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**ALEX CALLINICOS**

Revolutionary Paths



Alex Callinicos

## Revolutionary paths

A reply to Panos Garganas and François Sabado

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The responses in the previous issue of **International Socialism** by Panos Garganas and by François Sabado to my article *Where is the Radical Left Going?* are very welcome. [1] As their articles bear witness, the condition of the radical left in Europe is quite diverse. Though I have disagreements with some of the things that both have to say, these differences are quite minor.

We in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) are enthusiasts for the New Anticapitalist Party (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, NPA) that Sabado and his comrades in the now dissolved *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR) have played a key role in launching. I also recognise the significance of the realignment that is bringing together the Greek Socialist Workers Party (SEK) and the other far-left organisations allied in the Anti-Capitalist Front (*Enantia*) with the New Left Current (NAR), the most important recent breakaway from the Communist Party. I also express my disagreements in some humility: the disastrous recent experiences of the radical left in Britain do not exactly set

up any of the participants in these catastrophes to preach to their comrades elsewhere in Europe. As will become clear, the debate, and the concrete development of the NPA have shifted my own position.

## **A new model party?**

The most important point to emerge from the discussion is that the general term “radical left formations” encapsulates two quite different types of organisation, even though they are both a product of the radicalisation of the past decade. There are those cases where the level of class struggle and the political traditions of the left make it possible for revolutionary Marxists to unite with others who regard themselves as revolutionaries in new, bigger formations. So far the only example where this has come to fruition is the NPA, whose founding principles, as we shall see below, are in a broad sense revolutionary. Then there are other cases in which the most important break is by forces that reject social liberalism but have not broken with overt reformism—Die Linke in Germany, the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) in Italy under both its old and its new leadership, Synaspismos in Greece and some elements in the Left Bloc in Portugal.

Both Garganas and Sabado argue that radical left projects should follow the first model, basing themselves on a clearly anti-capitalist platform, rather than on an “anti-liberal” platform that targets neoliberalism and not the capitalist system itself. They justify this partly by pointing to the negative experiences of centre-left coalitions such as the plural left government in France in 1997–2001 and the Prodi government in Italy in 2006–8. Garganas also argues that significant sections of workers and young people are not attracted to “the traditional reformism of the past”. [2]

What seems to me valid in these arguments arises from the different paths taken by the class struggle and by the workers' movement in various parts of Europe. France and Greece are the European states that have seen the most intense social struggles in recent decades. Indeed, in Greece these have been so sustained and so fierce (think of the huge wave of rioting by young people that swept the country in December 2008) as to create, in relative terms, the largest radical left in Europe. Moreover, these are both societies with strong Communist traditions where social democracy has only succeeded in establishing itself as the dominant force on the left in recent decades and on a fragile and contested basis. In these conditions, seeking to build parties of the radical left on an anti-capitalist programme makes perfect sense.

It remains the case, however, that these parties will still have to grapple with the problem of reformism. One of the main lessons of the history of the workers' movement is that the development of the class struggle, by drawing new layers of workers into class-conscious activity, will tend to expand the base of reformist politics, since seeking to change the existing system seems, initially at least, an attractive halfway house between passive acquiescence in the status quo and outright revolution. Thus if we consider the great revolutionary experiences of the past century, the Russian working class, after the overthrow of Tsarism, gravitated first to the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, not the Bolsheviks. In Germany, thanks to the ingrained experience of reformism and the relative weakness of the far left, it was the Social Democrats and the Independent Socialists who were the first main beneficiaries of the revolution of November 1918. Nor are these experiences confined to the imperialist countries. Consider how the Brazilian Workers Party, which Sabado's comrades in the Fourth International helped to build in the belief that it was a non-reformist organisation, has become, under the Lula presidency, a pillar of social liberalism.

The implication of these historical experiences is not the fatalistic conclusion that the mass of workers will never break with reformism: on the contrary, the Bolsheviks achieved, within the space of a few months, majority support in the Russian working class, and the German Communists were able to win over the bulk of the Independent Socialists and build a mass workers' party. Nevertheless, these cases show how reformism remains a strategic problem for revolutionary parties far bigger and better socially implanted than the NPA, SEK or the SWP.

A major driving force in the development of the new radical left parties is the experience of social liberalism. After Tony Blair, Lionel Jospin, Gerhard Schröder and Romano Prodi large numbers of workers and young people are looking beyond the "old house" of social democracy. But it doesn't follow that they have broken with reformism as such. Indeed, so tight has been the embrace between recent centre-left governments and neoliberalism that some tendencies on the far left (the Committee for a Workers' International, for example) argue that the British Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party, the French Socialist Party and their like can no longer be regarded as reformist parties. I think this view is mistaken—apart from anything else it ignores the fact that large sections of the working class continue to vote for these parties, partly out of habit, partly for fear of the even harder neoliberal policies of the traditional bourgeois parties. But the sharp shift to the right by mainstream social democracy that gives this view whatever plausibility it possesses creates a large space to the left of these parties that is ideologically diverse and open to various political currents. [3]

It should be added that the revolutionary Marxist tradition, which both the Fourth International and the International Socialist Tendency have tried to continue, is not exactly a mass force at this precise moment in time. Sabado says this is because it "is more than 30 years since the advanced capitalist countries experienced revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations". [4]

That's true. It is also true that, whatever achievements the LCR or the SWP can claim, we have not led mass workers' struggles of any kind, let alone (as the Bolsheviks did) a successful socialist revolution. Moreover, we have to struggle with the incubus of Stalinism. None of this is a reason for liquidating the revolutionary Marxist tradition, but it does imply that we cannot hope in the short term to regroup the radical left on a platform that simply reproduces the strategic conceptions developed by revolutionary Marxists. That does not mean that these conceptions are simply irrelevant – a point that I return to below.

What does this mean concretely? The situation in France has allowed Sabado and his comrades to launch a party three times the size of the LCR whose programme, while in some respects remaining strategically open, nevertheless explicitly calls for a revolutionary break with capitalism. Conditions differ elsewhere. Thus in Britain and Germany we confront workers' movements in which social democracy has been deeply entrenched to the extent that it is often assumed that the two are identical. This is why the emergence of Die Linke in Germany is such a historic development. Sabado acknowledges that it is “a step forward for the workers' movement” in Germany, [5] but this recognition is rather grudging and he prefers to accentuate the negative, stressing the “left reformist” character of the project, the weight within Die Linke of the ex-Stalinist PDS and so on.

All of this is true enough, but it ignores the fundamental fact that, for the first time in decades, the decay of social democracy has produced a serious breakaway to the left. Of course, Die Linke's politics is left reformist: what else could it be given the balance of forces in Germany? Elsewhere the process of decomposition is so far advanced that such major splits are unlikely. As I noted in my original article, this is the problem that we are grappling with in Britain. The chronic, historic weakness of the Labour left would not matter so much if their ideas were not still supported by millions of people (as is

indicated by the immense popularity Tony Benn enjoys well into his eighties).

The continuing influence of reformism constrains us in different ways. Respect was doomed ultimately by its failure to bring about a major split in the Labour Party. But, even so, Labourism continued to make itself felt. If the SWP had, in the negotiations that led to the formation of Respect in 2003–4, insisted on the kind of anti-capitalist platform championed by Garganas and Sabado, the project would have been stillborn (or would have gone ahead without us). As it was, it was hard enough to have the word “socialism” included in the coalition’s title (via the acronym forming the name “Respect”). Were we wrong to have gone ahead on a weaker platform of opposition to neoliberalism, racism and war? Absolutely not: despite the ultimate outcome, it was right to have tried. But human beings make history not in circumstances of their own choosing, and an explicitly anti-capitalist party was not on the agenda in Britain then.

Similarly it is not on the agenda in Germany today. Does that mean that our comrades in *Marx21* are wrong to throw themselves enthusiastically into building Die Linke? Again, absolutely not. They are right to seek to try to develop Die Linke in the most militant and dynamic way possible. Sabado takes a cheap shot at *Marx21*, accusing it of “a relativisation of the critique of the policies of the leadership of Die Linke on the question of participation in governments with the SPD”. [6] Fortunately, this misrepresents the real situation. Our comrades take a principled position of opposition to participation in centre-left governments. But what they refused to do, before the formation of Die Linke, was to allow the wrong policy of the PDS in participating in social-liberal state governments in Berlin and elsewhere to be used as a pretext, as it was, for example, by the local Committee for a Workers’ International group, for attempting to prevent the creation of the new party. Were they wrong about that? Would it have been better if what Sabado

recognises as “a step forward” hadn’t taken place? Once again the question answers itself.

Even where circumstances permit the formation of a party on a stronger programmatic basis, this does not mean the problem of reformism goes away. Sabado mentions the case of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a leader of the French Socialist Party (PS) left and a key figure in the campaign against the European Constitutional Treaty in the 2005 referendum, who has now broken away from the PS with the aim of creating a “French Die Linke”. Sabado asks, ‘Should we support him and join with him in his proposals and projects for alliances with the French Communist Party, which maintains the perspective of governing tomorrow—with the PS?’ [7] Of course not. The balance of forces in France allows the anti-capitalist left to relate to Mélenchon from a position of relative strength. But nevertheless his break with the PS is a significant one, which exposes the disarray of the reformist left in France in the face of Nicolas Sarkozy’s victory in the 2007 presidential elections and the attractive power of the NPA embodied in the person of Olivier Besancenot.

The development of the NPA may generate more breaks, not just in the PS but in the Communist Party as well. The NPA will have to know how to relate to such openings in a way that involves more than just offering the choice of joining the party or engaging in “classic” united fronts on specific issues. For all the excitement it has generated, the NPA will be quite a small force (albeit significantly larger than the LCR) on the French political scene and in the workers’ movement. This will limit its capacity to lead in any real upsurge of social struggles. Realising the NPA’s very great potential will require a willingness to intervene in the broader political field and sometimes to make alliances with other political forces, some of which, in the nature of things, will be reformist. Having said that, I think the NPA’s founding congress was probably right to have rejected an electoral pact with Mélenchon in the European parliamentary elections in June 2009. The NPA is the stronger force and it is



important that it demonstrates and builds up its independent electoral force as quickly as possible.

There is nevertheless a danger implicit in Sabado's argument and sometimes explicit in what other comrades in the ex-LCR and in Fourth International sections when they say that the NPA should serve as a general model. This is encouraged by Sabado's dismissive attitude towards what the forces immediately to his right do. Thus he pours cold water on the defeat of the forces allied to Fausto Bertinotti, the former general secretary of the PRC and architect of its disastrous participation in the Prodi government, at the last party congress. I wonder if this is helpful to Sinistra Critica, the left breakaway from the PRC that is led by Fourth International members. It might be if the correct perspective for Sinistra Critica were to build a hard revolutionary propaganda group that needed to inoculate itself against pressure from bigger, more right wing forces. But if Sinistra Critica is to act as a catalyst to the development of a stronger radical left in Italy, it needs to attend carefully and relate to what is going on inside the PRC. It is surprising that Sabado barely mentions the Left Bloc in Portugal, which (despite the prominence of Fourth International members in its leadership) is plainly pursuing a different approach from that of the NPA, as is reflected in its membership of the European Left Party, founded by Bertinotti and now dominated by Die Linke.

The variety of circumstances we face in Europe make it a mistake to treat any party as a general model. It was a mistake for the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party to offer themselves as a model and a mistake to the extent that we offered Respect as an alternative model. The NPA has, I believe, a much more promising future ahead of it, but it would be a mistake to make it a general model either. In stressing the importance of the specific circumstances I am not relapsing into a kind of national pragmatism. No, we operate in the context of a common field of problems that allows us to draw comparisons and learn from each other. Moreover, we share the aim of

building large revolutionary parties. But it is still necessary to engage in a concrete analysis of the concrete situation in different countries.

## **Revolutionaries and the radical left**

This brings us to the famous formula, coined by John Rees, that radical left parties should be seen as “united fronts of a particular kind”. Sabado attacks the formula at length, and it became clear in the debates that the SWP has had about the lessons of the Respect debacle that quite a lot of SWP members do not like it either. The formula is in fact an analogy, which involves comparing things that are different yet involve important similarities. A radical left party is unlike a “classic” united front in that it is based on a broad programme rather than a specific issue. The Stop the War Coalition is directed against the war on terrorism, not wars in general, let alone the capitalist system that generates them. Respect, by contrast, sought to connect that war with a range of other issues and to win electoral support on the basis of a political programme that sought to address them all.

But a radical left party is like a united front of the classical kind in that it brings together politically heterogeneous forces. This is partly a consequence of the relatively open character of such parties’ programmes, which generally finesse the alternatives of reform or revolution (though this not true of the NPA). More profoundly, however, it reflects the character of a period in which it is possible to draw people from a reformist background into parties of the radical left where revolutionaries play an important role. The programmatic openness (what Sabado would call the “incomplete strategic delimitation”) of these parties reflects the recognition that it would be a mistake to make membership conditional on breaking with reformism. This stance is correct, but the price is a degree of political heterogeneity.

Before considering the implications of this reality, let me say a couple of things about Sabado's specific objections to the formula. He asks, "Didn't this conception of 'a united front of a particular kind around a minimum programme' contribute to disarming the leadership of the SWP in its relationship with George Galloway, for whom Respect had to sustain 'alliances with Muslim notables who could deliver votes'?" [8] In the first place, "around a minimum programme" is Sabado's own addition, presumably to highlight the contrast with the NPA. But in fact the degree of strategic delimitation (to put it more simply, of political hardness) in a party's programme is a relatively open question. Whether or not it is anti-liberal, anti-capitalist, or indeed full-bloodedly revolutionary depends on the basis on which it is possible to unite real forces in an alliance that is both principled and sustainable.

Did the fact that the SWP leadership saw Respect as a united front disarm us in dealing with Galloway? Not at all. Sabado's suggestion doesn't make much sense, since the united front conception is likely to make one attentive (over-attentive, he says elsewhere) to the tensions within the party. Moreover, as a matter of simple historical fact, growing tensions developed between the SWP and Galloway as early as the summer of 2005. The mistakes we made were arguably to compromise too much and certainly to conceal the seriousness of the conflict from all but a small minority of immediately affected comrades till much too late. But we were quite right not to follow the Scottish Socialist Party model of a unitary broad socialist party and liquidate the SWP. Had we done that it would have been much harder to salvage anything from the train wreck. To some degree, avoiding that catastrophic mistake was a consequence of using the united front formula, since a united front requires the existence of an organised revolutionary pole of attraction.

Sabado also elaborates on a suggestion in his earlier piece that to "consider an anti-capitalist party in a united front framework can also lead to sectarian deviations. If the united front is

realised, even in a particular form, might we not be tempted to make everything go through the channel of the party, precisely underestimating the real battles for unity of action?" [9] Once again this suggestion does not make very obvious sense. Why should we imagine we are engaging in one united front at a given time? In the past decade the SWP has been engaged simultaneously in a range of united fronts – Respect, Stop the War, Unite against Fascism, Defend Council Housing, and Globalise Resistance. In the majority of these we work alongside people from a Labourist background.

Having defended the formula of a united front of a particular kind, I must concede that it does not fit the NPA very well. The party's founding principles declare, "It isn't possible to put the state and its current institutions in the service of a social and political transformation. These institutions, geared to the defence of the interests of the bourgeoisie, must be overthrown to found new institutions at the service and under the control of the workers and the population." The principles add:

The logic of the system invalidates the pretensions to moralise, regulate or reform it, to humanise it, whether they are sincere or hypocritical. At the same time, the logic of the system helps to create the conditions of its overthrow, of a revolutionary transformation of society, by showing daily the extent to which it is true that wellbeing, democracy, and peace are incompatible with private ownership of the major means of production. [10]

So Sabado is right when he says that the NPA is a revolutionary party, in the broad sense of seeking the overthrow of capitalism from below, although he acknowledges that "this definition is more general than the strategic, even politico-military, hypotheses that provided the framework for the debates of the 1970s, which were at that time illuminated by the revolutionary crises of the 20th century". [11] In other words, the NPA has "a strategic programme and delimitations but these are not completed". [12] Sabado justifies this in the following terms: "The examples we can use are based on the revolutions of the

past. But, once again, we do not know what the revolutions of the 21st century will be like. The new generations will learn much from experience and many questions remain open.” [13]

Now, of course, there is an important debate to be had about how much of the strategic inheritance of the revolutionary Marxist tradition remains relevant today. [14] And it is also true that revolutions always comprise a decisive element of the unexpected and the novel. In that very general sense “we do not know what the revolutions of the 21st century will be like”. But it does not follow from this that we start at what Daniel Bensaïd has called a “strategic degree zero”. [15] The “revolutionary crises of the 20th century” contain certain strategic lessons. They confirm that the overthrow of capitalism requires the forcible overthrow of the capitalist state, that this process presupposes the development of organs of workers’ and popular power into a challenge to the state, and that a revolutionary party must seek to win the majority of the workers and oppressed to this objective. Not simply do Sabado and his comrades agree about this, but much of its substance is affirmed in the NPA’s founding principles.

There are also other subsidiary lessons that are important, for example, those developed particularly by Lenin in **Left-Wing Communism**, namely that the conquest of the majority requires revolutionaries to be active in the mass organisations of the working class, even though these are normally under (at best) reformist leadership, and in fights around partial demands, which require, among other things, pursuit of the united front tactic. And there is the complex set of issues related to the struggle against imperialism and national oppression to which the first four congresses of the Communist International devoted much valuable discussion.

Then there are the lessons of the experience of Stalinism. These do not simply reaffirm the fundamental truth that socialist revolution can only succeed if it is based on a more advanced form of democracy than that offered by liberal capitalism. They

also imply the rejection of what Leon Trotsky called “substitutionism” – in other words, strategies that seek to bypass the task of conquering the majority by, for example, relying on a guerrilla vanguard to seize power (here there may be a disagreement with Sabado and with Olivier Besancenot given the latter’s espousal of a 21st century Guevarism). And then, less a matter of strategy than of its analytical presuppositions, there is Marxist political economy, the whole body of analysis of the development of capitalism, its specific class structures and its interlacing with imperialism that is essential if we are to begin to comprehend what a socialist revolution means in the 21st century.

It would be the worst kind of dogmatism to imagine that this body of strategic lessons and analyses begins to define exhaustively the nature of revolution today. Many questions do indeed remain open. Nevertheless, the strategic heritage of revolutionary Marxism remains in my view an indispensable reference point today. Sabado and I are agreed that it should not define the programmatic basis of the NPA and parties like it. But I think that, in reality, we also agree that this heritage should be available to the members of the NPA and should help shape their debates on its future strategy and tactics.

The real problem is how practically to achieve this. In my original article I argued that it is necessary for revolutionary Marxists to form an organised current or to retain their own autonomous party organisation within radical left formations. Sabado agrees that this is sometimes the correct option but argues that it would be wrong in the case of the NPA for two reasons. First, “there is the anti-capitalist and revolutionary character of the NPA, in the broad sense, and the general identity of views between the positions of the LCR and those of the NPA”. [16] Second, “in the present relation of forces, the separate organisation of the ex-LCR in the NPA would block the process of building the new party. It would install a system of

Russian dolls which would only create distrust and dysfunction”.

[\[17\]](#)

These are good arguments in the concrete context of the formation of the NPA. It is at once a qualitative expansion and transformation of the old LCR, and one that retains a substantial continuity at the level of both politics and leadership with the new organisation. Moreover, the relative weight of the ex-LCR within the new party means that if its members were constantly caucusing separately this could create a dangerous “them and us” climate. The problem of being a big fish in a small pond is something that the SWP grappled with inside Respect, and, though it was absolutely correct to maintain our independent organisation, this evidently was not a recipe that guaranteed success. Sabado is also probably right, at least in the short term, that “it is not very probable, with the present political delimitations of the NPA, that bureaucratic reformist currents will join or crystallise”. [\[18\]](#)

Nevertheless, the problems I set out in my original article remain. The more successful the NPA is, the more liable it will become to reformist pressures from within and without. Negotiating these pressures will often be difficult and will require a demanding combination of political clarity and tactical flexibility. More broadly, the whole experience of revolutionaries in the face of mass struggles since at least 1848 is that these can pull militants in different directions. Old arguments about ultra-leftism, the temptations of centrism, syndicalism and abstentionist purism of the Bordiga sort, the problems arising from the relationship between exploitation and oppression (for us the key issue in the debate about the veil), are bound to arise.

This means that those who come from a revolutionary Marxist background have to be putting their own arguments within any anti-capitalist party. As Antonio Gramsci pointed out, spontaneity always involves diverse elements of leadership: the question for the new party is how these diverse elements will

determine the party's response as urgent strategic and tactical decisions have to be made. Of course, revolutionary Marxists have to avoid imposing their ideas in a top-down manner on others or turning every meeting of the NPA into a sectarian row. But they also have to find ways of organising themselves so as to articulate their arguments in a way that can win others in the new party to them.

Hence Panos is right that “it is necessary to maintain revolutionary organisation as a source of education and political initiatives that pushes the rest of the left forward”. [19] The complication is that the NPA has carried over much of the revolutionary substance of the old LCR. Nevertheless, at the very least, there is a pressing need for political education that makes available, in an open and critical way, to the non-LCR members of the NPA the theoretical and strategic heritage of revolutionary Marxism. The very welcome merger of the excellent Marxist theoretical journal **ContreTemps** with the LCR's journal **Critique Communiste** is a recognition of this necessity, but a good journal cannot substitute for the much broader process of education and debate that is required. [20]

These reservations are secondary to my recognition of the importance of the venture on which Sabado and his comrades have embarked. We wish them good luck. Their success will be ours as well. Grappling with the same set of problems and discussing and working together, we can learn from each other. I regard these exchanges as a contribution to this process.

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## Notes

1. Sabado, 2009; Garganas, 2009; responding to Callinicos, 2008.

2. Garganas, 2009, p. 154.



3. Garganas mentions one of these currents, autonomism, when he writes, “Young people may be more influenced by autonomists rather than ‘left Labour’ ideas” – Garganas, 2009, p. 154. This is plainly true in a number of European countries. But it is important to recognise that, precisely because of the autonomists’ evasion of the problem of political power, their ideas can often fit quite well with versions of reformism. This is shown by, for example, the collusion between autonomists and the right wing of the altermondialiste movement at the London and Athens European Social Forums, and the use of autonomist rhetoric by the PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti to conceal his shift to the right. See, for detailed discussion of this issue, Callinicos, 2004.

4. Sabado, 2009, p. 149.

5. Sabado, 2009, p. 144.

6. Sabado, 2009, p. 146.

7. Sabado, 2009, pp. 145–146.

8. Sabado, 2009, p. 146.

9. Sabado, 2009, pp. 146–147.

10. *Principles Fondateurs du Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, February 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/NPA2009>.

11. Sabado, 2009, p. 148.

12. Sabado, 2009, p. 148.

13. Sabado, 2009, p. 149.

14. For two contributions to this debate, see Callinicos, 2006, and Callinicos, 2007.

15. Bensaïd, 2004, p. 463.

16. Sabado, 2009, p. 152.

17. Sabado, 2009, p. 152.

18. Sabado, 2009, p. 151.

19. Garganas, 2009, p. 155.

20. One implication is that the review **Que faire?**, initiated by IST supporters inside the LCR, which emerged as a valuable venue for discussion in the lead-up to the launch of the NPA, can still play a useful role in the new party, provided that it continues to conceive

itself as a catalyst for wider debate open to militants of all and no tendency.

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