

France: The Rise of the “Left Front”

By [Murray Smith](#)

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The Left Front (*Front de Gauche*) emerged onto the political scene at the beginning of 2009. As the Left Front to Change Europe, it was established by three organizations – the French Communist Party (PCF), the Left Party (*Parti de Gauche*, PG) and the Unitary Left (*Gauche Unitaire*, GU) – with the aim of standing in the European elections of June 2009.

These three organizations were not of anything like equal weight. The Communist Party, though much weakened over the previous 25 years, was nevertheless still a mass party with well over 100,000 members and thousands of elected representatives at every level. More than that, it was an inseparable part of the history of the French workers’ movement, which it had largely contributed to defining. The Left Party was a recent split from the Socialist Party, numbering at the time at most 2000 members. The Unitary Left was even smaller, having left the newly formed New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) just after its founding congress.



Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the Left Party, and a leading candidate of the Left Front.

More important than numbers, however, were what the three organizations represented politically. In addition to being a mass party, the PCF represented the international current that had for decades been linked to the Soviet regime, though it began to take its distance from Moscow in the 1960s and has now pretty thoroughly settled its accounts with Stalinism. The Left Party came from the tradition of French social democracy, its principal leader, Jean-Luc Melenchon, having spent more than 30 years in the Socialist Party and the founding core of activists came from that party. The Unitary Left has its origins in one of the three main Trotskyist organizations in France, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). Never a mass force, the Trotskyist movement, and the LCR in particular, nevertheless had considerable political influence, especially after May-June 1968. So the Left Front brought together from the beginning political forces of different origins.

Prehistory

In what political context did it appear? The prehistory of the Left Front was certainly the mass – and successful – campaign against the European constitutional treaty in the referendum of 2005. The key element on the left was the united campaign involving the PCF, the LCR, the current of Jean-Luc Melenchon in the Socialist Party, and a range of ecologist and alternative left forces, whose emblematic figure was Jose Bove. This campaign was innovative in the way it both brought together different political forces. It would be an understatement to say that there is not exactly a tradition of the PCF conducting joint campaigns with Trotskyists. And while a considerable number of Socialist Party members

publicly opposed the treaty and some campaigned against it in various ways, only Melenchon's current actively took part in the united campaign with the other forces. At the time people spoke of the campaign of the three Bs (Bove, Olivier Besancenot of the LCR and Marie-George Buffet, national secretary of the PCF). The M, however, was just as significant.

The unitary committees formed to conduct the campaign continued to exist afterwards and sought to be the crucible of a united left campaign for the presidential elections of 2007. The attempt was unsuccessful. It would take too long to go into all the details and the responsibilities of the different forces involved, but the outcome was failure and the unedifying spectacle of the competing candidatures of Besancenot, Buffet and Bove.

Out of this sad spectacle, however, emerged one "winner." The LCR ran a dynamic campaign with the very capable and articulate Besancenot, who in the end won more than 4 per cent of the vote, as he had already done in 2002, whereas Buffet and Bove each had less than 2 per cent, as did Arlette Laguiller of *Lutte Ouvriere*, another Trotskyist party.

New Anti-Capitalist Party

On the strength of this result the LCR took the initiative of proposing the creation of a new anti-capitalist party, seeking to channel the combativeness and desire for unity expressed in the campaign. It had a very considerable echo and when the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) was formed in February 2009, it claimed, credibly, to have more than 9000 members, more than three times the forces of the LCR. The NPA was at the time widely perceived to be a broad party and comparisons were made with such formations as the Denmark's Red-Green Alliance and Portugal's Left Bloc. Wrongly, as it turned out, and it started to become obvious very early on. The moves toward building a credible force of the radical left were taking place elsewhere, in the Left Front, and the NPA, rather than contributing to the process, set itself in opposition to it, an orientation for which it would pay a heavy price.

At the beginning of the 2009 European campaign the Left Front was trailing well behind the NPA in the opinion polls. But at the finishing line it got 6.05 per cent in metropolitan France and the NPA 4.88. The difference was not enormous and the NPA failed by a whisker to get a member of the European parliament (MEP), while the Left Front got four. But the significant fact was that the dynamic of the Left Front was accelerating, while the NPA began to falter.

PCF

Let us now look at how the three forces that launched the Left Front got there. For the PCF, the creation of the Left Front was a decisive step in a process that had begun several years before. The party had experienced a long decline from the beginning of the 1980s with several causes, political and social, domestic and international, accelerated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc. From 1994, under the leadership of Robert Hue, the party underwent a process of political and organizational "mutation." Some sort of mutation was certainly needed, but the treatment further weakened the party.

This was reinforced when in 1997 the PCF entered the "plural left" government led by the Socialist Party's Lionel Jospin. Unable to seriously influence a government that remained within the neoliberal consensus, the experience was negative for the PCF, electorally and within its own ranks. When Hue stood as PCF candidate at the 2002 presidential election, he achieved the exploit of being beaten by not one but two Trotskyist candidates. Many PCF members had openly announced their intention of voting for Olivier Besancenot.

At that time no one would have bet much on the survival of the PCF. Its future seemed to lie in gradual social-democratization and satellization by the Socialist Party. Indeed, if Hue had continued to lead it, that is no doubt what would have happened, with splits and fragmentation along the way. Hue himself left the party in 2008 and founded a small group that followed precisely that road. He supported the successful Socialist Party presidential candidate François Hollande this year. Marie-Pierre Vieu, a leading PCF member and former supporter of Hue, recently remarked ironically: "In his great humility, Hue compares himself to Gorbachev and considers that the future of communism is social democracy."

However, Hue was replaced as national secretary in 2001 by Marie-George Buffet, and after the debacle of 2002 the PCF began to reorganize and discuss its future. The first decision was to maintain the party. But that in itself would only have served to slow, but not stop or reverse the party's decline. For that there gradually emerged, under the leadership of Buffet and her successor Pierre Laurent, an orientation that combined a willingness to work with other forces to the left of social democracy, a radical political orientation and an independence from the Socialist Party. It turned out to be a winning combination, and the decline was halted and reversed.

Melenchon

Melenchon, after a brief spell with the Trotskyist OCI in the 1970s, had spent the rest of his political activity in the Socialist Party, in a series of left currents. But after 2002 he began to reconsider his political perspectives. In 2004, he and his supporters took a step that was already putting one foot outside the party. They formed "For a Social Republic" (PRS). This was not an internal current of the PS but a political association or club that intervened both within and outside the Socialist Party and recruited some people who were not members of the PS. There followed the decision to take part in the unitary campaign over the European constitutional treaty. In the movement of committees that tried to find a joint candidate for 2007 Melenchon was present, but was not taken too seriously because he was still in the Socialist Party, though the idea of himself as a unity candidate was floated at one point.

Melenchon was looking for a way out of the Socialist Party, but lacked a credible perspective. The turning point was the evolution of the PCF. In the run-up to its 34th congress in December 2008 there was discussion as to how to formulate the party's willingness to open up to other forces on the left. The initial draft spoke of forming "fronts on the left with personalities." Later, and after discussion with PRS, the words "and organizations" were added. For Melenchon that was important. That meant that the PCF was ready to ally with the party he intended to create, not just to put some ex-Socialist Party members on its lists as individuals. On the PCF side, it needed to be sure that Melenchon would actually break with the PS, and apparently doubted it until the last minute.

Melenchon announced his departure from the Socialist Party on November 6, 2008. He left the PS with essentially the forces of PRS (though some refused to leave), plus the deputy Marc Dolez and a few supporters. But the PRS members were largely experienced political cadres. The rapid creation of the Left Party was criticized by some who thought Melenchon should have taken time to discuss with and regroup broader forces.

But the decision was probably right. The fact that a new political force existed acted as a force of attraction, for existing Socialist Party members and former members, for former supporters of Jean-Pierre Chevenement and for people who had never been in the Socialist

Party. The party grew quite rapidly to around 2000 members. A significant addition to the party came a year later with the entry of Greens deputy Martine Billard and her supporters. This reinforced and made more credible the ecological dimension of the Left Party.

UNIR current forms Unitary Left

A parallel process occurred with the principal minority of the LCR. One of its main leaders, Christian Picquet, had been part of the majority leadership of the LCR until 1999, when there was a recomposition of alliances within the party. He had been responsible for relations with other parties and as such had established good relations with the PCF and in particular those of its members who were the most open to working with the far left. As the LCR moved toward the orientation that would eventually lead to the NPA, Picquet became a leader of the UNIR current, which continued a dialogue with other forces including both the PCF and PRS. UNIR also began to recruit outside the LCR, often ex-members. Within the LCR it represented just under 30 per cent in 2003.

The dynamic of the NPA led many LCR members who were critical of the leadership to go along with it. Only about 15 per cent of delegates at the congress where the LCR dissolved itself opposed the majority position by proposing a broad alliance for the European elections. Subsequently Picquet and a group of leading members of the ex-LCR left and formed the Unitary Left. They were not the whole of the UNIR current, perhaps not even a majority, but they were sure that a Left Front would be formed and were determined to be part of it. Subsequent events vindicated the choice, but at the time it was far from guaranteed that the Left Front would make the breakthrough that it did.

Electoral Success

From 2009 on the Left Front went from success to success electorally. It was not a smooth, seamless progression but involved debates and choices. When the 2010 campaign for the regional elections loomed, the PCF consulted its members on the course to follow, via regional conferences and then a vote of all party members. In five regions the choice was to ally with the Socialist Party from the first round. In the 17 others it was to pursue the strategy of the Left Front, as the party leadership proposed. In the five pro-PS regions dissident PCF members allied with the Left Party and others to present unofficial Left Front lists.

It is worth comparing the 2010 campaign with the elections of 2004, when 14 regions chose a first round alliance with the Socialist Party. Among those who did not was the Parisian region where Buffet led a list that was genuinely open, with non-PCF candidates who were really independent, not just fellow travellers. It was a harbinger of things to come, and it was successful. But the evolution between 2004 and 2010 did not take place without discussion; party members had to be convinced of the new orientation. The success of the 2009 campaign helped.

After success in the regional elections and in local elections in 2011 the Left Front had to face up to the big test, the presidential election of 2012. First of all it was necessary to define and plan the campaign. The choice of candidate was not the least important. Over and above Melenchon's personal qualities, which largely contributed to the success of the campaign, there was the fact that he was not a PCF member. If the candidate had been a PCF member, given the weight of the party and the fact that it had 80 per cent of the candidates in the legislative elections, the Left Front would have appeared as simply as a

front for the PCF. As it was it appeared as a front of which the PCF was part, a big part, but that there were other forces. The difference was important, and the vote of PCF members by a 60 per cent majority to accept Melenchon as candidate was a decisive step.

As with the elections in 2009, the only comparison could be with the previous results of the PCF, the only part of the Left Front that existed before, and in each of those years, in those terms, progress was made. But in 2012 just doing better than Buffet's 1.93 per cent in 2007 would hardly do. Or even equalling or slightly surpassing Besancenot's scores. The ambition of the Left Front was not to be a protest force. It was to constitute a new force on the left, one that could eventually contest the hegemony of the Socialist Party. For that the Left Front fixed the objective of reaching double figures, and with 11 per cent they attained it.

2012 Elections

The subsequent legislative elections were something of a disappointment. After the second round the Left Front had 10 MPs, as against 19 before the elections. This was clearly not a good result, but it was not as bad as one might think by just looking at the seats lost. In comparison with the results of the Communist Party in the 2007 elections there was a gain of around 600,000 votes, which is not so bad. But the result came as a shock to the Left Front. It had been widely expected that on the strength of the result of the presidential election not only would it keep its seats but win more. The figure of 30 seats was considered a reasonable objective.

So what happened? In the first place there was what might be called the objective factor of bi-polarization. There was a strong drive by left voters to give Hollande a good working majority. Whereas 30 per cent of Hollande's voters in April 22 first round are estimated to have hesitated between him and Melenchon, 38 per cent of Melenchon's voters voted Socialist Party in June 10 second round. However, there were also weaknesses on the part of the Left Front. In the presidential campaign, which was a national campaign par excellence, the difference in program between the Left Front and the Socialist Party was very clear. The legislative campaign was of course a national campaign, but it was also a sum of more than 500 local campaigns. And it appears that the central, national aspect was not sufficiently emphasised and that the case was not sufficiently made as to why it was necessary to have a strong group of Left Front MPs and not just a presidential majority in general. This was particularly necessary given that the first measures of the Socialist Party government led by Jean-Marc Ayrault were well received on the left – 70 per cent of Left Front voters were fairly satisfied with them and 23 per cent very satisfied.

It should also be underlined that the electoral system, one of the most undemocratic in Western Europe, completely distorts the relationship between votes and seats. With proportional representation the PCF would have had 25 seats in 2007 and the Left Front 40 in 2012. Today the Socialist Party would have less than a third of the seats in parliament, as against more than half. When we look at the Left Front results in terms of votes the picture looks brighter. Compared to the PCF in 2007, the Left Front progressed in 90 per cent of the constituencies in metropolitan France. In 330 it scored more than 5 per cent (135 in 2007). In 69 constituencies the score of the Left Front was between 10 and 20 per cent (37 in 2007). In 26 out of the 95 departments in metropolitan France the score in 2012 was more than double that in 2007 and in eight it more than tripled. However, at the top end of the scale the number of constituencies where the score was over 20 per cent fell slightly from 23 to 20, thus not reversing a long-term trend.

As the historian Roger Martelli put it in an analysis of the first round, the foundations are becoming stronger, but the roof is fragile. You don't need to be an architect to know that that is better than the other way around (which was the tendency before). But that's a long-term view and in the short term seats were lost. However, they were mostly narrowly lost. Less than 5000 votes, distributed in the right places, would have secured six more MPs, mostly the sitting ones who were defeated despite their vote rising by between 2 and 4 per cent compared to 2007 – but the Socialist Party vote rose more.

Following on the legislative elections the PCF took a decision on whether to participate in the Ayrault government. Whereas the other components of the Left Front had made it clear during the campaign that they would not go into government with the Socialist Party, the PCF had always said that it would take its decision after the legislative elections. However it was pretty clear what the decision would be for anyone listening to what PCF leaders were saying during the campaign.

The SP was not going to modify its program to accommodate the Left Front and the PCF was not going to go into government to apply the program of the Socialist Party. The only thing worth noting was the scale of the refusal. At a PCF National Council meeting on June 18, 2012, a three-point resolution was adopted. The first point stressed the importance of taking political initiatives and mobilising to impose radical policies. Second, it was decided that the conditions did not exist for the PCF to take part in the government, though leaving open the possibility that these conditions could change in the future. Third, the continuation and reinforcement of the strategy of the Left Front was reaffirmed. The resolution was adopted by 93 for, 11 against and 17 abstentions. A consultative vote of party members in their branches on June 18-19 produced a majority of 93.44 per cent. The final decision was taken by 500 delegates at a national conference on June 20, with four against and 16 abstentions.

Where Next?

Where does the Left Front go from here? It is faced with a number of challenges. First of all, there are no more elections until 2014. It will therefore have to act and build its forces and support through extra-parliamentary mobilizations. The circumstances in which it will have to do this are those of a left government with a solid majority in the National Assembly (less solid in the Senate, where it depends on the Left Front). Obviously no one expects Francois Hollande to conduct an anti-capitalist policy. He wasn't elected to do that. But he was elected to break with Sarkozyism and take measures in favour of working people.

In fact he is trying to conduct a policy where there will be some austerity for working people but also to repeal or modify Sarkozy's measures, raise taxes on the rich and seek to protect employment. He is much criticized for this, both by employers' circles in France and internationally. So far he has sometimes wobbled; he has certainly not done enough, but not completely capitulated.

But he has capitulated on one thing. He has not succeeded in renegotiating the treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) and he is nevertheless proposing to have it ratified by parliament in September 2012. In this he is not only going back on his electoral promise, he is making a stick for his own back. He is giving the European Commission the right to exert pressure on his budget. And that is important in a situation where Hollande and his government will be subject to all sorts of pressure from European institutions, from other national governments, from the markets to get into line, to carry out labour reforms, pension reforms and cuts in the public sector – the well-worn litany. Some people in the

Socialist Party will relay this pressure, some will resist it.

How should the Left Front act now? Carefully. The odds are that as time passes, the Hollande government will gradually cede to the pressures and get into line, and the Left Front will have to oppose that. But announcing today that it will be a left opposition to Hollande, as some on the far left do, is not the answer. The danger in the present situation is that the Socialist Party government will disillusion and anger its supporters and the right will come back in 2017, as it did in 1986, 1993 and 2002. And it will be a very dangerous right wing, closer to the extreme right. The Left Front cannot necessarily stop the drift of the Socialist Party. But it can oppose it from the left and not just oppose but systematically present the outlines of a left alternative. That implies being lucid as to the Socialist Party's limits, but ready to support any move in a left direction and only to move into sharp opposition as it becomes clearly (to many of those who voted for Hollande) necessary. Let us recall the figures already quoted: 30 per cent of those who voted for Hollande on April 22 hesitated about voting for Melenchon; 38 per cent of those who voted for Melenchon on April 22 voted Socialist Party on June 10.

That shows that there is a large body of opinion between the hard-core support of the Left Front and the Socialist Party, enough to shift the balance of forces on the left, one way or another. Indeed, within the PS itself there is a left current of about 22 deputies led by Benoit Hamon who may decide to vote against the fiscal pact, as did 23 SPD deputies with whom they are in contact. It would be unwise to have too many illusions there, but would be equally wrong to write them off in advance.

An indication of the tactical choices facing the Left Front is given by how it votes in parliament. When there was a vote of confidence in the Ayrault government, the choice was to abstain – no overall confidence, but not frontal opposition. As the government now presents a much revised (compared to the preceding government's) budget for the remainder of 2012, particularly concerning taxes on companies and wealthy individuals, the Left Front parliamentarians are voting for it, while pointing to the contradiction of adopting the fiscal pact. When the pact comes before parliament, the vote will certainly be against.

Organization

The other problem for the Left Front is how it will organize itself. The original three components have now grown to eight. They include the ex-Chevenementists of Republic and Socialism, the Federation for a Social and Ecological Alternative (FASE), and two currents from the NPA – Convergence and Alternative and the Anticapitalist Left. The first broke away after the regional elections and the 2011 NPA congress and involved mostly people already critical of the leadership. The second has only just joined the Left Front and involves about half of the leadership that led the process of dissolving the LCR and founding the NPA.

One challenge is to get all these components working harmoniously together. The other is what to do with the not inconsiderable number of people who support the Left Front and would join it individually if it were possible. That would be a step forward, but a big step. It is one thing to organize individual supporters during an election campaign, as was done. It is another to say that what began as a cartel of organizations will now have individual members. But calls for this are being made and it might happen.

Of course, the simplest thing would be for the Left Front to become a party. But that would be a huge step and it seems clear that most members of the PCF in particular are not ready

for that. It might also be difficult to reconcile the different ways of functioning of the PCF and the Left Party. But things can evolve. Speaking of the process that is underway of transforming Greece's SYRIZA coalition into a party, now supported by an overwhelming majority, party spokesperson Panos Skourletis remarked that "the crisis has changed all political parties, and things that would have once taken decades to achieve come to fruition much more quickly." Let us hope it will not take decades for the Left Front to become a party, but if it happens, it will certainly take more than a few months.

Left Criticism

In the criticisms of the Left Front by the NPA and others, in France and internationally, we find characterizations that range from it being "left reformist" and "anti-liberal" (hence not anti-capitalist) to "institutional." This is essentially sterile and designed to draw a line of demarcation, implying that those who make such criticisms are themselves the real revolutionaries and anti-capitalists.

"A revolutionary party is not a party which is for the revolution, it is a party which has a program and a strategy for making the revolution. "

Guillaume Liegard, a leading member of the NPA and now of the Anticapitalist Left group wrote last year, in a contribution to the debate on strategy in the NPA, that "a revolutionary party is not a party which is for the revolution, it is a party which has a program and a strategy for making the revolution. It is an understatement to say that it is quite presumptuous of us to think that we have those two things."

Liegard is quite clearly right, and what he says punches a hole in the idea that there are "strategic differences" between the NPA and the Left Front. If you do not have a strategy how can you have strategic differences? You can of course have concrete differences; you can also have ideological generalizations and preconceptions which do not take you very far.

Does the Left Front itself have a worked-out strategy and a program? Not at this stage. But it has a definite anti-capitalist objective and a practice that combines electoral campaigns and work in representative institutions with extra-parliamentary mobilizations, seeking to combine the two, and it can evolve further. It will be judged now by its ability to face up to the challenges in the new political situation. The first test will be to see how strong a campaign can be waged against the signing of the fiscal pact.

Lastly, the Left Front is part of a process of a new rise of the radical left in Europe. It is uneven, there are difficulties in Germany and Italy, for example, and successes in Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands and above all Greece, as well as in France. But the overall trend is positive, the contacts are regular, particularly through the European Left Party, and people follow and analyse what is happening elsewhere. That, as well as the effects of the ongoing European crisis, can serve to accelerate the process. •

Murray Smith is a member of the anti-capitalist party Dei Lenk (The Left) in Luxembourg. This article first appeared on the [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) website.

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