

The situation in France

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1. Interpreting the crisis.

1.1. Was the left in your country surprised by the crisis?

It would obviously be mistaken to claim that the left in France was not surprised by the crisis. Certainly, it had been quite common for several years to interpret a number of social phenomena as signs of crises, sometimes economic sometimes social and sometimes more broadly “crises of society”. Without even going back to the 70s and the first oil crisis that marked the end of the Glorious Thirty the programme document of the Left always gave considerable space to the crisis in general and to the cyclic crises (Mexican, Asian etc.). However, with a few exceptions, these were analysed as essentially economic crises (slowing down of growth, austerity policies to “get out of it” etc). It would thus be quite wrong to say that the left (or the Right for that matter) foresaw the nature and depth of the present crisis. One of the reasons for this must be sought in the fact that the novelty of the regime of capital accumulation, which led to the financial crisis were only perceived very late.

1.2. What interpretation of the crisis has the Left in your country adopted (financial crisis, world economic crisis, a crisis of the capitalist system, an ecological crisis, any other)?

With hindsight, we can distinguish several successive phases in apprehending and understanding the crisis. At first it was seen as an American crisis that had taken a very specific form, a property market crisis. This rapidly led to a financial crisis, highlighted by very strong turbulence and even failures in the banking and financial sector. This was at first seen as confined to the United States. From this point of view, which was also found in the Left, there was a double danger: that the “American” crisis spread to Europe and, especially, that it spread to the “real” economy (see *Transform!*, *Sozialismus* or *Savoir/Agir*, Spring 2008).

It was essentially in the course of 2008 that this first perception was overcome. This had amounted to seeing the crisis as an accident linked to the immediate economic situation, certainly a little more marked by other cyclic events which have long marked market economies and temporarily interrupted their advance.

However, the extent of the crisis now began to seem much greater to the critical Left. This was on several levels: the property market (with the collapse of the market in the US and several countries in Europe, and the expulsion of insolvent households), banking (with the depreciation of assets and the unprecedented losses by the major banks), macroeconomic (with the increasing difficulty of financing businesses and households which have, apparently, been led to the edge of a worldwide recession), and finally symbolic, with the crisis in faith in the virtues of unlimited financialisation which has been the standard economic model since the second half of the 1980s. As is often the case, the acute economic crisis also led to a crisis of economic doctrine and its thinking habits, still solidly anchored in the minds of the dominant analysts. On the other hand, it must be recognised that, with a few exceptions, the ecological dimension only appeared later in the Left’s analyses (apart from the ecologists) — at least in France, particularly before the preparations for the Copenhagen Summit (an event whose date had been set long before the clear appearance of the present crisis). The outstanding success of the *Europe Ecologie* lists in the European elections also created a new situation.

It thus became clear in the course of 2008 that the dominant economic doctrines were incapable of understanding the process taking place. The American monetary policy had become the first ally of financial speculation, itself made possible by the enormous

inequality of incomes and of technical innovations aiming at multiplying short-term gains. In this context, the organised over-indebtedness of households in the United States played a central role. More generally, the crisis was then analysed as being part of a whole combination of structural changes that have affected not only the developed countries but also the emerging countries and new arrivals.

In its analysis of the crisis the critical Left recalled that it had been pointing out for a long time the substantial transfer of surplus values towards shareholders at the expense of wage earners. The masses of capital thus accumulated are permanently seeking profitable outlets and so fuel the speculative drives followed by more or less marked backward surges. Hence came the idea of a crisis of capitalism, of a systemic character and, consequently, not only a financial crisis that could be overcome by fresh State regulation. As a result the crisis could (for those who hoped for it, on the Left) or threatened to (for those who feared it, including some on the Left) provoke a collapse of the system. What was challenged (by the Right as well as the Left in France) was the infringement of speculation in its various forms. Hence came various more or less “radical” proposals to rebuild a new regulated system.

For the Left, it was clear that this would only be possible if there were to be a political boost in this direction. In the French context, and particularly with respect to the conflicts inside the Left, this took a specific meaning since the last Left government, that of the “plural Left” (Jospin) had seemed to abandon belief in the ability of politics to escape economic constraints (e.g. Jospin and the suppression of jobs at Michelin). This was something that the Right didn’t fail to point out, particularly Nicolas Sarkozy. The political confusion was to be accentuated by the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy and other prominent European leaders seemed to take over not only part of the analyses regarding what had led to the crisis but also part of the proposals for regulating it that were rather those put forward by the Left and the social movements (control of the banks, taxing financial operations etc.). It is now clear what is being set up. However, in the public debate, this was (and remains) less evident. This is no doubt one of the reasons why public opinion, while massively rejecting Sarkozy, does not have sufficient confidence in the Left to do any better.

1.3. Do you think that the crisis is of the same kind in all countries, and especially in all European countries? What is the opinion of the Left in your country?

One constant and perfectly justifiable idea of the Left is that the crises, whatever their nature and extent, hit the weakest most if not first and foremost. In domestic affairs, this conviction has led the Left to act in favour of strengthening social protection — or at least to save those that exist. The same approach leads spontaneously to the fear that the most fragile economies, in Europe and in the rest of the world, will be hit more than the others by the crisis. This is reflected in the documents produced by the Left, particularly those from the critical Left, but also by the speeches made by the Members of the European Parliament from the GUE/NGL Group. The present situation (Greece, Spain, Ireland, the Eastern countries etc.) shows clearly how justified is this analysis. The question remains: how can the machinery of solidarity be built with these countries? By “giving them sanctuary”, i.e. sheltering them from the greed of the markets? Or by a transfer of resources?

2. The crisis and the political contents.

2.1. How is the Left in your country reacting to the crisis at national and international level, and why?

In our opinion, coming out of the crisis requires both short-term measures but also structural reforms, both having to be thought of in the context of alternative logics. Several ways of joint struggle need to be seriously examined at both national and European levels.

- a). Acting on the Central Banks and the European Central Bank to re-direct credit in favour of sustainable development and solidarity, based on the development of public services and the setting up of public banking and financial services
- b). Putting an end to the free circulation of capital and of financial over-accumulation, the accumulation of doubtful debts — but also of the encouragement of banking fusions/takeovers (taxing financial transactions, closing down tax havens ...)
- c). Acting in favour of another way of sharing added values, of wage increases, reducing working hours. Breaking with the policy of reducing public expenses in line with the Stability Pact and setting up a common fiscal policy that tackles financial revenues as a means of reducing the public debt.
- d). Breaking with the European liberal dogma of “free and unfettered competition” and of the flexibility of work as a source of effective development of the planet, banning social, fiscal and ecological dumping and providing a European budget with the means for reducing the inequalities between regions and areas.
- e). Encouraging the development of the domestic economy, the economy of solidarity and of democracy inside firms.

2.2. Has the Left in your country changed its political priorities in the last two years because of the crisis and how? If not, what do you think should it do?

The crisis itself, as fast as its full extent became apparent (i.e. its systemic character) but also the responses (or failures or respond) by the governments of Europe (be they Left or Right) and/or the international financial and banking institutions (IMF, ECB, etc) and/or the supranational bodies of governance (European Union, G20, etc.) have evidently shaken up the lists of demands and proposals by making most prominent those that were linked to the crisis and the means proposed by the Left to overcome it.

Thus the Left has stressed its proposals regarding control of the financial system (regulation, essentially) and, what distinguishes it from the Right, part of which has also proposed such measures (with more or less conviction and sincerity) it has also made “pro-active” proposals not only to “resist” but also to create a break with the present system. Amongst these are proposals such as that of creating a public credit centre and, more generally, those which, without saying so explicitly, amount to nationalising all or part of the banking sector, or in any case strengthening public control of it. It is also clear that ecology has become, in the last few years, a priority for a Left hitherto suspected, not without reason in France, of being rather productivist (and in favour, for example, of nuclear energy). However, it would be unfair to consider this turn solely a consequence of the present crisis. It must be considered part of a longer term international agenda (preparations for the Copenhagen Conference), the multiplication of natural catastrophes directly linked to global warming in which, it must be recognised, the activity of ecological parties and movements has played a major part.

2.3. Has the Left in your country significantly changed its programme because of the

crisis and how? If not, what do you consider it should do?

This question, in fact, calls for an answer similar to the previous one — the programmes of the parties evidently reflect their political priorities.

Thus one must distinguish the programme as determined by the Congresses of Left parties, a programme whose content is subjected to a certain inertia due to the very means by which it is drawn up, and the proposals, of a programmatic nature made on the occasion of an election, proposals that are dictated, to a greater extent by the context of the moment. Even election leaflets can be significant in this respect. Thus for the Regional elections on 14 March 2010, a leaflet issued by the Left Front begins: “Faced with the crisis, our regions need a Left that lifts its head, that doesn’t crawl before finance or the shareholders (...) that fights and proposes solutions”. This shows clearly that, while it is a regional election, importance is given to the way in which the crisis of capitalism is understood.

2.4. Has the Left in your country developed any theoretical work on the subject of the crisis and if so what kind. If not, what do you think it should do?

In each of the Left parties, *ad hoc* organisations (economic commissions, for example) have worked on the crisis, firstly to understand it in all its expressions and extent and then to make proposals for emerging from the crisis. This was all in an unfavourable environment because of the virtually total hegemony of the Right wing or liberal intellectuals and economists in the media and the confusion knowingly maintained by our Right wing government, who took up proposals hitherto put forward by the Left, especially the radical Left, while emptying them of their significant content (taxation of financial transactions etc). However, there was not, overall, the “theoretical leap” needed for a proper understanding of the crisis in all its complexity. It should also be noted, moreover, that in France, at any rate, the former incapacity of the Left to conceive an alternative project obviously created difficulties in drawing up a coherent and credible response to the crisis.

2.5. Has the Left in your country launched a specific campaign to counter the consequences of the crisis.

It would probably be an exaggeration to say that there have been specific campaigns in France regarding the crisis. On the other hand, the crisis was at the heart of concerns in many areas.

- the election campaigns. As said above, the issue of the crisis is ever present in a general manner: subjecting the economy and finance to political decisions and not the reverse.
- the social struggles. Here, too, the demands drawn up by the trade unions systematically integrate the idea that the wage earners must not pay for the consequences of a crisis that had nothing to do with them

2.6. Has the Left in your country changed its views regarding the State and State intervention in the economy? If not, what do you think it should do?

It is undoubtedly in this area that the crisis has led the Left to reappraise the role of the State or, to be more exact, the role of public authorities (including local, county and regional councils). However, the “return of the State”, which is also recommended by part of the Right, is the subject of conflicts and discussion, particularly on the subject of democracy. For the Right, strengthening the State, in fact, goes hand in hand with its transformation/reduction as State-strategist, the carrying out of policies decided by it and its technocrats being delegated to various operators that, while not necessarily private are subjected to the criteria of business governance (Market –State). This reveals the application of the Lisbon strategy and its battery of indicators of performance, control

and evaluation. The French version of this conception is expressed by the General Revision of Public Policies (RGPP) and by reforms such as that, recently imposed, of the Universities and that, still impending, of local authorities (town and village, county and regional).

For the Left, public authorities are the authorised depositaries of the general interest. Their action should, thus, be oriented in this way, which pre-supposes, in particular, new forms of (participative) democracy as against former practices — forms that involve the personnel but also the users of these public services so as to break with “Statism”.

2.7. Has the crisis led the Left in your country to introduce ecological issues into its programme?

The reply is positive, even though taking the extent of ecological problems into account is the result of a slow process that was developing well before the present crisis and so is partly independent of it. However the crisis has accelerated awareness of these issues. The critical Left (and particularly the Communist Party and the Left Party, which has recently welcomed into its ranks the left wing of the Greens when they left that party) stress at the same time the ecological, social and economic imperatives that require another kind of development. The Socialist Party has barely evolved on this question and remains very moderate in its criticisms and essentially institutional in its proposals. The Greens have had the historic merit of having raised the ecological problems within the Left — sometimes at the expense of social issues. Today they integrate the latter rather more, though remaining tempted, especially since the crisis, to adopt a “neither Left nor Right” programme.

2.8. What does the Left in your country think about the E.U.'s possible responsibility for the crisis, as well as its policies to overcome it? How has the crisis influenced the attitude of the Left to the E.U.? What is your personal opinion on the subject?

The question of the role of the European Union is an important issue in the debate within the Left. Part of this, traditionally very critical of the E.U. might, indeed, be tempted by new forms of protectionism — in the struggle against delocalisations, which are amongst the most visible (and painful) symptoms of the crisis in the real economy, for example. In this area, there is often not little difference with the economic patriotism advocated by the Right.

Thus, there is a real contradiction, in this section of the Left, between a concern to see that the E.U. infringe as little as possible on national prerogatives and the demand that it play an active role in overcoming the crisis, which it must be admitted is far from being just a national one.

However, for the last three years, and particularly since the European elections, the idea that the E.U. has not played the part that it should have done is becoming predominant in the Left. This is particularly the case at the moment where countries like Greece are being particularly hard hit by the crisis.

2.9. Do you think that the crisis has influenced the balance of social and economic forces in your country?

This is hard to say. On the one hand, the management of the crisis by the Right wing government is widely condemned in the country. All the opinion polls show the great unpopularity of Nicolas Sarkozy. At the same time the polls indicate that, public opinion considers that the Left would not do any better. In the short term, the regional elections

will be a severe defeat for the Right, which would seem to indicate a change in public opinion and a new balance of forces favourable to the Left — and, within this, to the Left Front. However, the same phenomenon has occurred in the past, without producing a lasting change in the balance of forces at national level. The regional elections were a triumph for the Left in 2004 but the Presidential elections that followed in 2007 were a clear victory for Sarkozy.

The crisis has underlined the liveliness of the class struggle round the labour/capital conflict and the sharing of wealth — 43% of the French people hope for another system than free trade capitalism.

As far as the social movements are concerned, the end of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009 have seen social movements develop with an unprecedented degree of Trade Union unity. The wage earners have forcibly affirmed that they are not prepared to pay for the crisis. These actions were supported by 3 out of 4 French people. The number of strikes in private firms have visibly multiplied, more or less directly linked to the consequences of the crisis — too often of a “backs to the wall” kind in the face of closures but also on issues of wealth sharing: wages, pensions etc. This is a relatively new phenomenon, after years in which strikes in the private sector have dropped continually. The emergence of demands and actions linked to the defence of professional identity should also be noted. These are linked to the government’s policy of restricting the allocation of resources to hospitals, psychiatry and public services in general. An initiative like the “*Appeal of appeals*” has had the merit of giving unity and coherence to this kind of mobilisation. The universities and academic world conducted in 2009 a struggle against the “*comodification of the universities and of knowledge*” whose density and extent were unprecedented.

The divisions resulting from the way the unemployed were made out to be guilty of their situation has begun to fade with the hundreds of new unemployed created by the crisis.

2.10. How far do you think the neoliberal hegemony has been affected by the crisis? Has it been plunged into a crisis, broken, made more vulnerable, been renewed or left intact?

There have been two phases since the start of the present crisis. In the first, neo-liberalism was attacked (at least for its excesses) by the Left — but also by the Right. As far as France is concerned, there is no lack of quotations to illustrate this phase. Thus it could be said that, at least in appearance, neo-liberalism was demolished and that concepts like nationalisation, control by political powers had returned to favour. This new discourse faded in the second phase with the renewal of bank profits and the traders’ bonuses.

Today, this return to criticism of dominant economic theses and the renewed legitimisation of the State and of collective interests shows, evidently that neo-liberal hegemony has not been left intact. This, however, is also possibly a new trick, at least in part, in the form of another adaptation of real capitalism.

2.11. Has the social and political Left in your country had any successful struggles during the crisis?

As far as elections are concerned, the picture is a mixed one (see above). The Left was heavily defeated at the Presidential elections (that represented by Segolene Royal as well, but the very poor votes won by Marie-George and other candidates of the radical Left must not be forgotten). Then came the very poor results of the Socialist Party in the European Elections, with the break through of the Ecologists and an encouraging result for the Left Front. Now a broad victory is foreseeable in the 2010 Regional Elections in which the Socialist, the Ecologists and the Left Front will probably have good scores. However these two elections do not have the same importance since, in the French institutional system the Presidential election is “the mother of all elections”.

On the social level, there have been many and heavy defeats, even before the crisis itself arrived — on retirement rights in 2003 in particular. Today the wage earners are managing, here and there, to force the employers to retreat. Globally, however, unemployment is increasing and wealth sharing, if it has stabilised today, has all the same seen large transfers, over the last fifteen years, from wage earners to shareholders.

3. The crisis and systemic issues.

3.1. Does the Left in your country insist that the systemic nature of the crisis requires the transition to a new national, European and global state of affairs (another kind of economy, another kind of social development, another kind of ecological development, a widening of democracy, another kind of society). If not, what do you think is needed?

In one way, this is the (very) old opposition between reform and revolution. As the present system is a capitalist one, to talk about a systemic crisis is thus another way of saying a crisis of capitalism. Thus to talk of a new kind of economy, a new kind of social development, a new another kind of ecological development (see above) is just a euphemistic way of describing a non-capitalist system. In France, the Left as a whole is divided on this fundamental issue. Beyond the recognition of the damaging effects of capitalism, there are three trends in the Left that could be described as using these new frameworks and notions that have appeared (or reappeared) in the discussions about the present crisis.

- those who go, formally at least, to the limit of the logic of rejecting capitalism by name. This is the case of the extreme Left, which goes as far as choosing the name of New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

- those who, like the Left Front, propose a series of “radical” measures to “deeply to change the system”.

- those who, like the Socialist Party or the Greens, continue to think that capitalism can be reformed or (which amounts to the same thing) that free-trade and the market are not incompatible with social progress and democracy on condition of conceiving a new, more constraining system of regulation that the one the crisis has bankrupted.

3.2. Do you think that the crisis has changed the Left’s discourse in your country, and in what way? (Radicalisation of its criticism, use of terms such as anti-capitalism, post-capitalism, socialism, communism or other)

The extent of the crisis and its character that many feel is profoundly “unfair” (the bankers and traders are the ones who have blown up the system and it is we are having to pay the piper) has provoked a shift in the views held of the capitalist system:

- those, on the right, who do not criticise it at all but have their mouths full of the advantages of free trade, the market and even of stock exchange speculation have introduced an ounce of criticism to their discourse.
- those who, like the Socialist Party, and some Trade Unions, who, hitherto, made moderate criticisms have hardened their discourse.
- those to the Left of the Socialist Party (the Left of the Left as they are described in France) where the criticism has become clearly more radical.

In this context, some words and concepts that had disappeared from political speech, particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall, including on the Left, have been “rehabilitated”. If we consider that the hegemony of liberalism for the last thirty years has been translated by the eclipse, in public debate, in the media and, probably even in people’s minds, of a whole vocabulary hitherto very much identified with the Left, this is a certain sign that the latter has “pulled itself together”. This is the case for certain terms

used in this questionnaire (capitalism or communism for example). Moreover, more subtly, certain notions have returned like general interest, collective interest, the public good — notions that are not specifically Left but which, nevertheless, carry the idea that there are other values than those of personal interests, competition and competitiveness. On the other hand people no longer talk of post-capitalism in France and the word socialism has always remained, throughout the Left, a word with positive connotations.

3.3. Has the crisis led the Left, in your country, to change certain analytical concepts?

It would seem evident that the change in vocabulary (or the return to a old vocabulary) cannot be reduced simply to changing words or using new words. There is always, even if sometimes only gradual, a change in the nature or content of the concepts that serve as a basis for analysing a situation or in formulating political proposals. From this point of view, to speak of capitalism (even more of anti-capitalism) does not quite refer to the same thing as to talk of liberalism. The resonance is clearly more ambivalent, even when the trait is accentuated by speaking of ultra- or neo-liberalism. It is highly probable that the crisis has been directly the source of this “clarification”.

As for other concepts, it is harder to connect them as clearly to the present crisis. The Left’s recent and rather late taking the ecological dimension into account expresses is at least as much a matter of “catching up” with the ecologists and the “alter-globalists” as a consequence of the crisis. Even though it could be rightly said that the crisis acted as a catalyst to this process of catching up.

3.4 Does the Left in your country see the present crisis as an “opportunity”? (for social transformation, in order to rethink what is the Left, for extending its influence, for progressing in building a counter hegemony ...) What is your opinion?

Is this the right question? Obviously all its components of the Left saw, in the crisis, an opportunity for succeeding the “social transformation”, or at least for extending its influence. However these hopes or attitudes are not new, they are even fairly “ritual”, on a historical scale, since the 19th Century. The answer to this question is rather optimistic with regard to the Left in France. The perspective of a counter hegemony (besides why “counter”) seems still far off.

3.5. Has the Left in your country changed its political style or practice during the crisis? If not what do you think it should do?

The answer is YES: the style and practices of the Left have markedly changed. However, here too, the crisis has accelerated a process that was already under way rather being its incubator. The victorious campaign for a NO to the referendum on the projected European Constitutional Treaty in 2005 was an important date in marking a change in the alliances on the Left, after the French CP’s participation in the “plural majority” (the Jospin government). Ever since then, the critical Left has been pursuing a dream (a pipe dream?): to build up on the basis of the social struggles. This has in general been fairly successful, including in elections where it has regularly failed, hitherto, to mobilise the large potential (often estimated at 15 to 20% of the electorate) that had been mobilised to win the NO vote at the referendum. Various means have been explored: anti-liberal collectives after 2005, rallying political parties, single issue campaign associations, individuals and the “civil society”, presenting mixed list (parties and “civil society”) at elections etc. The Communist Party (PCF) then launched the idea of a “front” which has now take been consolidated in the present Left Front (PCF, the Left Party, a part of the

Revolutionary Communist League) and several other small organisations, whereas the majority of the LCR opted for transforming itself into the New Anti-capitalist Party. Two lessons, in particular can be drawn from these new practices:

- the result of the 2009 European elections and the prognostics for the 2010 Regional Elections indicate that, for the moment there is a bonus for parties perceived as seeking unity (the Left Front) and a penalty for those that the electors and activists consider, rightly or wrongly, as responsible for division.
- cooperation and the search for unity between political parties and social movements remain conflictual. The political parties tend to conceive it as rallying round them while the social movements would like to be treated on an equal footing. A “theoretical” question arises here: is this tendency to hegemony inherent in the very nature of political parties? Or is it just due to the specific context of this period?

3.6. What is, at the moment, the predominant scenario of the Left in your country regarding the crisis (are we close to getting out of it, are we far from any way out of it, any other).

Evidently the critical Left thinks that the crisis is absolutely not over. As evidence, if it were needed, on a national level, the social situation that is continually getting worse. There is also rising a perception of serious dangers for democracy. The political problem that is concretely raised is that the right too does not say that the crisis is over. It is using it, on the contrary, to accentuate its policy of social regression, the calling into question of public services etc. The principal political question for the Left is thus not one of making a diagnosis of the state of progress of the crisis (how far are we from the “end of the tunnel” as the right used to say in the 1970s) but of making proposals for overcoming it and its capacity to form broad rallies and social and political dynamics. The proposals have to be concrete, credible and inspired by an alternative logic. This is the whole problem in the absence of an overall project at the present time. (Whether true or not, the absence of such a project is, so to speak, very present in public opinion)

4. The crisis and (some) political confrontations,

4.1. Which political confrontations have been at the heart of the Left/Right clashes over the last two years?

A year after his election Nicolas Sarkozy might have found himself in trouble over his campaign slogans “Working more to earn more” and “Going to seek growth gusto”. The crisis enabled him to restore his image and present himself as the champion of the moralisation of capitalism. Sarkozy took advantage of the crisis to accelerate the rate of his reforms and advance in challenging the past the democratic progress of the past. Just after the most acute phase of the financial crisis broke out, while criticising the excesses of deregulation, Sarkozy made an emotive speech pleading in favour of capitalism, the driving engine of society, the source of all wealth and the reward for work.

By fuelling fears of the State’s indebtedness, his discourse serves to impose restrictions on public services and social protection. Moreover, the Prime Minister is announcing that the State’s expenditure will grow by less than 1% until 2011. The objective of not replacing one out of two of the Civil Servants who retire is more than ever becoming a fact. Public opinion is very mixed. There is a lot of anger at the unconditional aid given to the banks who are carrying on as before, at the tax reductions on the very rich, which

have increased in number since Sarkozy's election. However, since the 2007 Presidential elections the Left has been on the defensive in the debate about the "too great public debt".

Faced with this, the Socialist Party only proposes timid measures that do not tackle the logic that feeds the crisis. Worse, Martine Aubry, its First secretary, has tried to propose delaying the retiring age so as to "adapt to the realities of society", but was forced to retreat in the face of all the protests. While the government is preparing to tackle this issue, the support that this declaration provided it was a real stab in the wage earners' backs and contributed to discrediting all Left alternatives.

The critical Left's discourse, proposing to attack the logic of capitalism had difficulty in making itself heard.

All the polls show that the French people have no confidence in Sarkozy for settling their problems in the right direction — 57% consider his actions in the face of the financial and economic crisis negatively. However they have no more confidence in the Left parties — 69% have confidence in neither Left nor Right to resolve the crisis.

Confrontational politics in France, especially confrontation with Sarkozy, do not yet have the breadth required. They tend rather to be focused on electoral alliances to beat Sarkozy instead of on the content. The Socialist Party cannot imagine any other alternative than a vast anti-Sarkozy coalition round itself, extending from the Modem to the Communists and including the Greens.

The principal confrontation with the Left took place last autumn around the issue of the privatisation of the Post Office. All the Left parties, from the PS to the NPA, part of the Trade Unions and many other organisations together organised a popular referendum regarding the privatisation of this public service. Over 2.3 million people took part and an overwhelming majority (98%) said that they were opposed. However, faced with the government's determination, this movement has subsided. The French are very attached to the public services but the discussions on their future, their evolution towards greater democracy and effectiveness has not been sufficiently conducted in the Left. The credibility of the Left has, moreover, been badly compromised by years of social democratic governments in which the PCF has taken part, during which discourses have multiplied justifying privatisations carried out by the Left.

4.2. In what way do these confrontations differ from those before the crisis?

The issues connected with the defence of public services are appearing more sharply than before the crisis. However, the urgency regarding the preservation of jobs is leaving insufficient time for reflection on a new mode of development. Some voices are being raised to challenge the present model of growth. These issues are now being taken into account by the Left, but we have not yet drawn all the political conclusions.

4.3. Have you been faced with an accentuation of authoritarian government action?

The government is applying its golden rule with determination: "It is not the street that governs". If it does happen to retreat it is never on basic issues and often just a manoeuvre to gain time so as to impose its line by seeming to respond to popular demands.

In many areas, anti-democratic and authoritarian offenses are developing (dismantling some sections of the legal system, involving some social professions in the repression, the "culture of results" as rules of the police; repressive actions against demonstrators, trade unionists, high school and university students; arbitrary arrests and prolonged periods of detention without trial; heavy sentences ...)

4.4. Have you been faced with a reform of the State and of local government in this

period?

A reform of local government is under way and is part of a double objective: on the one hand an authoritarianism reinforced by being more directly run by the State, to the detriment of local authorities and elected local councillors who are considered too close to the aspirations of the populations; on the other hand the dismantling of local public services by the drying up of the local authorities' resources. This is part of the policy of reducing public expenditure and of putting an end to local democracy.

The State intends to brush aside local elected councillors from decisions concerning planning and to take over the local transport and town planning so as to impose a few centres and abandoning the other areas. This reform is part of the Lisbon strategy.

4.5. Are there appreciable changes in the confrontations within the institutions?

The legal system has been profoundly reformed in a "law-and-order" and authoritarian direction. Its independence of authorities in power is being challenged, to which many movements inside the legal system are objecting. The reform of the Constitution reinforces Sarkozy's hyper-presidency and weakens the powers of Parliament. There is talk of a long series of "mini-coups d'états". The Presidentialisation of the regime is increasing and the Regional elections will form a means of giving life to some counter powers.

4.6. Are proposals for protectionist policies being developed by the Right or the Left in your country.

While assailing protectionism, Sarkozy is proposing, with the carbon tax at the borders, a European protectionism in the service of the most developed countries at the expense of the others. Everything must be made to serve the "competitive advantage".

On the ideological and political level, a debate on national identity was orchestrated to renew the mobilisation of Right wing voters very sensitive to the more reactionary and national sovereignty conceptions of the Nation. However, after a few months it turned out to be a failure, mainly favouring a slight revival of the National Front.

In the course of 2009, the media had taken up the discussion on the Euro zone and protectionism. A variety of voices argued in favour of European protectionism against the undue advantages of certain countries. However, while the press devoted more place to the question of protectionism, it was noticeable that the panel of those who expressed themselves in its favour was pretty narrow and that their position was not new.

In fact, protectionism will not settle anything. Wage deflation is at the heart of the neo-liberal production model and this does not come from outside. On the whole the reflection, the proposals and the criticisms are more directed at the European institutions and rules, the ECB and its operation.

4.7. Do Left criticisms of the E.U. in your country go so far as to propose that your country abandon the euro zone? What is your opinion?

It should be noted that none of the lists in the June 2009 European elections proposed abandoning the Euro zone. Only the extreme Right National Front raised the eventuality of leaving it if it were impossible to reform the ECB.

Translated from French into English by Jimmy Jancovich