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France

After the success of the « No from the left »

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The French referendum on the European constitution created a political shock in France and in Europe. A political shock because, in spite of the commitment of the biggest parties of Right and Left (the UMP and the UDF on the right and the Socialist Party on the left) to the campaign for the "Yes", the electoral disavowal was definitive.

What we saw was a profound movement in French society. The most spectacular aspect was obviously its class character: 80 per cent of manual workers, 70 per cent of white collar workers, more than 60 pert cent of young people voted for the “No”. It was the most working-class towns and polling stations that voted “No”.

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So this “No” is the direct expression of the social and political crisis that the country has been going through for years. It could be seen in the previous electoral contests, either through popular abstention, or through the systematic punishment of the parties that were in government. It is the kind of punishment that Lionel Jospin, at the time Socialist Prime Minister, suffered in the presidential election of 2002. The same thing happened in 2004, at the regional and European elections, which were a disaster for the UMP and the UDF under the government of UMP member Raffarin. The unprecedented aspect of this vote on the constitutional treaty is that the electors were able to vote at the same time against all the parties, whether of Left or Right, that were responsible for neoliberal policies.

It was the popular classes getting their own back. The vote crystallised on the electoral terrain a profound social discontent. That is not surprising, since successive governments have never hesitated to make the link between their measures of social regression and the European Union. But it is a reality that that has been was largely underestimated, on the right, but also by the Hollande leadership of the Socialist party.

A decade of resistance

For ten years, in France, as in the other countries of the European Union, the neoliberal attacks have been piling up, threatening public services, social protection and secure employment. Every wage earner is directly concerned by these attacks. The advance towards the neoliberal model has been continuous. In 1995 there took place a general strike against the Juppé Plan to reform Social Security (health insurance), a movement of which the rail workers were the backbone. The Right paid dearly for this attack. The reform was blocked and two years later the Left arrived in strength in the National Assembly. In five years, it largely exhausted its store of confidence, privatising more enterprises than the two preceding right-wing governments together. In 2002, during the presidential election, a first warning shot had unsettled the liberal leaders: Lionel Jospin, candidate of the Socialist Party, failed to make it into the second round, the far Left won 10 per cent of the votes, almost three times more than the Communist Party, and Jacques Chirac only won 19 percent of the vote. Only a scare campaign made it possible for Jacques Chirac to be plebiscited in the second round against Jean-Marie Le Pen, candidate of the National Front. By turning the second round into an anti-fascist vote, the SP, like the Right sought to conceal the growing breach between it and the popular electorate.

Nevertheless, a year later, for several weeks a powerful strike movement mobilised workers against the reform of the pensions system, linked to a general strike movement among teachers. This movement was finally defeated but left, in popular consciousness and among the militants of the workers' movement, the understanding that the bourgeoisie was setting out to dismantle all the social gains of previous decades, a dismantling that was permanently justified by the imperatives of globalisation and the construction of the European Union, a dismantling that was the responsibility

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of the Right, but also of the social-liberal Left.

Since 2003, the agenda of liberal reforms has continued. In 2004, in particular, the Raffarin government established the Douste-Blazy Plan, attacking the health insurance system, with the same logic as the previous attack against pensions. This attack was conducted parallel to a reform of the hospitals (“Hospital 2007”), which also led to harsher conditions of work, with a compartmentalisation by department and the setting up of regional hospitalisation agencies responsible making the hospitals profitable according to capitalist criteria. Only the active complicity of the political and trade union leadership of the workers' movement prevented the building of a fightback similar to the previous year's movement, although the task was not made any easier by the demoralisation of many militant sectors who were still digesting the previous year's defeat.

Nevertheless, on the initiative of ATTAC, the Copernic Foundation and many union sectors, as well as of the LCR and the PCF, the country was covered with a network of collectives in defence of Social Security, taking up again the anti-neoliberal responses put forward the previous year during the debate on pensions. It was a defeat without a battle, but a defeat that once again reinforced the consciousnesses of the need to combat a project of society, which, step by step, was destabilising workers and reinforcing social inequality.

Parallel to this, the energy sector was attacked by the change in the status of EDF-GDF (the state electricity and gas companies) in order to open them up to private capital. Unfortunately, the leadership of the Energy Federation of the CGT, which was by far the majority union in the sector, did nothing to organise the fightback and coordinate the militant actions that were conducted in several regions. During the summer of 2004, the successive announcements of the privatisation of France Telecom and of the closure of 6,000 local post offices completed the tableau of the neoliberal calendar.

On all the questions of privatisation, the French trade union movement did not provide a global response, did not seek to build a general mobilisation which could have been carried forward by an alternative project of development of public services in the service of social needs. The CGT has in this domain the main responsibility, because that is where there are the bulk of the militant forces who could have built such a fightback, but that must obviously not hide either the rallying of the CFDT, the second most important trade union confederation, to such projects, nor the passivity of Force Ouvrière. Each sector was left to its own devices and the willingness to fight of militant sectors of the CGT, or of SUD-PTT, could not impede these processes. On the other hand, the defence of public services provided once again the basis for building numerous local collectives and for the organisation, in February 2005, of a national mobilisation in Guéret, prefecture of the department of Creuse, in the centre of France, which became a symbol of the desertification of public services.

To these questions of global social policy were have been added, over the last few months, continuing mass lay-offs and workplace closures and the inexorable rise in the number of unemployed, who are subjected to growing culpabilisation and to reduced benefits. The question of relocation, which was very much present in the European election campaign, is a result of the growing desire of employers to increase their profit margins by relocating production units in Eastern Europe, or more generally by the pressure exerted on wages and working conditions by the blackmail of relocations. In the same way, the question if wages came to the forefront again, both the public and the private sectors being subjected to a policy of wage austerity which led to a drop in purchasing power, reinforced by the rise in rents, the price of everyday consumer products and energy bills.

So in the last few years - and in the months preceding the referendum - there has been an increase in the attacks, a disorganised fightback and a growing feeling of insecurity and destabilisation among workers. And that was taking place without this feeling being able to be expressed positively by perspectives of social struggles or of a political alternative, the leadership of the Socialist Party having yielded a long time ago to these liberal evolutions.

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Parallel to that, there has been a broad politicisation of trade union sectors and of the global justice movement, expressed in particular during the European Social Forum of Paris-St. Denis in November 2003.

An accumulation of - badly interpreted - experiences

In this context, the regional elections of April 2004 had given a false impression of the situation. Without having conducted a really dynamic campaign, the Socialist Party, for the main part, and its traditional allies, the Greens and the PCF, had been the beneficiaries of an overwhelming vote aimed at punishing the Right, which gave social democracy control of 21 out of 23 regions. In spite of a united campaign conducted by Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the LCR, the far Left found itself weakened by this electoral movement, dropping below 5 per cent of the vote. Some people saw in that, after the “protest” votes of 2002, the proof that traditional politics had reasserted itself and that the perspective of putting the Left back in office had regained the credibility it had lost. Subsequent events located this vote within a global perspective, showing that the vote for the SP was a vote against the Right and in no way a renewed popular adhesion to this party or a marginalisation of the political positions of the far Left.

It is no doubt a false view of reality and an underestimation of popular discontent that led Jacques Chirac to embark on the adventure of the referendum and François Hollande, First Secretary of the Socialist Party, to strongly commit his party to the battle for the “Yes”. By only having a superficial view of the votes of 2002 and 2004, it seemed to both of them that the victory of the “Yes” was guaranteed. To such an extent that François Hollande did not hesitate to appear in a photo alongside (UMP leader) Nicolas Sarkozy, on the cover of a mass-circulation magazine. Furthermore, Jacques Chirac saw himself as sure to be the main beneficiary of this result, faced with a Socialist Party that could not fail to be divided on the question.

A particularity of French politics lies in the fact that there exists widely in the workers' movement an anti-neoliberal political sentiment, which makes the connection between capitalist globalisation, the policy of the European Union and the national policies of attacking social gains. This sentiment has been steadily maintained by the social struggles of recent years, and also by the actions conducted by the global justice movement and the Peasant Confederation, the existence in France of a radical social movement involving associations and unions, and of a far Left that is very much present on the political scene, in particular in recent years with the popularity of Olivier Besancenot. This political sentiment also has its negative aspects, in a national view of things that is somewhat haughty vis-à -vis the other countries of Western Europe, considering France as a citadel of the social state, besieged by the Anglo-Saxon model, thus ignoring the gains that were won in the post-war years, in Northern Europe as in Britain, in Germany or in Italy, for example. This view of things comforts sovereignist or republican currents who see in the French state as such a protection against social attacks.

Nevertheless, it is this widespread sentiment that explains why, alone in Europe, the Socialist Party could be so divided on the question of the Constitution, with an internal referendum in which more than 40 per cent of the membership voted to reject the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT).

So this movement for the “No” has deep roots and social, associative, trade union and political backing.

A campaign patiently built...

As soon as the question of the referendum came onto the agenda, in the summer of 2004, the Copernic Foundation -

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a centre of initiative and analysis which brings together political militants (LCR, PCF, Greens, critical Socialists), trade unionists, anti-liberal activists of various associations - took the initiative of launching a broad appeal for the rejection of the Constitution on a left basis, for a “social and internationalist No”. At that point only the militant sectors were preoccupied by the question of the referendum, but this appeal made it possible, from autumn onwards, to build many united front collectives. The LCR completely committed itself to this appeal and to the building of united front collectives. On the political level this “Appeal of the 200” involved, other than the Ligue, the PCF, militants of PRS (“For a Social Republic”, a club in the SP around Jean-Luc Mélenchon), MARS (a current that came from the Citizens' Movement of Jean-Pierre Chevènement), the “ecologists for the No” of the minority of the Greens, plus militants from the trade unions and from various associations.

Lutte Ouvrière had a particular attitude throughout this campaign. In contrast to its position at the time of the Maastricht Treaty, when it had called for abstention, incurring the criticism that it had by so doing contributed to the narrow victory, with 51 per cent, of the “Yes” during the French referendum of September 1992, it decided in December 2004 to come out in favour of the “No”, more to avoid being criticised again than to really conduct a campaign. During the first half of 2005, the militants of LO were absent from the collectives and from the united front campaign and they themselves conducted practically no campaign, Arlette Laguiller making only a few appearances on television on the question.

In the early stages of the campaign, the PCF, signatory of the Appeal of the 200, kept its distance, concentrating on organising its own campaign and...waiting for the SP to take a position, hoping that a victory for the “No” would act as the driving force for a campaign of the entire Left. Subsequently, in the vast majority of towns and cities in the country, the PCF really committed itself to the united front campaign.

There were two real turning points in the campaign. The internal referendum of the Socialist Party, in December, in which Laurent Fabius, the party's number 2, after having “hesitated for a long time”, came out in favour of the “No”. This choice, coming from a convinced social-liberal, who had himself supported all the previous treaties since the Single Act and Maastricht, surprised many people. A tactical position, looking towards the 2007 presidential election? Obviously. But also no doubt a sharper understanding than his colleague Hollande of popular resentment against liberal Europe. The vote, which produced 59 per cent for the “Yes”, resulted in a clearer commitment of the minority currents of the SP to the campaign, although Henri Emmanuelli and Laurent Fabius concentrated on running their own campaigns, Fabius being obviously unable to identify with the radical content of the Appeal of the 200 and of the united front campaign. The result also more clearly committed the PCF to the united front collectives and meetings.

After a real internal debate, ATTAC came out without hesitation for the “No” and played an important role in all the work of explanation and information at local level. The same was true of the Peasant Confederation.

The position of these two organisations had a big impact on the left. Because François Hollande as well as Daniel Cohn-Bendit tried throughout the campaign to present the “Yes” as an “intelligent, open” vote, compared to the “No - fearful and frustrated”. The credibility of the Peasant Confederation and of ATTAC among intellectual layers and the better-off sections of the working class helped to build a broad base for the “No” vote.

The French Greens decided by a narrow margin in favour of a “critical Yes”. But the omnipresence of Cohn-Bendit in the campaign for the neoliberal “Yes”, often alongside François Bayrou, leader of the UDF, eclipsed any autonomous campaign and left the field open to the minority, which was present in the united front collectives and rallies.

The most important problem was that of the trade union movement.

Caught up in its aggiornamento into a trade union of negotiation and of insertion into the European Trade Union

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Confederation (ETUC), the confederal leadership of the CGT was for a long time tempted to adopt the position of the ETUC, of support for the ECT, a position shared in France by the CFDT. This position obviously went against the attitude of a large majority of militants. But the Thibault leadership obstinately refused to commit the confederation. That had, de facto, the effect of blocking the situation both in the main teachers' federation - the FSU - and in the Union Solidaires (which includes the SUD unions). Although these two organisations had taken a clear position of rejection of the Treaty, there was continuing resistance in their ranks to getting really committed to the “No” campaign, this lack of commitment being reinforced by the CGT's attitude. Fortunately, in February, during a meeting of the National Confederal Council, the CGT came out clearly, by 81 votes against 18, for the rejection of the treaty. This was the second decisive element of the campaign, which allowed the “No from the left” to solidly establish itself.

However, even before this vote, many trade union militants, from the CGT, from the FSU and from the SUD unions were present in the campaign, and many union bodies had themselves taken a position.

...a campaign dominated by the “No from the left”

Overall, it is the commitment of all these forces that gave the campaign for the “No” its full breadth and marked it with a clear social content.

In the first months of 2005, the question of the Constitution and of the referendum became the central political question in the country. All the social questions contributed to strengthening the “No”: the debate over re-locations, the mobilisation against the Bolkestein directive, an all too short-lived national mobilisation over wages on March 10th, 2005, the protest movement of school students that throughout the spring opposed a reform of the baccalauréat which was part of Education Minister Fillon's plan to undermine the school system, leading to greater social discrimination. That was also the case with the attack on the 35-hour week by de-controlling overtime quotas, and especially with the government's decision to suppress the Whit Monday holiday. This decision, taken in a climate of quasi indifference following the heat wave of summer of 2004, which had led to the death of more than 10,000 old people, under the pretext of setting up a fund to finance dependent old people, which was to be paid for by this additional unpaid working day. But the implementation of the measure, on the eve of the referendum, produced a clash that once again reinforced the rise of the “No”. After several days of an exemplary strike by the workers of the Total oil company against the suppression of the Whit Monday holiday, the government, panic-stricken, had to allow the management of the company to negotiate the abandoning of the extra working day for its employees.

Faced with this strength of the “No”, throughout the campaign the whole of the media - newspapers, radio and television -conducted a partisan campaign in defence of the “Yes”, caricaturing the “No”, a campaign predicting that there would be chaos and that France would be outlawed by the other countries of the EU if the vote went against ratification. Jacques Chirac intervened there times on television, throwing his full weight into the balance. All to no avail!

The campaign was clearly dominated by the “No from the left”, which mobilised more than 200,000 people in united front meetings, with hundreds of local public meetings. Books about the Constitution and magazine supplements were distributed on a large scale. This was in sharp contrast to the campaign in the Spanish state, where the electors where not even able to acquaint themselves with Part III of the treaty, which contains the essential elements of previous treaties and the concrete ultra-neoliberal measures.

Whereas in the autumn of 2004, the leaders of the “No” on the right, like Philippe De Villiers, often held centre stage and marked the campaign with their rejection of Turkey joining the EU, in the spring these themes were marginalized,

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as was the very discreet campaign of the National Front, which only held a few meetings.

Crisis of legitimacy and denial of democracy

The result of the referendum had a corrosive political effect. Its unchallengeable score sharply revealed the weakness of the social base of the neoliberal parties of Right and Left. Whereas 92 per cent of French MPs and senators voted in favour of the Constitution, 55 per cent of electors rejected it. That obviously creates a crisis of legitimacy, for Chirac and for the Assembly.

The total denial of democracy was clearly shown by the contempt with which Chirac considered that he didn't have to relay the popular vote in the European institutions. In 2003, Raffarin said to the millions of workers who were occupying the streets against the reform of pensions: “it is not the street that governs!”. Today Chirac is basically saying, “it is not the ballot box that governs!”. That can only reinforce the crisis of legitimacy of parliamentary institutions and electoral mechanisms.

Never has a government been so discredited a s soon as it was appointed as the new government of De Villepin, appointed in haste to replace Raffarin in the wake of May 29th.

But the corrosive effect of the referendum can be seen in the very composition of this government. Only one minister from the UDF (who disobeyed his party's orders and was expelled from his party a few days later), a government organised around the unconditional supporters of Jacques Chirac, even ousting all the ministers who are supporters of his rival Nicolas Sarkozy within the UMP, and only including Sarkozy himself in order to deprive him of extra room for manoeuvre in the preparation of the presidential election of 2007.
In the same fashion, in the Socialist Party, the first decision of the Hollande leadership was also to oust Laurent Fabius from his position as number 2 and from the National Secretariat, which was also made up solely of the losers of May 29th. It can be predicted that it will be very difficult for the Socialist leaders to put all that back together again...

All these defensive reflexes also show that this vote is once again an anti-system vote. A vote against all the parties of government. From a certain point of view that confirms the elements of growing distance between the traditional leaderships of the Left and the popular classes. These are profound long-term tendencies on the social and political level. But the vote brings out more forcibly the crisis of representation of the parties.

May 29th also poses a fundamental social question. It did not change the social relationship of forces and the government is launching fresh attacks. The class character of this vote poses a direct challenge to the social movement, above all the trade union movement. It is evidence, not necessarily of increased combativeness, but of a readiness to mobilise on fundamental social objectives around which the leaderships have up to now refused to organise action at the level that is required. This situation reinforces the urgency of converging actions by the militant forces who, in the CGT, the FSU and Solidaires share this readiness to fight back together against the neoliberal reforms.

The PCF at the heart of the contradictions

The forces of the “no” from the left are obviously faced with a political challenge. The spokespersons of the PCF and of the SP minorities are already declaring that they refuse any logic of building a “radical pole” and that they want it

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reunify the “no from the left” and the “yes from the left”, in a perspective of coming together for the general elections of 2007, whereas everything indicates that the SP will maintain the orientations that it has applied for years and which remain within the framework of neoliberalism.

The heart of the contradiction on the left is now to be found within the PCF. This party has found fresh vigour in this campaign. It was in many rallies and meetings the dominant force. There are not new waves of recruitment, especially among young people, but the “Communist people” - many with grey or white hair - has woken up. That still means tens of thousands of militants. But it has woken up on an orientation that is combative, anti-neoliberal and opposed to the leadership of the SP. To be more precise, the PCF leadership maintained two parallel discourses throughout the campaign: a sharp denunciation of neoliberalism, but also the need to renew links with the “Yes from the left”, in a perspective of a parliamentary and governmental majority. Similarly, PCF leader Marie-George Buffet often came back to the idea that there are not two Lefts...but only one, from the SP to the LCR... and that it was necessary to reunify all that!

If the broadest unity is obviously necessary against the MEDEF (the bosses' organisation) and the Right, the question that is now posed for tens of thousands of Communist militants is the following: in the present relationship of forces, where the party machines and the institutions are dominated on the left by social-liberalism - that includes the “No” of Laurent Fabius -, can we put together again a “new look Union of the Left” on an orientation imposed by the leadership of the SP or else do we have to build another alliance, in the dynamic of the “No from the left”, - an alliance that is really anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist?

That is the real question that is posed. Take up the fight to change the relationship of forces on the left, with a perspective of breaking from capitalist imperatives, with all the risks that that entails, or else fall back into the rut of all the past governmental formulas, which have always respected the capitalist economy and capitalist institutions. That is the question that the LCR is going to ask the PCF in particular, but that it will also address to sectors of the social movements, to left sectors of the Socialists and the Greens: social-liberal government or anti-capitalist alternative, that is the key question for the coming weeks and months. From this point of view, although what is most likely is an orientation that will try to rebuild a Union of the Left with the whole SP in a governmental perspective, sectors of the PCF can opt for a step to the left and a break with the leadership of the SP. In which case, that would seriously pose the question of a new anti-capitalist front or alliance including, besides the revolutionaries, a PCF or sectors of the PCF that would break with any policy of governmental alliance with the social liberals. But this question also concerns the trade union militants and the militants of various associations who were involved in the campaign. Not to seize the occasion to change the political landscape on the left, but instead to submit to new governmental perspectives under the leadership of the SP, would be somewhat incoherent with the political force that emerged during the campaign.

United front collectives and new anti-capitalist force

This debate obviously dovetails with the debate on perspectives for the movement of the collectives. Today, the unitary dynamic is such that the sectors who have taken part in this campaign, at least at rank and file level, have a strong desire to continue. The LCR is going to propose united front actions and objectives, social and political, against the programme of the new government and of the Right, in particular concerning defence of jobs, of labour legislation and of wages, because the new government is making a multitude of declarations about “adapting the French social model” to models “which create...jobs”, even though these jobs are of the most insecure kind.

The LCR is also proposing to go forward after the French and Dutch “No's” towards a European conference, in order to draw up new European perspectives that correspond to social needs.

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But at the same time, a discussion is posed in the collectives about the content of an anti-capitalist political alternative, a programme that breaks with the law of profit. It is in this sense that the LCR developed throughout the campaign a plan of ten anti-capitalist emergency measures, which, starting from immediate demands, put at the centre of things a new redistribution of wealth and incursions into capitalist property. This perspective is of course opposed to all the possible social-liberal governmental combinations and to any other government that remains within the framework of the capitalist economy and capitalist institutions. But the main thing is to pursue this unitary movement, to make tests, around practical action and in struggles, to take forward action and analysis. The “No” was a decisive moment of the political struggle. It embodied not only elements of refusal, but also in a positive way the first elements of response, demands, debate, hope. Now we have to go beyond that...because the “No from the left”, as such, does not constitute a sufficient political response for building an anti-capitalist alternative. We have to deepen our analysis, bring forward global propositions, but without dividing the movement. This is a particularly key question in order to bring together the militants and currents who could be ready for the perspective of a new anti-capitalist force.

This question is obviously fundamental, because the gulf that today exists between workers and their political representation poses objectively the question of this new force. The LCR played its full part in the united front. Olivier Besancenot was one of the main spokespersons of the campaign. A political situation in which the LCR can play an important role is opening up again. And the echo of the LCR's spokesperson largely exceeds the audience of the branches of the LCR, there again demonstrating the political space that could be occupied by a broad anti-capitalist force on a programme independent of compromises with social democracy. The balance sheet of this campaign provides a new occasion to go forward in this direction.

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