

Political lessons of the Leonarda affair

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The “Leonarda affair” has laid bare the reality of social and political conditions in France. The seizure and deportation of the 15-year-old Roma student Leonarda Dibrani by the government of President François Hollande, and the ensuing student protests, have exposed the chasm separating all of the establishment political parties and the feelings of the vast majority of the population.

Masses of people oppose the anti-immigrant policies of Interior Minister Manuel Valls, who has said he believes all Roma should leave France and go to Eastern Europe. Hollande’s intervention last weekend, offering to repatriate Leonarda but not the rest of her family, has made clear that his entire government supports racist policies.

There is a growing recognition that Hollande’s Socialist Party (PS), the French bourgeoisie’s main “left” party of rule, is adopting policies to appeal to the neofascist National Front’s (FN) electorate—as did Hollande’s right-wing predecessor, President Nicolas Sarkozy.

These events reveal once again the reactionary role played by pseudo-left forces such as the Left Front (FdG) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), which supported Hollande’s election, in subordinating the working class to bourgeois rule.

They starkly raise the question of a new political orientation and the building of a new party of the working class. The question of a way forward in the struggle against neofascism came to the fore previously in the presidential election of 2002.

At that time, opposition to the presidential candidacy of Lionel Jospin, who for five years had served as a PS prime minister under Gaullist President Jacques Chirac, took the form of a substantial vote for three candidates who—falsely—described themselves as Trotskyists. Arlette Laguiller, Olivier Besancenot and Daniel Gluckstein collectively received over 10 percent of the

vote. Jospin landed in third place behind the FN candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and was eliminated.

The so-called “Trotskyists” responded by backing Chirac against Le Pen in the runoff election. They flatly rejected the call raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* for a working-class boycott of the election.

As the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International explained at the time, a widespread boycott campaign would have “demonstrated to the broad masses that there is a progressive social force which challenges the existing social and political order.” Such a campaign would have prepared working people for the class struggles to come after the election.

We categorically rejected the argument that a vote for Chirac was a vote against Le Pen. “Chirac has no principled political differences with Le Pen”, we wrote. “The result of a massive vote for Chirac would be to greatly enhance his political authority, as a quasi-Bonapartist figure. He would use this authority ruthlessly against the interests of the working class.”

The WSWs stressed that the central historical issue was “the necessity for the working class to adopt an independent political standpoint and develop its independent strength, on every political issue, including the burning question of the struggle against fascism.”

Events developed as the WSWs had predicted. Chirac, newly elected, followed a right-wing, anti-working class course and, like Sarkozy after him, increasingly adopted the policies of the FN. He attacked Muslims wearing veils and persecuted Roma and other immigrant groups.

His successor, Sarkozy, pursued an aggressive, imperialist military policy, led France back into the NATO command structures, and took the initiative for war against Libya.

The pseudo-left groups responded by moving further to the right themselves. Besancenot’s Revolutionary Communist League transformed itself into the New

Anti-capitalist Party, openly rejecting an affiliation with Trotskyism. Since then it has supported the imperialist war drive against Libya, and then Syria.

In the second round of the 2012 presidential election, all the pseudo-left groups, from Mélenchon's Left Front to the NPA, supported Hollande, declaring that he was a lesser evil compared to Sarkozy. Their support was instrumental in Hollande's election victory.

However, as was to be expected, Hollande seamlessly adopted Sarkozy's policies. He intensified the attacks on Roma and immigrants, pushed for a new imperialist war against Syria, and enacted massive social attacks and job cuts.

One-and-a-half years later, most French workers are of the opinion that Hollande is worse than Sarkozy. The party that has profited most is the FN, which has been strengthened by the racist policies of the government, while posing as an opposition to its social attacks.

The case of Leonarda has now revealed the broad opposition to this right-wing orientation. Thousands of youth protested against the brutal treatment of their classmate. The government was seized by "panic-stricken fear of seeing the youth flare up," as *Le Nouvel Observateur* put it.

The pseudo-left organizations are intervening to try to dampen the flames. They have outdone one another with protestations of moral outrage in order to bring the movement under their control, derail it, and reduce it to putting pressure on the PS.

Both Besancenot and Mélenchon demanded Valls' immediate resignation—as if shuffling a few ministers would change the character of the government or the PS.

The spokesman of the Communist Party, Olivier Dartigolles, appealed to President Hollande to respond to the social tensions with "a Republican offensive." Hollande's failure to exploit this opportunity was a "serious political and moral mistake," Dartigolles declared.

In fact, the policy of Valls and Hollande is not a "mistake." It originates from the class character of the PS, which, like all other bourgeois parties, defends the interests of the ruling class and seeks to divide the working class along racial and ethnic lines. This is mirrored in events in countries across Europe, most prominently in the rise of the neofascist Golden Dawn organization amid the social devastation of Greece at

the hands of the European Union.

The defense of the PS by the Left Front, the NPA and the other pseudo-left organizations is likewise no "mistake." These organizations represent wealthy middle-class layers that are increasingly hostile to the working class. They are right-wing bourgeois parties and are increasingly dropping their leftist pretensions as they go over to the imperialist camp—as, for example, in the NPA's support for war against Libya.

The defense of social rights and the past gains of the working class, the rejection of war and militarism, the defense of refugees and immigrants, the struggle against the FN—all these tasks now come together and presuppose one thing: the development of a movement of the working class independent of the PS and the trade union bureaucracy, and their pseudo-left defenders.

The prerequisite is the building of a new political party based on a socialist program that unites workers and youth across all national, religious and ethnic lines—that is, the construction of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in France.



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