is favourable to reformist ideas, can also, faced with the increasing alignment of the reformist apparatuses on capitalist politics, move towards radical anti-capitalist, even revolutionary, positions, especially when the capitalist system is entering a phase where it is reaching its historical limits. It is logical, if we build a popular, pluralist, broad, open party, that this party will come under all sorts of pressures. If it did not, that would be abnormal. But why should these pressures be expressed in crystallized reformist positions? There is and there can be a tension between the anti-capitalist character of the new party and the fact that workers, young people, even a series of personalities, join the new party quite simply because they seek a real left party, starting in particular from the interventions of Olivier Besancenot.

These new members can indeed be combative but full of illusions. This is the case with every mass party, even one that is in a minority.

That is when it will be necessary to discuss and educate. That implies even more giving a "strong" content to the political responses of the NPA and carefully maintaining the radical character and the independence of the party.

In the same way, if these parties want to play a part in the reorganization of the social movements, they must be pluralist. Many sensibilities must find their place in their ranks, including "consistent reformist" activists and currents, but that does not automatically mean that the problem is posed in terms of struggles between the revolutionary current and crystallized reformist currents which would have to be fought. The key question is that all the currents and activists of the NPA, over and above their positions on "reform and revolution", put "the class struggle" at the centre and subordinate their positions in representative institutions to struggles and social movements. Of course, we cannot exclude the hypothesis of a confrontation between reformists and revolutionaries. But it is not very probable, with the present political delimitations of the NPA, that bureaucratic reformist currents will join or crystallize... In a first historical phase of building the party, the role of revolutionaries is to do everything they can so that the process of constitution of the party really does give birth to a new political reality. That implies that revolutionaries avoid projecting the debates of the former revolutionary organization into the new party. As soon as the NPA has taken off, there will of course be discussions, differentiations, currents. Perhaps certain debates will correspond to cleavages between revolutionary perspectives and more or less consistent reformism. But even in these cases, the debate will not take the form of a political battle opposing a bureaucratic reformist bloc to the revolutionaries. Things will be more mixed, depending on the experience of the new party itself.

Is it necessary to organize, in a separate way, a revolutionary current in the NPA?

There too, there is no model. In many anti-capitalist parties, there are one or more revolutionary currents, when these parties are in fact fronts or federations of currents. This is the case of the militants of the Fourth International in Brazil, in the framework of the "Enlace" current. Without organizing themselves as political currents related to the national political life of these parties, certain sections of the Fourth International can be organized in ideological associations or sensibilities. This is for example the case of the ASR within the Left Bloc in Portugal, and of the SAP within the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark. We can also find this type of current in other broader organizations or parties. This schema does not work for the NPA.

First of all for fundamental reasons, namely the anti-capitalist and revolutionary "in the broad sense" character of the NPA, and the general identity of views between the positions of the LCR and those of the NPA. There are and there will of course be political differences between the LCR and the NPA, a greater heterogeneity and a great diversity of positions within the NPA, but the political bases under discussion for the founding congress of the new party already show political convergences between the ex-LCR and the future NPA.

Also, even though the NPA already constitutes another reality than the LCR, even though it is the possible crucible of an anti-capitalist pluralism, it is not justified today to build a separate revolutionary current in the NPA.

There is also a specific relation between the ex-LCR and the NPA. The ex-LCR represents the only national organization taking part in the constitution of the NPA. There are other currents, like the Fraction of Lutte Ouvriere, the Gauche revolutionnaire, communist activists, libertarians, but there are not, unfortunately, at this stage, organizations of a weight equivalent to that of the LCR.

If that had been the case, the problem would be posed in different terms.

In the present relationship of forces, the separate organization of the ex-LCR in the NPA would block the process of

The NPA, a new experience of building an anti-capitalist party

building the new party. It would install a system of Russian dolls which would only create mistrust and dysfunctions.

Lastly, the NPA does not start from nothing. It results from a whole experience of members of the ex-LCR, but also of thousands of others who have forged an opinion in a battle to defend a line of independence with respect to social liberalism and reformism.

There is thus a militant synergy within the NPA, where revolutionary positions intersect with other political positions coming from other origins, other histories, other experiences. Only new political tests will lead to new alignments within the NPA, not former political attachments...

It is an unprecedented gamble in the history of the revolutionary workers' movement, but the game is worth the candle.

We will advance as we walk...

This article appears in 'Critique Communiste'.

[1] John Rees, "Anti-capitalism, reformism and socialism", International Socialism, second series, number 90 (2001), p. 32

[2] A formula of Lenin's evoking the spontaneous trade-union reaction or feeling of workers to defend their conditions of work and existence and their demands