

2017 French elections: Why is the NPA criticizing the Left Front's populism?

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Amid the international crisis triggered by the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, and in France by the discrediting of President François Hollande's Socialist Party (PS), bitter policy divisions are emerging among the petty-bourgeois parties that have for decades orbited around the PS. The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) is criticizing the populism of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the Left Front leader running as the presidential candidate of the Rebellious France movement.

In its February 11 article “Mélenchon campaign: an attempt to re-orient the French left around populism?”, the NPA attacks Mélenchon's 2017 campaign. The NPA writes that it “goes hand in hand with deep transformations of fundamentals, insofar as Mélenchon seeks to respond to the disorientation of the 'left population' by proposing that it turn to populism.”

Mélenchon's 2017 campaign, the NPA adds, “does not constitute a simple *aggiornamento* of the orientations of the workers movement, but seems to indeed consist of a plan for a major break with the history of the French left.” Mélenchon is trying to “distance himself from the traditions of the workers movement,” the NPA writes. “This rejection of the old symbols of the French left implies fundamentally a break with the traditions of the workers movement.” It notes that words including “exploitation,” “profit,” “capitalism,” and “socialism” do not appear in Mélenchon's 2017 program.

The NPA's criticisms of Mélenchon, whose Left Front contains parties with whom the NPA has worked closely for decades, are politically fraudulent. There is no question that Mélenchon is a defender of capitalist property. In his book *The Era of the People*, first published in 2014, he declared the end of socialism, the working class, and the left, and advanced a populist nationalism, insisting that the response to the PS' crisis was not to try to rebuild a left-wing movement opposed to the PS.

The NPA rejects the revolutionary role of the working class and a revolutionary internationalist struggle for socialism no less than Mélenchon, however. In fact, its

spokesman and former presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot, whose anarcho-libertarian sympathies are well known, reportedly came to the attention of the party leadership at a 1998 congress in Aubervilliers because he called for moving beyond the struggle for socialism.

Neither the NPA leadership nor Mélenchon, who both emerge from the middle class student movement that developed after the May-June 1968 general strike, represent the workers or socialism. After 1968, both oriented to the newly-formed PS—a reactionary party that defends NATO and the European Union (EU) and pursues vicious austerity against the working class.

If the NPA is criticizing Mélenchon now, it is because the NPA has significant tactical differences with Mélenchon, especially over foreign policy. It fears that his openly anti-Marxist positions expose the PS' entire periphery, NPA included, to attacks from the left and the standpoint of the working class.

The NPA has however made no bones about their rejection of the international working class, the central revolutionary force of classical Marxism.

In a 2013 book reviewing the evolution of postmodernist and anarchist philosophy since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, *Left Hemisphere*, Sorbonne University professor and NPA member Razmig Keucheyan wrote: “The current world, with all its noise, resembles the world in which classical Marxism emerged. In other respects, however, it is very different, above all because of the absence of a clearly identified ‘subject of emancipation.’ The Marxist of the beginning of the last century could count on powerful workers organizations, which they often led, whose activities were supposed to overcome what was then presented as a final crisis of capitalism. Nothing similar exists currently, nor is it likely to exist in the near future.”

Such anti-worker conceptions underlay the formation of the NPA in 2009. Its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), dissolved itself on the basis of an alliance with the PS and an explicit rejection of whatever

symbolic association it retained with Trotskyism.

In 2009, the LCR's platform for the NPA founding congress stated, "The NPA does not claim a specific relation to Trotskyism, but continuity with those who, over the last two centuries, have confronted the system all the way. The NPA is a pluralistic and democratic party. [There was] participation of comrades from various components of the social movement, of the anti-globalization left, of political ecology, of comrades from the PS and the PCF, from the anarchist movement, from the revolutionary left. Without becoming bland, the NPA has everything to win by opening itself even further."

As the WSWS explained at the time, this position was designed to facilitate the NPA's full integration into the orbit of the PS and of French imperialism. It wrote, "The LCR's real target in liquidating itself is, in fact, Trotsky's political heritage: an insistence on the complete political independence of the working class, revolutionary internationalism, and an irreconcilable opposition to collaboration with the bourgeois state, the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies, and all brands of bourgeois nationalism and petty-bourgeois radicalism."

This assessment has been strikingly vindicated since then by the NPA's pro-imperialist policies. It hailed US-NATO wars in Libya and Syria as wars for democracy, promoting CIA- and Al Qaeda-linked Islamist opposition militias as revolutionaries. Like Mélenchon, the NPA supported the promotion of anti-Muslim hysteria in France, backing reactionary bans on headscarves in the public schools and on burqas in public. Also like Mélenchon, the NPA enthusiastically and unconditionally called for a vote for Hollande in 2012.

Both the NPA and Mélenchon hailed Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") when it took power in Greece in January 2015, presenting it as a left-wing government fighting the EU. This was exposed as a political fraud less than half a year later: Syriza capitulated to the EU, imposing savage austerity measures and vast cuts in social spending.

What divides the NPA and Mélenchon is not their attitude to reactionary, anti-working class policies, which both support, but tactical divisions, above all on foreign policy—over how to prosecute and package the policies of French imperialism and of NATO.

These emerged most clearly when the NPA and the PS government sided with the US-NATO intervention in Ukraine, endorsing the fascist-led putsch in Kiev in February 2014 as an uprising for "democracy." The NPA's Russian co-thinkers, the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) even proposed to work with far-right forces on the Maïdan, including Svoboda and the Right Sector, which openly glorify Nazi SS units that participated in the Holocaust.

At the time, the NPA published on-the-spot reports from RSM member Ilya Budraitskis hailing the pro-Nazi Right Sector as pro-democracy revolutionaries. Budraitskis wrote, "Without the ultra-right proponents of a 'national dictatorship' from the Right Sector, there would never have been any barricades on Hrushevskoho or occupied ministries turned into 'headquarters of the revolution.'"

Mélenchon distanced himself from NATO's intervention in Ukraine, however, in line with other French bourgeois politicians, such as Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), who saw it as cutting across French imperialism's traditional relations with Russia. Mélenchon said Russia had the right to take "protective measures against a putschist and adventurist government [in Ukraine], in which neo-Nazis wield political influence."

In subsequent months, forces on Mélenchon's periphery, like traditionally pro-Left Front economist Jacques Sapir, began calling for alliances between Mélenchon, the Left Front and the FN. This set the stage for a turn even further to the right by the Left Front and its largest component party, the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). Amid protests against the PS' anti-worker labor law last year, the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor joined protests by FN-linked police unions, and anti-immigrant marches organized around refugee camps in Calais.

It is no coincidence that the NPA is criticizing Mélenchon as divisions erupt inside NATO and the Trump administration over what policy to pursue towards Russia, and the FN remains poised at the gates of power in the French presidential elections.

Its criticisms reflect a broader debate over global war policy, and over which party should rule France, that is raging inside the ruling class and the political establishment, of which the NPA is an integral part. In terms of its utter hostility to Marxism and the working class, however, the NPA has nothing to learn from Mélenchon.

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