On tactics in the French municipal elections

[threecolumns]How fragile the Left Front (Front de Gauche) still is has been shown by the municipal elections and the tactical disagreements between the two main participating organisations. We know that the Communist Party (PCF) has advocated – and arranged – local electoral alliances with the Socialist Party (PS) wherever some basis for an agreement made that possible. So they are going for an electoral bloc with the SP, not general and national, but arranged case-by-case as local opportunities permit. The Left Party (Parti de Gauche) on the other hand rejected even a local alliance with the PS from the outset on the basis that it was incompatible with the very justified criticisms the Left Front as a whole has made of the policies of the PS government.

This disagreement has baffled many workers, who expected the Left Front to present clear, united slogans. They feel handicapped by this – to say the least – difference of approach between the main forces in this coalition, which is why it is absolutely vital to examine this disagreement with a view to clarifying what it means and finding a way forward for working people.

What is the Left Front?

We Marxists, we have to say, are not at all surprised by the ongoing disagreements at the heart of the Left Front. Yes, we believe that this front is the first fruits of a genuine attempt to re-build the revolutionary party of the working class, and we are totally part of, but we are still at the very beginning of this process. So, unlike comrades who see this as already the finished form of working class political representation, we think that the Left Front is only a first,

promising sketch which has still got a long way to go to fulfil its real mission. It is not united; its class character is still ill-defined; in its composition, Marxists rub shoulders with non-Marxists, consistent revolutionaries with non-revolutionaries, and so forth.

We still have a long way to go to achieve the revolutionary Marxist workers' party the working class and all working people need. The way may be longer or shorter, more or less painful and difficult and strewn with disagreements and crises, and the progress needed will consist in overcoming these in a positive way. We cannot anticipate everything that will happen along the way, but we can be quite certain that it will be punctuated with disagreements and crises, and what we are currently experiencing is the first manifestation of this.

In general, two exaggerated views of the character of the Left Front can quite often be found among activists clearly situated to the left of the PS – trade unionists, communists and ex-communists and various tendencies which claim adherence to this or that brand of Trotskyism, not to mention all kinds of anarchists. This is hardly surprising, given the present prohibition that has been placed upon Marxist thinking, which has been widely repudiated and suffered recurrent distortion and falsification. The first is to categorically reject the Left Front on the basis of an abstract formalism and professorial pedantry, which sees this re-groupment only as a non-Marxist formation and conglomerate of former social democrat or Stalinist survivors, a formation discredited by the compromised pasts of its various components from a really bygone age. This sectarianism is insensitive and indifferent to the specific forms taken by the powerful dynamics of working class resistance, under the constant attacks from capital at bay that plague it. This view is typical of the tradition of certain organisations claiming adherence to Trotskyism, such as the Lambertist POI (Parti ouvrier internationaliste), "Lutte Ouvrière" and a large part of the

New Anti-Capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, NPA) and milieus they influence.

The other, opposite, exaggeration assumes that this Left Front – or one of its components – already is the ready-made, finished version of this party the working class so badly needs, which will start to function better as its it grows (occasionally at the expense of the other protagonists). Sadly it seems to me the overwhelming majority of the participating organisations' leaders share this position with many of their members. One of the drawbacks of such of view is that it cannot grasp the way differences and misunderstandings blow up, however much they are to be expected in a movement that is actually still being build. It sees such things as aberrations disturbing and threatening the smooth functioning of the whole. Consequently, such disagreements provoke a rigid, paralysing blockage which freezes the contradictions and prevents a positive outcome.

Under these conditions, the division over the two different electoral tactics which has hit the Left Front reinforce and accentuate the organisation's overall weaknesses, one of which (there are others) is the evident inconsistency with which the two organisations each pursue their own tactical choices, as we shall see shortly. This, too, reveals that neither the Left Front nor any of its components is yet ready to be considered this new revolutionary party of the proletariat. We all hope it will succeed in making the necessary adjustments. A decisive step towards that goal consists precisely in passing the present test, positively clarifying the difference and overcoming it as a step forward in achieving greater revolutionary cohesion. And this is the solution to which we hope our thoughts and comments will contribute. The first of these is to define the significance of municipal elections in the current struggle and the role they could play.

Contradictions in an unprecedented situation

The unremitting attacks on the part of exhausted, moribund capital; the fragility of the internal contradictions racking the bourgeoisie's classical political resources, including above all the presence of the Socialist Party at the helm and managing the bourgeoisie's bankruptcy; the crushing weight of successive defeats and setbacks the workers' movement has suffered: all this confers on the current stage an exceptional specific character. This exceptional character leaves its stamp on events and movements, including the municipal elections. It is further accentuated by a growing tendency among working people to defend themselves vigorously while at the same time having difficulty picking their way forward through the lumber of bankrupt ideologies and organisations under the mantle of the workers' movement, surrounded as they are by deadly traps. But it is this, even subterranean, resistance which feeds and renews and reinforces their attempts to rebuild their fighting potential, above all their party. These are the specific features which determine the current situation and prevent us from considering the coming elections according to schemas and clichés we got used to over past decades.

That is why all views and conceptions that see these elections in the traditional way as a sort of joust between two parties in a tournament miss the essential point. They lose sight of the probable character of these elections as a moment expressing a certain shift or re-alignment of class forces that re-draws the political map of the country.

Even the bourgeois parties and Hollande's Socialist Party are afraid of such a possibility and do not know which Saints to pray to for intercession or how save themselves from the National Front (Front National, FN). They do not fear the Left Front because it is split – and that in itself is a serious warning sign. Unlike everyone else, we Marxists do not see these elections, in this situation, as the usual competition, but as a potential opportunity for the Left Front to make a

big, extra, step forward towards becoming this new party of the working class. And in this the choice of tactics can play a bigger role than in a calmer, less tense, “normal” times.

On the respective content of the two tactics

The Communist Party tactic, which sets its sights on an alliance with the socialists anywhere and everywhere they can, is undoubtedly closer both to the situation and its requirements. It finds backing along a whole wave of critical sources of resentment among socialist activists against government policies which feed various oppositions within this party. Moreover, it has already inspired a number of planned or actual local agreements which have actually had an impact on the government’s arrangements. It could potentially be an effective way of driving a wedge between the government and a section of its party, opening the way to a broader oppositional realignment.

On the other hand, the main problem with the Left Party’s position of rejecting any local alliances with socialist activists is that they see the Socialist Party as one united, homogenous bloc. Against all the evidence, they deny that there is any permanent friction and internal opposition in this party. So, instead of relying on that, they cement this explosively refractory whole together under the leadership of Hollande and co.

Whether or not the competing partners in the enterprise even realise it, differences over tactics also involve different conceptions of or approaches to how effective the Left Front actually is. The Left Front clearly derives its tactics from two profoundly mistaken assessments, both unacknowledged, but all the more deeply held for that.

On the one hand, it is assumed that the Left Front is more or less the fully-fledged and recognised new party of working people, ready to take power and needing only to grow

numerically. Too bad if others continue to support other parties or vote for the Socialist Party, even without illusions. Despite popular belief, there are still a lot of them, and even more who turn their back on the SP and do not necessarily go to the Left Front (or the Left Party), but at "best" simply abstain.

Not a million miles from this unrealistic view, on the other hand, the Left Party imagines it can achieve power by increasing its vote. But it is very hard to see that happening, even for a political formation which does not challenge the capitalist system itself and the measures it is taking to survive. But the orientation and basic line of march of the Left Front go clearly beyond this system. So the majority of its demands are incompatible with keeping the system going and even more with the present desperate attempts to maintain it. This relationship entails a major and permanent confrontation which means there has to be a serious investigation and study of the conditions for this conflict and how to wage it.

What do the lessons of history tell us?

To get a clearer assessment, not just of how inadequate it is to plan a direct raid on power, but also of the many dangers that entails, we need to turn to the past of the Marxist workers' movement, which provides abundant theoretical and practical experiences on this topic. (That is, assuming you really want to replace the power of the bourgeoisie rather than simply amend it.) Here we can only indicate some essential references, without developing the whole topic fully.

The Second Congress of Lenin's Third International opened fire on sectarianism, that "infantile disorder of communism" and twin brother of opportunism. Then in 1923 the Third Congress broadened this struggle into a vigorous campaign against ultra-leftism, working out communist tactics for winning the

majority of working people. In its “Theses on Tactics” it talked of the conviction that “(t)he theory of promoting Communism by propaganda and agitation alone … has been proved utterly incorrect”. It goes on to insist that: “Even the smallest Parties should not limit themselves to propaganda and agitation. The Communists must act as the vanguard in every mass organisation. By putting forward a militant programme urging the proletariat to fight for its basic needs, they can show the backward and vacillating masses the path to revolution and demonstrate how all parties other than the Communists are against the working class. Only by leading the *concrete struggles* of the proletariat and by taking them forward will the Communists really be able to win the broad proletarian masses …” (www.marxist.org/history/international/comintern/3rd-congress/tactics.htm)

Already the Third International explained the need to establish a whole “system of” partial “demands” in order to engage in this struggle, which was later developed by Trotsky in the famous Transitional Programme of the Fourth International. These Theses very clearly outlined the character of these “partial demands” which “… in their totality, challenge the power of the bourgeoisie, organise the proletariat and mark out the different stages of the struggle for its dictatorship. Even before the broad masses consciously understand the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat, they can respond to each of the individual demands.”

The majority of the Third International followed Lenin, who in many speeches and articles severely criticised the so-called “theory of the offensive” which several young communist parties had adopted. Lenin emphasised the central importance of preparing the seizure of power. In his speech to the Congress he criticised the Italian, Terracini, who “defended the theory of an offensive, pointing out ‘dynamic tendencies’ and the ‘transition from passivity to activity’,” which, said

Lenin, “are all phrases the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries had used against us”. Later he added: “If it is said that we were victorious in Russia in spite of not having a big party, that only proves that those who say it have not understood the Russian revolution and that they have absolutely no understanding of how to prepare for a revolution.”

Speaking of the need to win the masses, Lenin explained: “The concept of “masses” undergoes a change so that it implies the majority, and not simply a majority of the workers alone, but the majority of all the exploited. Any other kind of interpretation is impermissible for a revolutionary … what is essential … is not only the majority of the working class … but also the majority of the working and exploited rural population”. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jun/12.htm#s3).

Then the Fourth Congress’s “Theses on the United Front” in 1921 rounded out this tactic, which had actually been prevalent from the very beginning of the Third International. They stated that “The Communist Parties of the world … are now trying at every opportunity to achieve the broadest and fullest possible unity of these masses in practical activity.” They emphasised that the reformists “… will not fail to sell out … the … Communists and the revolutionary elements of the … working class must still approach the reformists before the start of every mass strike, revolutionary demonstration or any other spontaneous mass action, asking them to support the workers’ initiative, and must sys-tematically expose the reformists when they refuse to support the revolutionary struggle of the workers. This will prove the easiest way to win the masses of workers who are outside the Party.” (http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/united-front.htm)

Contrary to popular belief, this proletarian united front policy is a general and permanent tactic, not just a policy

applied from time to time in the face of dangers like, say, the threat of fascism. (Albeit that today in France such a threat, represented by the clear advances the Front National is making, is perfectly real). It is an integral part of the arsenal of any workers' party worthy of the name at every point in its struggle to win over a majority of proletarians.

I already mentioned that in the 1930s Trotsky developed this tactic, among other things by elaborat-ing these "partial demands" in the *Transitional Programme*. At the same time he advanced the united front tactic, particularly in the trade unions and in the socialist parties of the time.

But it is important to emphasise also the less well-known fact that about the same time the Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci, imprisoned in a fascist goal, largely contributed to developing this same tactical orientation. Of course the fact that he was in prison, which cut him off from all political activity, explains the more "philosophical" character of his studies and arguments, less linked to immediate practise and less concretised than Trotsky's. But what they thereby lose in political freshness, they gain in depth of generalisation. Be that as it may, Trotsky's and Gramsci's ana-lyses support and complement each other in bringing out and explaining the tactics of the proletar-ian party.

In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci also took as his starting point the rich heritage of Lenin's International. Even before he was imprisoned, these same considerations led him to oppose the adventurist policy of the so-called "Third Period" of the Stalinist Third International through the famous "Lyons Theses" (1926) of the Italian Communist Party, based on these principles and clearly orientated to-wards the conquest of the masses against the adventurist ultra-left offensive of the Stalinist Comintern. In the years when he was writing the *Prison Notebooks*, he developed these views into a great theoretical whole dealing with the conquest of power. Without looking at the whole scope of this important theoretical

elaboration, one can summarise its essence as follows.

Starting from Lenin's thoughts on the more difficult conditions for the seizure of power in highly-developed western countries compared with backward countries such as Russia had been, Gramsci came to the conclusion that in the west the bourgeois state, supported and reinforced by a whole range of institutions and movements, is infinitely more robust than in less-developed countries such as Tsarist Russia. Consequently, instead of a quick, direct and offensive "war of movement" like the Russian Revolution, the western proletariat, in its struggle for power, needed to develop a whole tenacious and patient "war of position" to achieve a winning majority. As Gramsci wrote late in 1930: "It seems to me that Ilitch (Lenin) understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West … That is what the formula of the United Front seems to me to mean" (*Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Hoare and Nowell-Smith, London 2003, pp. 237-8).

(The impression this gives that the united front policy had not been applied in Russia is probably due to a lack of precision in Gramsci's formulation quoted, but does not correspond to his thought in general.)

This brief foray into the heritage of Lenin's Third International, as taken up and developed and re-fined by Trotsky and Gramsci when faced with the whole Stalinist degeneration, much discredits the ultra-leftism in which Stalinism frequently indulged. Even today a number of organisations tend to follow this bad tradition, popularised by Stalinist adventurism, rather than the traditions of Marxist theory and experience. Reading this, one could of course object that neither the Left Front as a whole nor its various separate organisations are Marxist parties inspired by Lenin's ideas, nor do they claim to be. And that is precisely

why I started this article by talking about shortcomings and inadequacy when it comes to the development of the Left Front as the new, re-built workers' party.

Let's assess recent experiences

In fact the Left Front, too, has sufficient experience of its own in this field to draw some valuable conclusions. Its involvement, and the vote it got, in the 2012 general election provide us with some useful lessons.

The spectacular results the Left Front had previously achieved in the presidential election testified to a rapid and unexpected development. This is very likely the reason why Jean-Luc Melanchon decided to take on the Front National leader in Pas de Calais all on his own outside of any alliance, although that did look more like a personal challenge than a politically-considered attempt to win a valuable seat in the National Assembly. After all, the whole political atmosphere seemed to encourage a bold approach.

Sadly, the election results dashed these hopes, revealing that what had looked like confidence was only illusion. From a closer look at the voting figures, we can draw some conclusions which corrobo-rate the theoretical and practical lessons of history.

The Socialist Party candidate, Philippe Kemel, won the seat with 50.11%, a mere 116 votes ahead of Marine Le Pen with 49.89%. So it was very close. Melanchon could only manage third place with 21.48%, less than half of Le Pen's vote, escaping by a whisker a real political fiasco.

Since 40% of the voters abstained, that outcome really is terrible, but it does help us to get a clearer grasp of why the Left Front was routed. The very high level of abstentions shows that, while a great number of working people have lost confidence in the traditional left parties, they are still far from won over by the new Left Front formation. In any case, in

Pas de Calais the Socialist Party was able to keep the support of clearly more of them than the Left Front could win over.

Since then, the only change in the situation is that confidence in the Socialist Party is falling even faster, although that has still not nearly become the mass development the Left Front anticipated. The fact that this development is marking time has not escaped the attention of bourgeois journalists, to their unconcealed satisfaction. The problem is, this is not simply Schadenfreude arising from our opponents' habitual class instincts.

For example, one of the organisations which has joined the Left Front is the "United Left" ("Gauche Unitaire", made up of former members of the LCR), who have also criticised the Left Party's "go-it-alone" tactics. The party spokesperson, Christian Picquet, openly deplored them in an article evocatively entitled "For a united Left Front that can rally everybody together". Here he roundly states that: "… over the last 18 months the Left Front has not managed to extend the influence that it has gained … it is even obliged to register a certain stagnation, expressing the problems we obviously have in coming across as a credible claimant to office". This stark assessment entirely coincides with our own observations above, including the fact that this "stagnation" started with the election cam-paign in Pas de Calais.

Before going on, we should remember, in relation to just that critical assessment by comrade Picquet, the argument most commonly-used against the PCF's tactics and consequently against our own conception of the need for local alliances with socialists. This is that it "would break up the posi-tive dynamic of struggle" engendered by the Left Front in the Presidential elections. But this "argument" is based on an illusion. On the one hand it is clear that the "dynamic" referred to, if it still exists at all, has faded considerably, as the general election showed and various mass actions have con-firmed. On the other hand, it is precisely in

order to lend new dynamism to the struggle that the Left Front needs to get out of the sort of ghetto into which, defying hopes and expectations, it has been shunted in the course of these elections shunted. Undeniably, comrade Picquet's main concern is to make up for lost time by applying the correct tactics in the municipal elections.

He starts the article by saying: "I wish neither to abstain from the debate on what is at stake in the municipal elections nor to add fuel to a controversy in which *Le Monde* has seen … a Left Front on the brink of imploding. But rather to develop the idea that it is a complicated political problem re-lated more to the considerable challenges involved in the period confronting us today than to any electoral calculations, which seem all the narrower for focusing on next March's municipal polls."

This is a prudent and quite timid way of declaring what is actually a criticism, even if comrade Picquet has carefully wrapped it up in a series of mental reservations as if oddly compelled to justify and excuse himself. But nobody gains from waffling about developing "the idea that it is a complicated political problem" instead of tackling the subject head-on. A criticism should be clear and pre-cise if it is going to be useful and effective.

Fortunately, comrade Picquet soon sheds his customary oblique way of talking. He calls on the Left Front to go beyond being a mere radical opposition to urgently set out "to win over sections of the left" and, in an evocative sub-heading, to "Make a move towards the rest of the left". Here he rightly states: "… there is now a majority on the left that can be won for a change of course, we should aim for the broadest possible re-groupment". One can only applaud this aim of re-grouping a broader left in the course of the municipal elections.

Laudable as this questioning of the tactic of standing in the

elections alone is, however, it stops half way. For one thing because, like absolutely all the groups involved, it, too, is narrowly confined to the elections, and the opportunity to grasp a lever to broaden support is seen only in that context. And for another because, for the same reason, correct as it is, it remains at the mere level of a simple good intention, even if we do see that comrade Picquet, too, feels the need for something more concrete than just a proposal for some vague broadening out. That is why he adds: "… unity cannot be separated from the bold project for transformation … which is at the same time the condition for working class confidence that it can once again find its strength". Sadly, entirely valid as it is, this proposal is too hazy, general, unclear and laconic to be taken up.

Political wavering and inconsistent positions

It must be said: the two main parties in the Left Front do not only define their tactics differently, they also apply them in inconsistent and contradictory ways. Although it looks like an opening to healthy forces in the PS, the political line of the Communist Party is not obviously any more than the usual kind of electoral manoeuvre. Instead of being an opening through which working people's struggle can flourish, it is locked even tighter into the strait-jacket of electoral games.

In negotiating these deals, the Communist Party seems to have abandoned any more radical de-mands and content itself with getting together with SP activists who had already decided to shift the government over certain things. In all this horse trading the Communist Party muffled its drums and behaved as the supplicants. It is characteristic that they held these talks in private, sometimes even behind the backs of the Left Party. All that explains the enormous restraint and exceptionally moderate character – in relation to what the government is doing – of these programmatic agree-ments.

But what completely devalued and debased these negotiations is

that when they were carried out, the working people concerned were totally excluded, not allowed to participate and not even told. But any political agreements, and the negotiations leading up to them, should be carried out in full view of working people and with their actual participation. The bureaucratic secrecy surrounding these talks reduced them to complicity between office-holders. It is a leaden heritage of Stalinism which the Communist Party obviously finds it hard to shake off.

Even if this is not the same, and not as bad, as the "Marchais-Mitterrand agreement" a few years ago, this way of turning to SP activists is a bureaucratic habit which compromises any opening to-wards these activists and makes a caricature of it. It is, then, hardly surprising that it offended their partners in the Left Party and strengthened comrade Melanchon's obstinate determination to per-sist in his line that we saw earlier. (Since then, PCF tactics have even lost their only real justification, i.e. their determination to ally themselves only with local socialists more or less opposed to the government. Specifically, in Lyons they entered a rotten alliance with one of Hollande's worst supporters, the PS mayor, Collomb. This was despite several of their own candidates, faced with this right-wing mayor, linking up with the local Left Party. So it turns out that rather than adopting a correct tactic to break the SP line-up behind Hollande's policies, the bureaucratic local government forces in the CP are actually renewing their unprincipled tactic of allying with the SP government.)

But it would be an unforgivable mistake to imagine that some sort of rigid last-ditch stand involving an ultra-left blockage is a viable alternative to this lashed-together alliance the PCF has opted for, or its capitulation.

We have already said that the Left Party sees the Socialist Party as one uniform bloc, lost for all time. Their contempt extends to all party members, who are identified with the

government, and goes so far as to refuse to even describe them as “socialists”, instead superciliously (and childishly) calling them “solférénians” (The SP headquarters are in the rue Solférino in Paris – Trs.)

But before even going into the obvious shortcomings of such a view, it is worth emphasising that a summary position of this sort presumes that the Left Party (or the Left Front) can double its influence and take power on its own, standing against all the activists who have stayed in other parties, including the SP. What few experiences we have contradict any such belief, even though it is this belief that has seized the minds of the party leadership. Despite its programme, which opposes aus-terity on behalf of working people, and despite its members’ will and obstinate determination to convince workers that their programme is right, the Left Front is, as comrade Picquet explained, marking time. Having reached a certain threshold in its development, it is not managing to get over the critical point to achieve the greater dimension that is needed.

Obviously this has to do with a serious shortcoming in the methods chosen and carried out by the Left Party, particularly their desire to convince everybody by propaganda that their policy, and it alone, is the correct one. They are obviously convinced that all you have to do is present the truth, for it to be not only accepted but, above all, put into practice by working people. The party is particularly convinced of the effectiveness of this propagandism because comrade Melanchon’s oratical talents really did facilitate their spectacular early progress.

But even the greatest charm or powers of seduction are no substitute for a right method and correct political behaviour. It is time to recognise superstitions for what they are and settle accounts with this magic of the spoken word, which still seems to mesmerise certain activists and their leaders. As we all know, at the last CGT (trade union confederation)

congress, Comrade Melanchon got more applause than the secretary, Thierry Lapaon. Nevertheless, it is the latter's proposals that count among CGT activists, not comrade Melanchon's (more correct) ones. And while, at a meeting of the Parisian members of the PCF, more than 40% of those present voted for a united Left Front cam-paign and only 57% voted for alliances with the SP, people who use that as an argument against the electoral tactics of an opening to the SP members forget the practical realities. Of course this is a significant vote, as an indication, and it would be a mistake to under-estimate its scope. But an indication of sympathy, even a serious one, remains an indication, and cannot replace one policy with another. The PCF members who voted for an electoral alliance with Melanchon nevertheless unhesitatingly apply the opposite policy decided by their leadership. There was not even the shadow of a tendency crystallising inside the PCF, not to mention organised opposition. As for members leaving that party and joining the Left Party, not even comrade Melanchon dreams of that.

Of course the Left Party also feels how limited its forces are and it proved that by its attempts, contradicting its own policy of standing on its own, to find allies in the elections. It reached electoral agreements with ecologists in various towns. We have to call that flagrant political inconsistency, even before we say anything about its content or significance. One the one hand, what they did went against their tactic of standing on their own and their criticism of the PCF for doing just that, and, above all, on the other, while they criticised the CP for its alliance with one governing party, the Left Party made overtures to another party in the same government.

So the wheel turned full circle. You have to conclude that the Left Party not only stands on the same wheeler-dealing electoral terrain as all the other parties, but also hopes to win over a few ecologists this time using the accustomed

method of sterile propagandism. But that method is even now showing itself to be ineffective. Eva Joly may have expressed sympathy with the Left Front and Noel Ma-mere may have broken with the official ecologists, but both of them preserve a prudent distance from the Left Front. And actually – given their unshakable illusions in capitalism's ability to fix itself, illusions on which the Left Party's political arguments and programme clearly have little impact – we should be relieved.

Break with electoralism without falling into the traps

In clarifying the problem we are dealing with, it is of the utmost importance to re-establish the origi-nal tradition of the revolutionary workers' movement and of Marxism in relation to elections (local or national), betrayed, denied and blunted though that tradition has been. This past nevertheless teaches us that participating in and using elections is strictly subordinated to *direct* methods and organisations of workers' and working peoples' class struggle. Otherwise, any involvement in elec-tions tends inevitably towards parliamentarism, i.e. adherence to bourgeois democracy through ad-apting to its institutions (including local government) and its rules. In any case, the organisations in-volved in the Left Front have plenty of time between now and the elections to overcome positively the difference which have arisen based on electoral calculation. But that can only happen if there is the will to go beyond the parliamentary (or municipal) horizon by organising workers' struggles on the basis of a programme that is extra-parliamentary (or which goes beyond municipal politics properly speaking).

In what he writes, Comrade PIcquet is quite right to seek a way forward along these lines, but it is going to take a lot more than his rather general guidance. Even his hasty attempt to sketch out three areas for doing this is botched because it leaves out some immediate and fundamental problems working people face. Apart from his call for a turn to the unions

(which is left hanging in mid-air because its scope is limited to opposing the increase in VAT), his proposals for unity with various other left sectors and for “going beyond the way the Left Front is run by a cartel” so as to “blend itself together” are far removed from working peoples’ vital concerns and the problems they face.

In this connection there is of course no denying the positive fact that the Left Front also feels the need to shake off narrow, sordid parliamentarism and turn systematically to the working masses, calling on them to demonstrate for this of that real immediate aim or against things the bourgeoisie is doing. And so on 1 December last the two big parties in the Left Front got together to organise a national demonstration in Paris for a “fiscal revolution” and against the planned increase in VAT. Now. Choosing the tax system as a field of working people’s struggles and the object of a confrontation with the government is obviously a huge blunder. Instead of hitting the enemy full-on, it misses its target – at best.

Taxation as such is hardly a central or particularly important concern for workers. It is important for the bourgeoisie, however, because they have a constant drive to cut the taxes they have to pay. In recent times in particular they have made it one of their war-horses in the struggle to do away with social gains. In reducing the taxes they pay, they also hope to solve the crisis in a way favourable to themselves by weakening and then abolishing the financial resources embodied in the social gains working people have made. The tax system also provides a useful weapon for easing the concentra-tion and centralisation of capital through the elimination of the weakest and above all the destruc-tion of petit-bourgeois intermediate classes. That is why lightening the tax burden, concretely, reducing various kinds of taxes, is a central demand of the petit bourgeoisie which, along with bourgeois layers ruined by competition, sees it as a life-belt.

Of course the working class and its organisations can and

should offer support to downtrodden and threatened small and middle farmers, craftsmen and shop-keepers in their struggle against the overwhelming tax burden. Similarly the working class wages an incessant struggle for an effective, progressive tax system as one of its transitional demands to defend real and relative wages and increase the burden on the bourgeoisie. But on the express and indispensable condition that these demands in relation to taxation are clearly subordinated to the objectives of the fundamental struggle against capital and not replace them with a "better" tax system.

This is because, despite the deliberate lies and widespread myths, you cannot have a fair and equi-table distribution of wealth in an unjust and unequal society. The only system of wealth distribution capitalism can provide is one in its own capitalist image, with a tax system as a corresponding means to achieving it. The more the system is cornered, as it is now, the more invasive, aggressive and one-sided its tax system becomes. What this means concretely is that one of the current aspects of the advanced death-agony of capitalism is the colossal, irreparable debt level of all states (to say nothing of other debtors). The preponderantly hawkish character of an omnipresent, arbitrary and unfair tax regime flows directly from this fatal scourge of capital, which uses its state tax system like a wounded beast desperately defending itself and its kin tooth and claw. So it would be a real mistake to separate a tyrannical, unjust and arbitrary tax regime from its immediate source and present it as if it was a sector independent of the socio-economic system as a whole and its current ills, and, moreover, as if it was its main determining feature. Whereas even this capitalism's own governments openly and cynically describe it as the price to pay for the monumental indebtedness of the state, and a means of paying it.

The general confusion in this field is what made possible the

Force Ouvrière (FO) Union confederation's unfortunate mental lapse on 2 November in Brittany, when it entered an unnatural alliance with the region's bosses in the Quimper demonstration. (We should note in passing that this perversion on the part of the anarchists leading this union does not mark any significant break with their past, since the anarchist who used to lead FO in the Loire Atlantique department, the late Alexandre Hébert, had already flirted with the local bourgeoisie under the benevolent gaze of his trade-union ally, Pierre Lambert.)

Comrade Mélanchon was a thousand times right to severely criticise this lapse on 2 November last, so it is all the more regrettable that he immediately fell into the same trap, although he did it as it were "independently", without the disreputable allies. Worse, he jumped in and promptly lost his bearings. As if outbidding the others in some bizarre rivalry, he went much further than a simple protest to add his commitment (together with the Communist Party this time) to no less than a "fiscal revolution". But no worker would feel that such an objective was any more than fanciful sermonising under capitalism. Under these conditions, all it does is tarnish the idea and practice of revolu-tion, dragging this orientation down to the level of publicity for some detergent. Whereas the right thing to do would be to rise up not against the increasing tax burden, but against the immediate source of this apoplectic, cruel and violent expression of capital in its death agony – the gigantic and generalised debt.

But we know that the Left Front is deeply hostile to this scourge of indebtedness. It has already risen to demand it is repudiated, or rather, that an independent public enquiry is established to examine its legitimacy. We already know that it is illegal and that it should be purely and simply wiped out. But it has to be demonstrated to everybody's satisfaction that this is the correct thing to do, and that is why such an enquiry is necessary. So instead of fantasising about an

imaginary “fiscal revolution” and competing with the bourgeoisie in this field, the Left Front should simply take up and popularise this slogan. There is no doubt that it will find agreement among working people and sup-port from activists. It will also, at a stroke, take care of the very real problems of municipal councils with no money and unable to do all the things they ought to do and which have been made even more difficult by their excessive debts.

(I am perfectly within my rights in making a little detour, within the context of a discussion of tax-ation, to the discussion between François Chesnais and Thomas Piketty over the latter’s latest book *Capital in the 20th Century*. Having correctly established that in this book Piketty “is going to deal [above all] with the distribution of wealth”, Chesnais rightly criticises this conception of inequality [distribution of wealth] “which has very little to say about the ownership of the means of production it is based on”.

Now this sort of brief comment is virtually all he says about this in the course of a polite and ami-cable discussion! And yet precisely the main question is this attempt to conceal the fact that the source and origin of all the evils of capitalism is production itself, and to replace it with a quasi-autonomous system of distribution that you could improve independently of production. I cannot deal with Pittkey’s book as a whole here, but merely comment that this economist is one of the chief ideologues of the nowadays very fashionable current in favour of channelling the growing resentment against capitalism into this blind alley of distribution. Chesnais understands this completely. So it’s all very well him saying, in his inimitable, well-bred intellectual style, that “the social conditions for this (capitalist) production determine the configurations of this distribution from the outset”, but he does not develop this short passage into a fuller analysis, and even less does he extend that an-alysis to deal with the role this conception has in the plans and

programmes of various currents and political parties made up of those who want to “reform” capitalism. It is a great shame, especially since twenty years ago Chesnais was one of the small number of Marxist economists, from where he has only recently sunk back to the level of petit-bourgeois anti-capitalists in Attac.)

The real meaning of unemployment – Who claims to have an effective programme to fight it?

Even though the forthcoming elections only affect local government, it would be an obvious mistake to confine the stakes involved to just local problems, important as these may be. On the one hand the advanced stage reached in the bourgeois demolition of social gains in all fields (carried out and organised by the SP-Green government) and the rapidly and continually deteriorating situation working people are in, and on the other the requirements of building and strengthening the political party of the working class, insistently require a fighting programme which can unite working people in every locality beyond their local demands. Such a programme would necessarily have to combat the very source of the evils, i.e. the capitalist system itself, instead of losing itself in the blind alleys of some illusory “improvement”. Such an overall orientation would also distinguish it from scattered occasional criticisms whose targets shift on a more or less monthly basis. Necessarily, only through such a project can you set yourself up to really oppose that manager of moribund capitalism that is the present government. That is also the only way to rally the workers for a real fight and for driving a wedge between the government and all those who really want to struggle for the interests of working people, which includes certain members and cadres of the PS.

Such a programme would not be hard or difficult to work out because it would not be some artificial invention. It flows directly from the situation and responds to the immediate

concerns of all working people. Today, it concerns the massive unemployment which already affects a growing number of working people and threatens all the rest. It is mass unemployment, and its reasons and causes go far beyond those that produce, maintain and increase the “reserve army of labour”, the traditional scourge of capitalism. There is more to it this time. As a mass, it is no longer just the inevitable pro-duct of the contradictory expansion of capital, but on the contrary it is the decisive sign and one of the direct consequences and ineluctable traumatic sequels of capitalism in its death agony. It is no longer just a *reserve* army, from which capital can recruit workers as it expands. The majority of those currently unemployed are *excluded* from production for good, without any hope of getting back in. The fact that their number is growing is the most eloquent and convincing proof that even if here and there and from time to time it can happen, that famous economic growth has everywhere become notoriously inadequate.

The vulgar explanation for this phenomenon is simple. Everybody knows it and everybody talks about it at great length, without, however, really considering it or its causes and consequences at all seriously. Broadly speaking, it has to do with the way industry has been largely dismantled, a veritable industrial counter-revolution which has ravaged all the economically advanced countries in recent decades. With capitalist economy swooning from exhaustion – due to the historic blind alley reached by production based on and ruled by profit – the crisis has mutated from a passing purge into a permanent and universal fever, considerably weakening the moribund patient. Let me just explain very briefly here: This “exhaustion” and “historic blind alley” capitalist production faces signify the general fall in the rate of profit and the concomitant global orientation of world capitalism towards, on the one hand, transferring production to more “profitable” locations and, on the other, the extension of the hegemonic domination of finance.

The bankruptcies of a string of firms one after the other make this picture particularly sombre, painfully marked by the acceleration thereby revealed in the process of concentration and centralisation. I shall not go into the calamitous statistics on this which over the last thirty years have caused growing alarm even for those political managers who enthusiastically maintain the system. A brief com-ment will suffice to emphasise two important historical facts: On the one hand the sad reality of the unemployment which has always plagued capitalism as an organic and natural part. Even during the famous “thirty glorious years” (1945-1975) – the age of reference for all the admirers (and dupes) of the system – the years of so-called “full employment” including in the “welfare states”, unemployment was never, anywhere able to fall below an official level of 2.5% per cent of the active population, whereas in the USSR and in the Eastern European countries they dominated, anti-working class and anti-democratic as the Stalinist regime was, unemployment – and capitalists – were unknown. These were palpable reflections of what survived of the October Revolution, despite the fact that many of its legacies were liquidated. These facts are shrouded in absolute silence and obscured by the loud, hateful denunciations of the revolution and the USSR on the part of the bourgeoisie – and renegades – and their servile submission to the bourgeoisie’s dubious traditions.

Since there is no hope of curing the epidemic of unemployment, the system is forced to nursemaid it somehow, and the whole set of political and trade union arrangements for dealing with it in all their manifestations are completely helpless. Their total impotence starts with their utter inability to explain the phenomenon, still less why it keeps getting worse. When they gravely explain that unemployment is caused by a lack of industries, this insight thoroughly deserves its place alongside all other statements of the bloody obvious. Next, they all put forward their own remedy, a whole massive spectrum from simple sticking plasters to universal panaceas.

What unites them all is a rather dubious good-will, except for a very few currents and organisations which openly say they want to finish off capitalism. All the rest put forward elixirs for re-invigorating the moribund system and making its raddled face less repulsive. Which is why there is nothing you can do with all this made-up nonsense, and no point wasting time on it.

A central role among these charlatan quacks falls to president Hollande, elected, among other things, for his pompous promise to put an end to this gangrene in the body of perishing capitalism. But a year later his own statistical services report that over the "… 12 previous months, 43 981 businesses have been liquidated (out of 62 431 bankruptcies) … 2 per cent more than in 2009" and that "over the last year, the number of liquidations has gone up from 6 per cent to reach a record high". (Le Monde, 22 November 2013). All that despite the minister Montebourg, a tame and useful "left" puppet what with his teeth-grinding and the rest of his grotesque contortions as if to pantomime an interest on the part of the authorities in really finding a solution, while at the same time ridiculing it. And of course unemployment spreads inexorably alongside plant closures.

Its worrying growth threatens to bring the whole damn system into disrepute, and the bourgeoisie and its various agencies try to hide it behind various screens. Generally the most widespread form this latent unemployment takes is casual employment (*précarité* in French) in all its varieties. One of them is the short-term contract (in French *CDD -"contrat de travail de durée determine"*), something which has recently taken off in a big way. The same issue of *Le Monde* quoted above splashes the sinister news across its front page that: "3.7 million employment contracts for less than one moth were signed in the first quarter of 2013: the number has doubled in ten years." And on an inside page the paper tells us that "…more short term contracts have been signed in France in 2013

than ever before", quoting a report from URSSAF (the central body of the agencies which collect the em-ployee and employer social security contributions in France) that "… more than 86 per cent of the employment contracts currently being signed … are short term contracts. An absolute record since 2000". To provide a striking image of this, the paper also quotes the informed views of a well-placed economist: "Out of 20 million contracts signed each year, two thirds are short term contracts of less than one month. It's spectacular." – more accurately, it's nightmarish. This way, this capitalist society is ceaselessly and ever faster suppurating at least three large categories of unemployed: Offi-cially-recognised unemployed, the non-recognised unemployed who are lost and damned, and a vast army of latent unemployed, a large proportion of whom are maintained in their precarious existence (while another, far from negligible proportion is shunted off into early and actuarially-reduced retirement, a state that is insecure and instable and precarious in its very essence, a veritable forcing-house of poverty.)

Above, where I mentioned the widespread agreement among all parties, groups, ideologies and currents in political and trade-union thinking, both left and right, about reducing, if not actually abolish-ing, unemployment even within the framework of capitalism, I drew no distinctions between them. But there is one sizable cleavage within this unity which separates them into two distinct and even opposed groups. A minority makes a serious effort to reduce unemployment and sincerely tries to fight for the right to work. Broadly, this embraces the Left Front and its sympathisers and the CGT unions and occasionally the FO unions. Most, on the other hand, (including the bourgeois parties, the CFDT unions and their ilk and, above all, the Hollande government) cynically and brutally plan, present and use their schemes for tackling unemployment as terrible weapons for degrading every aspect of working conditions. The jobs these people offer are nothing but shameless blackmail used to impose, by shock, an indecent

increase in both the absolute and relative surplus value extracted by lengthening the working day and cutting wages by holding them down as the rate and intensity of work increases. And that goes nowhere near exhausting the list of measures and forms of refined servitude in return for the offer of a job involving cheap and almost certainly casual labour. So what Hollande and his supporters offer the actual and potential unemployed is the glowing prospect of entering the ranks of the latent unemployed, as long as they agree to being exploited even more. You can reject out of hand all the Hollande government's efforts and attempts to buy the capitalists' goodwill, with a bankrupt and cash-strapped state handing them billions to employ more people (under much-reduced conditions, obviously). Just as obviously, the capitalists pocketed all these sumptuous gifts, but instead of acting out Hollande's fantasies, they obeyed the implacable laws of their system, and didn't employ any new workers!

Facts are obstinate things, as we all know. Unemployment has continued to rise despite all these plans and efforts, and the scandalous fact that the bourgeoisie has managed to blackmail workers (and all working people) into accepting seriously worse conditions, and to seriously weaken their powers of resistance – with the valuable help of the SP and the conciliator unions (CFDT) etc. But if some unions (CGT and perhaps FO) and parties (Left Front) and groups and other formations do carry on their customary fight against this disaster, they all realise more or less confusedly that their traditional methods of fighting are no longer adequate. The harsh social reality of capitalism with its back to the wall has made the old slogans and methods of fighting null and void and ineffective. You have to go with the evidence: If working people's organisations don't change their slogans and methods, they will all gradually start to look like Don Quixote, exhausted by vain battles. With the notable difference that their wooden swords won't be used on innocent, passive windmills but will shatter on the pitiless reality of capital

determined to defend itself with every means at its disposal.

There are extremely worrying signs, such as the loss of trade union membership and the massive levels of abstention, not to say indifference, by working people in elections, which indicate a dumb but critical disapproval of and opposition towards these means of struggle that are past their sell-by date and overtaken by events. Although they cannot by themselves spontaneously and on their own find a way out of the blind alley they are in, their attitude all the more clearly expresses for them the urgent necessity of changing methods and slogans which are no longer adequate for the struggle. All they need to do, these organisations which claim to represent their interest, is to respond to these preoccupations, foremost among them the Left Front, which should also express what they want in the preparations for the municipal elections.

The starting point for such a project is to state firmly that capitalism and its managers are obviously bankrupt when it comes to resolving the various difficulties in the economy, above all the unemployment blighting the lives of millions. There is abundant evidence that capitalism is not only unable to solve of it but inexhaustibly, tirelessly organises it. The programme of a Left Front that is really up to its mission of expressing what working people say and want should therefore concentrate on the permanent and consistent struggle against unemployment, that nationwide scourge which affects every municipality.

This starting point therefore culminates in a central demand in such a programme, based on the total bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie and its plans and efforts to save businesses within the economic, legal and administrative frameworks of this system. So it must aim to go beyond them. It is high time to stop vainly begging capital to behave responsibly. It has proved many times not just that it simply cannot, but that massive and growing chronic unemployment is necessary for it

simply to keep going. So we need to to deprive capital of its ability to arrange the whole economy as its own exclusive property and place it under the watchful control of the workers themselves. Capital has amply demonstrated that its aim is to maintain and extend levels of unemployment. Hence the demand for *workers' control of production*, which grows out of this untenable situation.

It seems that workers at "Goodyear" at Amiens, exasperated by the light-minded way their bour-geois owners condemned them to unemployment and poverty, are not only keen to re-connect with the great tradition of workers' control and even factory occupations, but have already taken the first steps along that path. The generalisation of their struggle and its conscious expression in a demand for workers' control should therefore be *at the centre* of a Left Front programme for the municipal elections, buttressed by a vigorous repeat of the demand for an independent public inquiry into state – and municipal! – debt. Taking up the demand, betrayed by Hollande and Co., for the right of foreigners to vote in the municipal elections would nicely round off this programme, while at the same time widening the trench between SP (etc.) activists and the government.

Left Front at the crossroads

Ever since the differences broke out over electoral tactics, the respective political lines of all the par-ties and groups in the Left Front have thrown into even harsher relief the mistakes, faults, shortcomings and inadequacies of each of them in turn. These weaknesses have grown more worrying as the situation has degenerated and the dispute, in contrast, has become more poisonous. Lacking the solid backbone which only a bold and adequate programme that responds to the serious problems working people face could provide, these differences have degenerated into a bar-room brawl. The lack of an *adequate* programme, that reflects the bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie and offers a real way out of the general blind

alley that capitalism is in, is paralysing and blocking the development of the Left Front and each of its components. Worse, it condemns them to marking time and the threat of a general step backwards.

Even those whose raise the real problems, like the above-mentioned Christian Picquet, lack clarity and serious objectives and fall into the crudest opportunism. He decided to support the Paris SP in exchange for a few miserable paid positions within its arrangements – but without the SP making the slightest changes to its programme. So Picquet sold his programme (if he ever had one) to secure a place in the future municipal bureaucracy of Paris. Moreover, the real and welcome opportunity of strengthening and widening the contradictions between the SP activists and the government was thus reduced the level of shameless horse-trading.

Now a political programme that arises directly from the untenable situation and matches up with working peoples' needs and requirements, like workers' control of production, which appears to be the only real and effective barrier to unemployment, inevitably requires broad co-operation among all the forces of working people. Only blind belief in the omnipotence of the word could lead one to imagine, as comrade Mélanchon seems to, that it is a waste of time to seek and establish alliances based on a programme with slogans that can be acted upon. But you don't need a programme if you are doing unprincipled deals and sharing out jobs in the municipal bureaucracy, like the CP and fol-lowing them Picquet.

It is not just sterile propagandism that is on trial here, with its idealist delusion that it can win over the mass of working people with pure verbiage (words and discussion), but also the fact that even this propagandism is reduced to conveying a policy which consists essentially of a partial *critique* of dominant bourgeois policy instead of developing a political line *opposed* to it. It is high time to recognise that such an attitude, *negative* when all is said and done, is

a brake on all progress and a source of fruitless dissentions. Only a constructive i.e. *positive* policy expressed in the kind of programme required by the situation would be able to draw workers along with it and at the same time overcome differences.

All the signs are that only a programme like that, supported by a broad mobilisation of working peo-ple, can provide the basis for the opening needed towards activists in other parties (SP, Ecologists, etc.) with a view to exploding the contradiction between them and the government. It is the same path towards strengthen a great proletarian party in the way that is needed, a party whose painful birth-pangs are represented, as it goes and above all, in the convulsions racking the Left Front. The latter is still far from fit for the role, even if it does manage to survive the various stages leading to it.

It is important immediately to emphasise here how vitally essential the trade unions are as partners in such a political programme as formulated and concretised above and, by the same token, associated in a political mobilisation, including for the municipal elections. It is clear that if it, for example, did launch a political programme centred on the demand for workers' control, the Left Front would no longer be able to maintain a polite distance from the unions, nor keep up its accommodating be-haviour towards them as they are now. It would quickly be forced, and already is anyway, to define a consistent worked-out political line in relation to them, the first point of which should be to specify how to turn them from "social partners" of the bourgeoisie into fighting organisations of working people. A political programme in favour of these working people could tolerate the slightest equivocation on this point.

It must be obvious to anyone who looks objectively at society without self-satisfied blinkers that a political party that fights for workers and wants to change the disastrous

situation in their favour – in this case the Left Front – could not, as it stands, conquer power in one dash, like a cavalry charge. So audacious an undertaking requires a tenacious and extremely careful preparation, especially under present-day conditions, which are shaped by a long retreat in the international workers' movement and weakened by a series of painful defeats and serious losses. Sadly, we are still in a period of defeats and a general retreat. This is the time to sharpen our weapons and assemble our forces, in a word, to prepare patiently the inevitable general rise of the working class and all working people in the decisive struggle against capital. Despite the sceptics and those who mock such a "utopian" view, all the "realist" alternatives and shifts and all the artificial shortcuts for getting over problems are condemned to failure.

The Left Front has reached a cross-roads. But at this point it must be realised, on the one hand, that history does not wait for those who do not make it to the appointment on time, and, on the other, that politics abhors a vacuum. Either the Left Front will seize the opportunity offered by the municipal and European elections to raise itself to the level of its historical tasks, or it will inevitably go backwards. [/threecolumns]

Balazs Nagy