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France

Two months that shook Lutte Ouvrière

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Lutte Ouvrière is one of the largest organizations of the far left in Europe. For the last 15-20 years, it has been the largest of the three major organizations of the far left in France. [1]

Lutte Ouvrière attracted a certain amount of attention internationally in 1995 when its candidate Arlette Laguiller won 5.3 per cent of the vote in the presidential election. A similar result was obtained at the European elections in 1999 when the joint LO-LCR list won over five percent and elected five Euro-MPs (three LO, two LCR). In these elections, lists of the radical anti-capitalist left won significant votes in practically every country in the EU. The success of the LO-LCR list was widely seen as a possible first step towards a party that would be the French equivalent of the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Danish Red-Green Alliance and other such formations. Viewed from afar there was nothing intrinsically ridiculous about this idea. It was clear that LO and the LCR, separately and on this occasion together, were drawing votes from the same constituency as the new formations of the radical left that were appearing in other countries of Europe.

However, a new party emerging from the joint list was never on the cards. To understand why it is necessary to take a closer look at Lutte Ouvrière.

Lutte Ouvrière was founded on the eve of the Second World War. It never joined the Fourth International or any other international, although it is the centre of a mini-international, the Union Communiste Internationale, with small groups in half a dozen countries. After playing a key role in the big Renault strike of 1947 the group collapsed and was re-launched (as Voix Ouvrière) in 1956 by Robert Barcia ('Hardy'), who has led the organization ever since. Like other far left organizations, VO began to recruit from the youth radicalisation of the 60s and grew dramatically in 1968, when after being banned it reappeared as Lutte Ouvrière.

Lutte Ouvrière can be defined as functioning as a sect in the Marxist sense of the term. 'The sect seeks its raison d'Être and point of honour not in what it has in common with the class movement but in the particular shibboleth which distinguishes it from the class movement'. [2] In a 1983 pamphlet LO poses the question of how to create a revolutionary workers' party and replies in the following way: 'It is to this problem, which remains posed for the whole Trotskyist movement, that Lutte Ouvrière proposes an answer different, we think, from that provided by all other tendencies, whatever the differences between them in other respects. It is therefore, in fact, even if that could appear at first sight contradictory, because it is Trotskyist that Lutte Ouvrière exists alongside and independently of the rest of the Trotskyist movement'. [3] And what is this answer different from all other tendencies? The pamphlet explains: 'Our choice is first of all a class choice: the proletariat. But in an epoch where it is the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie which occupies centre stage as far as radicalism is concerned and where the workers' movement is entirely reduced to the reformist organizations, it is also a voluntarist choice which implies the refusal to orient our activity in priority towards the milieux which might seem to be, and which are for so many others, such a priority'.

Here we have in a nutshell the way LO sees itself. First of all, unlike 'all other tendencies' LO has chosen the working class. Secondly, there is the idea that LO has to fight against the pernicious influence of the petty-bourgeoisie and to refuse to orient to those milieux dominated by it. One consequence is that LO has never committed itself to campaigns of international solidarity or to building for example the women's movement or the anti-racist movement. The latest example of this attitude is its shunning of the movement against capitalist globalisation, such demonstrations as that at Genoa and Barcelona being characterized as diversions from the class struggle at home. Thirdly, the workers' movement is entirely dominated by the reformist organizations. Now if this was true in 1983 it is much less so today, when possibilities of recomposition and the creation of new parties are opening up. But as we shall see LO is unable to come to terms with the challenges and possibilities of this new situation and falls back on building its own organization and the perspective of a 'revolutionary communist party'. This party would in effect be

Two months that shook Lutte Ouvrière

LO writ large, with the addition of forces won from a rapidly diminishing Communist Party, towards which LO orients today in priority, often in a rather opportunist way. For example, LO has never been shy about proclaiming its fidelity to Trotskyism. In the 1995 pamphlet 'What is Lutte Ouvrière?' it is clearly stated 'Lutte Ouvrière is a Trotskyist party'. But in Arlette Laguiller's book 'My Communism' published for the recent presidential campaign, the word 'Trotskyism' appears just once in a passing reference. Now while it is correct not to let the question of Trotskyism become an obstacle to working with other forces, not to even mention the subject in a 170-page book aimed primarily at CP members and electors is to say the least surprising.

The particularities of LO, its shibboleths, are to be found more in its way of organizing and acting than in its theory. In this realm it makes no claim to originality, frequently stressing that little has changed since 1940.

LO is organized in an extremely strict and clandestine fashion. It has no public headquarters, elaborate security precautions surround its internal meetings, pseudonyms are universally used and so on. It published the list of the members of its Central Committee for the first time after its congress last year, no doubt in response to coming increasingly under the spotlight of the media. In a feature on the organization published by the Paris daily Le Monde (March 14, 2002), LO claimed to have 7,500 members. In fact it is organized in a highly elitist fashion, in concentric circles according to the degree of political commitment and understanding of LO's politics. The organization has only about a thousand full members (those who have voting rights at conferences).

LO members in the workplaces play a leading and often exemplary role in struggles. But the organization itself is essentially propagandist, as LO itself has no hesitation in admitting. In the pamphlet 'What is Lutte Ouvrière?' under the heading 'Our activities' we read: 'These are essentially activities of propaganda and recruitment. As far as propaganda goes, in addition to the editorial of our workplace bulletins we organize as regularly as possible political meetings for Marxist education'. In fact LO has several hundred workplace bulletins, always with the same formula: one side is the editorial of that week's issue of the paper, the other deals with questions related to the workplace. And each bulletin appears every fortnight, regular as clockwork. Such regularity and seriousness are in fact one of the hallmarks of the organization and one of its positive features. As for recruitment, in spite of its claim to be a 'proletarian tendency' LO devotes a lot of attention to recruiting young people, often from a petty-bourgeois background. Its social composition, particularly its hard core, is in fact probably no different and no more proletarian than other far-left organizations.

In the same pamphlet we read, 'Propaganda activity is also conducted of course by participating in election campaigns', adding 'since 1973 we have stood candidates in just about every legislative presidential municipal election; wherever we could'.

And it is indeed on the electoral terrain that LO has made the biggest impact and become nationally known. Somewhat ironically, as the organization regularly explains that elections change nothing.

In the 1974 presidential election LO presented for the first time Arlette Laguiller, who had just led a nine-week long strike at the Credit Lyonnais bank. An accomplished speaker, she has since stood in every presidential election and has become for the general public the personification of LO. However, electoral success remained limited until 1995. The result that year was clearly a reflection of the growing combativity in the working class and a foretaste of the mass strike movement of November-December that year. But it was also a reward for consistency, for the fact that the organization had stood in elections for over twenty years, always with the same anti-capitalist message, expressed in simple, concrete language that was comprehensible for ordinary people, if somewhat old-fashioned, and for its unambiguously independent stance in relation to the Communist and Socialist parties. An innovation in the 1995 campaign was the putting forward of an Emergency Plan, a series of simple anti-capitalist measures (such as the demand to ban sackings) which had an impact and which have subsequently been widely taken up by others on the left.

Two months that shook Lutte Ouvrière

In the 1998 regional elections both LO and the LCR registered good results and won regional councillors (20 for LO, two for the LCR). The subsequent agreement to run a joint campaign for the 1999 European elections came as a surprise to many people. In the not so recent past, between 1977 and 1985, the two organizations had regularly collaborated in election campaigns. In the early 1980s joint branch meetings took place, and annual fÃªtes were organized by the two organizations in 1983, 1984 and 1985. During this period LO combined such joint work with the regular affirmation that the existence of separate organizations was justified and that it would be shown in practice who was right. In 1986 LO broke off relations of collaboration with the LCR and began a long period of splendid isolation aiming to prove in practice the validity of its own approach.

During recent years joint activity with the LCR has been systematically defended only by the 'Etincelle' ('Spark') faction of LO. [4]

Those on the left who saw the 1999 campaign as a hopeful sign, as perhaps the beginning of a less sectarian attitude on the part of LO, were to be disappointed as the organization quickly reverted to its sectarian line. Already in 1995 Arlette Laguiller had reacted to her electoral success by making a call for a new workers' party. The call had a certain resonance but the leadership of LO quickly buried the idea. [5] The closed character of the organization makes any serious orientation towards a new party, which would necessarily involve working with other forces, extremely perilous for the leadership of LO. They are extremely contemptuous of any talk of recomposition. A declaration by the candidates of LO on May 31 sums it up: 'What working people need is not a new 'recomposition' of the left in order to better deceive the workers, but a party which really defends the political and social interests of the workers, a party which would be what the Communist Party no longer is'. It apparently never crosses the mind of the leadership of LO that such a party could be the result of a recomposition rather than just a bigger version of their own organization.

In a period where the idea and the necessity of a new party, defended by the LCR among others, is winning wide acceptance, even a joint campaign can be dangerous. The question therefore is not so much why LO reverted to its traditional isolationism after the 1999 campaign as why it concluded the agreement in the first place. It seems that the motive was less a desire for unity than a calculation that an alliance was necessary to cross the five per cent barrier in order to have Euro-MPs and have campaign expenses reimbursed by the state. They may also have thought that since the LCR, then emerging from a long period of difficulties, was the weaker partner the operation carried minimal risk. However the LCR emerged strengthened from the campaign and probably gained more from it than LO, something which the leadership of LO certainly understood. When the Ligue proposed an alliance for the 2001 municipal elections, LO abruptly refused. But for the first time the results of the two organizations were comparable, though LO still did slightly better.

For the presidential elections of 2002, the LCR again proposed a joint campaign and offered to accept Arlette Laguiller as the candidate. The main excuse that LO had used to refuse a joint campaign in 2001, the fact that the LCR had a policy of calling for a vote for the official left in the second round of the elections, was no longer available as the LCR had since changed its policy. But the LCR's offer was still immediately refused.

After what was probably the unpleasant surprise of the LCR's good showing in the municipal elections, the leadership of LO was sure that the presidential election, with Laguiller as candidate, would re-establish the relationship of forces in their favour.

Most people, including in the LCR, thought that they were right about that. LO embarked on Arlette's fifth presidential campaign, full of what seemed entirely justified confidence. The candidate had built a solid reputation. Indeed, she was practically the only political figure in France instantly identifiable by her first name. LO conducted an expensive campaign, sure of being reimbursed when Arlette easily cleared the five per cent barrier. At one point she was standing at 11 percent in the polls. The LCR candidate, Olivier Besancenot, was completely unknown at the start of

Two months that shook Lutte Ouvrière

the campaign and until a couple of weeks before the first round was being credited with only 0.5 to one per cent. But of course that's not how things turned out on April 21. The far left got over 10 per cent but with 4.3 percent, Olivier Besancenot wasn't far behind Arlette with 5.7 per cent. The result was not only overall a breakthrough for the far left but a major victory for the LCR and in fact a setback for LO, which did scarcely better than in 1995.

In many ways the style of the two campaigns was well summed up by their central slogans. LO: 'Always in the workers' camp'; the LCR: 'Our lives are worth more than their profits'. LO ran a campaign that was good in its way, anti-capitalist, clearly on the side of the workers, no doubt about that. The LCR campaign was more keyed in to struggles such as those of young workers in fast-food chains, to the movement against capitalist globalisation, to the question of Palestine. The connection was made between the struggles of today and the socialist society of the future. And particularly in the final stages of the campaign, the need for a new party was systematically put forward. Once Olivier Besancenot got access to a mass TV audience during the two weeks of the official campaign, his campaign took off, not only because of his considerable personal ability but because of the coherence of what he was saying. Indeed, it is entirely possible that if the campaign had lasted two weeks longer he would have overtaken Arlette.

The 'Etincelle' faction wrote after the result that Besancenot's score 'represents a notable success for the LCR, on the basis even of the programme of LO'. That is and isn't true. The LCR campaign took the best of LO's programme, its clear line of class independence and in particular independence from the official left. But it added a content that was much broader and more dynamic.

LO's analysis of the results was that their own electorate was stable and that the LCR now had 'its' electorate, i.e. that the two electorates were separate. In the April 26 issue of the weekly 'Lutte Ouvrière' Georges Kaldy, one of the organization's central leaders, wrote of 'the existence of a significant LCR electorate' and of 'several far-left candidates representing different policies and addressing different milieux'. Again that is and isn't true. In the first place, both organizations would be unwise to assume at this stage that they have a stable electorate which is 'theirs'. The LCR undoubtedly attracts a vote that is somewhat younger (10 per cent of 18-24 year-olds voted for the LCR, 6 per cent for LO) and less limited to the traditional sectors of the working class. However, fundamentally the two organizations are appealing to the same audience, those who are thoroughly disillusioned with the official left and are looking for an alternative.

In the event, the results of both organizations were overshadowed by the first-round elimination of Lionel Jospin, by the National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen making it through to the second round and by the enormous anti-FN mobilization between the first and second rounds.

LO's analysis of the vote for the far right was to completely downplay its significance, insisting on the fact that the progress in votes was very limited, that Le Pen got through because of the collapse of the Socialist Party vote, that there was no danger of fascism. That is of course strictly true. However, even the maintenance of the far right at nearly 20 percent is not to be swept aside and its ideas need to be combated. And the fact that many of the overwhelmingly young people on the big anti-fascist demonstrations overestimated the real danger does not detract from the hugely positive character of those demonstrations, something which seems to escape LO.

Between the two rounds, the pressure built up for a vote for Chirac in order to inflict a resounding defeat on Le Pen. This pressure came from both the political establishment and from the demonstrations and the electors of the left and the far left. Polls showed that 70 to 80 per cent of those who had voted for Laguiller or Besancenot in the first round voted for Chirac in the second.

The reactions of LO and the LCR were quite different. After some hesitation the LCR called for a 'vote against Le Pen', which could have included a blank vote but was widely and correctly seen as authorizing a vote for Chirac. At

Two months that shook Lutte Ouvrière

the same time the LCR was quite unambiguous about what Chirac represented and its central slogan in the demonstrations was '20 years of anti-social policies, 20 per cent for the National Front' thus pinpointing the responsibilities of the governments of both left and right. Also after some slight hesitation, LO opted to actively campaign against a vote for Chirac. This put the organization in a position of frontal opposition to the mass of the anti-FN demonstrators, making the question of a vote for Chirac a line of division in the movement. LO contingents, even with the widely respected Arlette at their head, were booed on demonstrations.

This difference over the vote for Chirac provided the leadership of LO with the excuse it needed to refuse the LCR's proposal of an agreement for the June legislative elections. As a result the two organizations ran separately, LO everywhere, the LCR in over three-quarters of the constituencies. In the overall context of a campaign that was pretty dismal and apolitical, many of those who had voted for LO and the LCR in the presidential election either abstained or chose to vote for the official left to limit the scope of the expected victory of the right. But within this framework, the LCR for the first time won more votes (328,000) than LO (304,000).

The electoral setbacks for LO in the presidential and legislative elections are extremely significant. Many of those who voted LO previously because it was the only credible force to the left of the official left now know that that is no longer true. And LO is undoubtedly paying the price of its sectarianism, in general and in particular between the two rounds of the presidential elections.

Inevitably, even in an organization as closed as LO, this situation will provoke questioning and dissensions. These will not be limited to the 'Etincelle' faction, which is however more convinced than ever that it is right to argue for LO to adopt a unitary approach, especially in relation to the LCR. During the legislative campaign a group of LO members in the southern town of Arles left and joined the LCR. They may not be the last.

The question of unity with other forces on the left and the question of a new party will not go away. But in the coming period these questions will be posed not on the electoral level, but in the context of working-class resistance to the attacks of Chirac and Raffarin. LO will have difficulty evading them. Its present difficulties demonstrate that today those far-left organizations, even the biggest of them, which place their own interests above those of the movement as a whole and which see their own construction as an end in itself will be unable to rise to the challenges of the period and will pay a price for that.

[1] The other two are the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), French section of the Fourth International and the Workers' Party (PT - the 'Lambertistes').

[2] Marx to Schweitzer, October 13, 1868, in 'The First International and After'.

[3] 'Lutte Ouvrière dans le mouvement trotskyste', published by Lutte Ouvrière.

[4] This is a public faction of LO led by some of its historic leaders. In contrast with the general absence of structured democratic debate in LO, the Faction has the right to a column in the weekly 'Lutte Ouvrière' and in the journal 'Lutte de Classe'. The flipside of this is that most of its members have either been expelled from LO or have never been allowed to join. Those who are members are not part of the normal branch structure. The Faction has its own branches and its own factory bulletins. At annual LO congresses it receives more than three per cent of the votes.

[5] Those members of LO who took the call too seriously were subsequently expelled from the organization. They included the overwhelming majority of the members in Rouen and Bordeaux. Those expelled formed the organization 'Voix des Travailleurs', which joined the LCR in June 2000.