

Travel Notes - Impressions of Paris and the Left

April 18, 2016

While in Paris in mid-April, I had conversations with a number of mostly older, leftist intellectuals: professors, publishers, editors and writers. These are men and women who historically have had close ties and involvement in the labor and social movements. I also went to political protests and attended a socialist meeting. Here are my impressions, just impressions of a few days in Paris.



François Hollande's Socialist Party government has become utterly discredited with the population in general and with the left. No one likes him, no one believes him. Recent polls show that most French people—75%—think that he should resign. And 66% of the people on the left feel the same way.

Activist movements of environmentalists, labor, and youth aggressively oppose Hollande. And no wonder. The unemployment rate hit a record high last month of 10.4%. This month some 120,000 marched in the streets of Paris against his labor law reform. Now the movement has become nocturnal.

The *Nuit debout* protests—we might translate it as "Take a Stand Tonight"—have been taking place nightly in La Place de Republic, a few of them as large as a few thousand but most nights in the hundreds. They have inspired and enthused the left, which hopes that they will spread across France as the *Indignados* protests spread across Spain or as Occupy Wall Street spread across the United States.

I went to the "Nuit debout" protest and offered words of solidarity from activists in the United States. Not surprisingly, when I mentioned the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Bernie Sanders campaign the crowd cheered and applauded enthusiastically.

Most of the intellectuals with whom I spoke in Paris come out of the Trotskyist tradition, though now they are in multi-tendency left organizations. The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) that was created by the merger of the League Communist Revolutionnaire (LCR, of the Fourth International) with environmentalists and other radical left activists, and which was greeted with such a sense of hope just a few years ago, seems now to some of those with whom I spoke to be hopelessly lost.

One person said that NPA had become a *congeries* of leftist activists, groups, and tendencies, with no unified leadership, no program, and no sense of direction. Some described NPA as having become ultra-leftist and sectarian. Some of those to whom I spoke remain members, but some have also joined Ensemble, another multi-tendency left group that forms part of Le Front de Gauche led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Ensemble brings together who have come out of the Socialist, Communist, and Trotskyist parties, together with people new to politics who are working to create a radical and democratic left that can work with both in electoral politics and in extra-parliamentary mass movements.

I spoke to Ensemble comrades about the U.S. elections and the Bernie Sanders campaign at their

office in the Paris suburb of Bagnolet. Afterwards, of course, we had a glass of wine and talked a little. I found their group to be made up of people of political principles, deep commitment, and an orientation to the central movements and questions of their society. The Ensemble folks seemed to me to represent the kind of political organization that fits the times in France.