

The French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire defends its opportunism

David Walsh in Paris
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Many people and organizations claiming to be “revolutionary,” are, in fact, nothing of the kind. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire [LCR—Revolutionary Communist League] of France is an organization specializing in a brand of “left” demagoguery that is devoid of content. In reality, it is a deeply opportunistic organization, taking up a position on the left flank of the French political establishment.

The response of the LCR to the first round of the presidential election April 21 represented a turning point in the history of the organization. The party’s candidate, Olivier Besancenot, received 1.2 million votes in the balloting, 4.25 percent of the national total, in a fragmented race in which the leading vote-getter, the incumbent president, Jacques Chirac, received only 5.7 million votes. Never before had the LCR received such support at the ballot box.

Much to the surprise of the political pundits, the first round results produced a run-off between the right-wing Gaullist Chirac and the extreme right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front. The candidate of the parliamentary left, then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin of the Socialist Party, finished third and was excluded from the run-off election. The response of the French bourgeois political apparatus, both its right and left wing, including the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, was to launch a concerted campaign for a vote for Chirac.

Demonstrating that it took seriously neither itself, nor its more than one million voters, nor political principle, the LCR threw in its lot with the officially sponsored campaign for the incumbent president. The party, headed by Alain Krivine, demurred from openly calling for a Chirac vote. Instead it appealed to its supporters to “vote against Le Pen” in the two-man race. It is not clear whom this was supposed to fool.

It did not fool the LCR’s presidential candidate, Besancenot, who publicly declared in advance of the second round that he was voting for Chirac.

This “revolutionary” and “communist” organization effectively called on workers and youth to give their political support to the chosen representative of French big business. The LCR as a result has assumed political responsibility, whether or not it acknowledges it, for the measures carried out by the Chirac government—not only its attacks on the social programs and living standards of French workers, but also its actions in defense of French imperialist interests throughout the world.

From the point of view of Krivine and the rest of the LCR leadership, there was little choice after April 21. To have resisted the pro-Chirac camp would have brought them into open conflict with the middle class protest movements and Stalinist trade union officials to which they are oriented. It would, moreover, have brought the crisis within their own ranks to the point of a split. Such is the outcome of the protracted political decay of this organization.

The LCR is perhaps the most perfected model of the Pabloite party. Pabloism is a tendency that emerged in the Trotskyist movement in the early 1950s. It represented the repudiation of the struggle to build an international party of social revolution, which the Pabloites had come to

consider a futile task. Instead it sought to reduce the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938, to the role of adviser and “left” critic of the Stalinist and social democratic labor bureaucracies and the petty bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. The French LCR, under the tutelage of Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel, Pierre Frank, Krivine and others, has been pursuing this liquidationist course for half a century. Opportunism has distorted and perverted parties and individuals beyond recognition in far less time.

In the campaign for the legislative elections, the first round of which takes place June 9, the LCR is running in 412 constituencies under the banner “LCR—100 percent à gauche” (LCR—100 percent left). In several dozen other areas it is supporting campaigns by various regional “left” coalitions. In all, it is presenting or supporting candidates in 450 out of the 577 constituencies, covering some 80 percent of the French electorate. This is a considerably larger campaign than the LCR organized in 1997, when it fielded 130 candidates.

The thrust of the LCR’s campaign is that there are now two “lefts” in France: the official, parliamentary left of the Socialist Party and its coalition partners (the Communist Party, Greens, Left Radicals) and the left “from below,” the “radical” left, the left that is “clearly against the right and the extreme right.” The LCR includes itself in the latter camp.

The ten-point program of the LCR calls for a law banning layoffs; the defense of public services; an increase in the minimum wage and social benefits; the legalization of marijuana; equal rights for women; an end to discrimination against homosexuals; full pensions at 60; the introduction of pro-ecology policies; and the rejection of all “anti-social measures” introduced by the European Union.

It is difficult to distinguish between the programs of the LCR, Lutte Ouvrière, the Communist Party and even sections of the Socialist Party. They all read like reformist wish lists. There is no serious attention paid in the LCR program to the state of French society, the growing social polarization and political alienation of wide layers of the population, the criminal betrayals of the Socialist and Communist parties, the crisis of perspective and leadership in the working class, or the need for the socialist transformation of society.

The LCR distinguishes itself as the party of “mobilizations,” i.e., protests and demonstrations. Its conception of a political struggle is reduced to that of the “permanent mobilization,” as Besancenot has expressed it. The notion that a Marxist party must fight under all conditions against the prevailing reformist consciousness of the working masses for a socialist program is entirely foreign to the inveterate opportunists of the LCR.

Some of these issues assumed very concrete form in the course of an election meeting held June 5 by the LCR in the Paris constituency in which Besancenot stood as the party’s candidate.

The meeting was opened by Béatrice Bonneau, also an LCR candidate, who made a few general remarks about a program that “will really change things.” Sandra Demarq, running for *suppléant* [alternate] with

Besancenot, then read out the LCR program.

The floor was given over to Besancenot, who spoke of the “two possible lefts.” The Socialists, CP and Greens think that capitalism is “unsurpassable.” The fight against the National Front “has only begun.” He noted that the governmental left had not understood anything from the presidential election nor why they were cut off from the working population and the youth. He described the conditions in the local area and emphasized that working people had “gained nothing” from the left or the right.

In conversation [see “An interview with Olivier Besancenot, candidate of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire”] Besancenot, 27, is a perfectly amiable person, without pretensions. However, as his remarks to the June 5 meeting indicated, he has an extremely limited grasp of political questions. He becomes, willingly or not, one of the means by which the opportunism of the LCR’s hardened Pabloite leadership is transmitted into the working class.

At the June 5 meeting, the discussion that followed the opening reports was deliberately restricted by the LCR cadre to the most immediate questions: issues involved with the public service, the fate of this or that postal facility, etc. This under conditions, according to their own propaganda, of political crisis, the emergence of a fascist threat and the need for desperate social measures. One must always keep in mind when dealing with the LCR: this is an organization that does not take its own name, program or breathless rhetoric—in short, anything about itself—seriously.

Not surprisingly, the vapid exchange of questions and answers produced a general mood of somnolence in the hall. At this point Ulrich Rippert of the *World Socialist Web Site* and German Socialist Equality Party [Partei für Soziale Gleichheit] intervened in the discussion. He noted that the French elections had an international significance and that they had raised fundamental political issues. In considering why the right wing had made serious gains and how it could be fought, Rippert pointed to the lessons of history: that fascism cannot be stopped by elections or alliances with this or that section of the bourgeoisie. “The struggle against fascist organizations,” he stated, “requires the political mobilization of the working class as an independent social force on the basis of a socialist program.”

He pointed to the example of the German Social Democrats who, in 1932, “called for a vote for General Hindenburg. Only a few months after Hindenburg was elected president—with the votes of many workers—he appointed Hitler to the post of chancellor.”

Rippert pointed to the LCR’s position in the previous month’s French presidential election—de facto support for Chirac—and commented, “This has weakened the workers and created unfavorable conditions for a struggle against Chirac and against a potential right-wing government. My question is: Why didn’t the LCR call for a boycott of the elections? Why didn’t the LCR say that there was only a choice between two right-wing bourgeois politicians and that the working class should not give any support to either of them?”

In responding to Rippert, Besancenot defended the LCR line on the grounds, first, that it had organized independently of the main bourgeois camp. “We were among the first to call people onto the streets, that is, to carry out a campaign of action,” he asserted.

Second, he indicated that the LCR’s aim was to block “the far right both in the streets and in the elections [at the ballot box].” He admitted that this had “generated a debate amongst us, and we never hid it ... In our organization, there are those who thought that we had to call clearly for a vote for Chirac. Against that, there were those who thought it was wrong to call for a vote against Le Pen. The majority position was what I said. Very sincerely, it is an important issue, I agree with you. But, look, it’s not the issue of the century.”

He continued: “But about your position on an active boycott, I think that

nobody in our organization would have had that position. Because for our part, we don’t put Chirac and Le Pen in the same basket. Because there is a difference, all the same, between someone who would sing the praises of national socialism in a Greek weekly newspaper last week [Le Pen], and a right-winger who is a racist and hasn’t ever been able to stand immigrants [Chirac], but someone who, when he gets into power, will not necessarily attack the entire workers’ movement, the whole social movement. The problem is, the day Le Pen takes over we will not be able to have the very discussion we are having right now, while we can still have it today under Jacques Chirac.”

These comments are quite revealing.

First, Besancenot fails to see that if the right-wing parties did not mobilize “in the streets” for Chirac and against Le Pen, it was largely because they did not need to. The so-called left, including sections of the “far left,” was doing it for them. The Chirac camp was able to lay back, avoid a political confrontation with the National Front and its supporters, and prepare for future collaboration with the neo-fascist right.

The admission that there were those in the LCR who openly supported a call to vote for Chirac is also significant, although it hardly comes as a surprise, given the fact that Besancenot was among them.

To Besancenot’s comment that this is not, in any case, such a pressing matter, one can only respond: if the means by which one defends the democratic rights of the working class and fights the threat of fascism is not one of the “issues of the century,” what might those be?

The LCR candidate’s remarks on the political physiognomy and relations of Le Pen and Chirac are also significant. The starting point for the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board’s call for the LCR, Lutte Ouvrière and Parti des Travailleurs to organize a boycott of the second round of the presidential election [See “No to Chirac and Le Pen! For a working class boycott of the French election”] was not that there were no differences between Chirac and Le Pen. That would be vulgar radicalism.

There are differences between Le Pen and Chirac, between Chirac and François Bayrou of the UDF, between Bayrou and Alain Madelin of the Liberal Democrats, for that matter, between Le Pen and Bruno Mégret of the MNR (another ultra-right party). In some cases these differences are substantial, and the working class is obliged to understand them. But in the end, the differences are relative, since all of these parties and candidates defend French capitalism, and, should the capitalist system face a direct threat from the working class, they would unite behind any measures, including those of fascist dictatorship, deemed necessary by French capital to defend its rule.

The starting point for socialists is not the differences, large or small, between rival factions of the ruling elite or its petty bourgeois agents, but the need to establish the political independence of the working class from the entire bourgeois set-up. As history has demonstrated again and again, mostly in the form of tragic defeats of the working class, this is the only viable means to defend the democratic rights of the working class from the danger of dictatorship and fascism. Wherever the working class has been subordinated to the liberal or “democratic” wing of the bourgeoisie in the name of the struggle against fascism—as in Germany in 1931-33 and the “popular front” in France of the mid- and late 1930s, the result has been the defeat of the working class and the triumph of fascist reaction.

Belying the LCR’s much repeated insistence that Chirac does not represent a “rampart” against fascism, Besancenot’s responses at the meeting revealed a touching and complacent faith in the French president. He also exhibited the political fatalism that lies behind the LCR’s ceaseless agitation for protest and action “in the streets.”

For all of the LCR’s claims that it organized independently of the right and the official left, it is inevitably obliged to fall back on the same arguments as the Socialist and Communist parties, although in slightly more obscure and hypocritical “left” terms: it turns out, after all, that Chirac is a defender of “Republican values,” who can be relied upon not

to attack the rights of left movements and “not necessarily ... the entire workers’ movement, the whole social movement.”

Besancenot exposed, in his own words, the political fact that the LCR is prostrate before the French ruling elite and bourgeois public opinion.

After Rippert spoke at the meeting, one LCR member could be heard saying to another, “I’m glad I arrived in time for the interesting part.” She spoke too soon. As soon as Besancenot made his response, leading LCR members intervened to bring the discussion back to its previous subject: the state of French public services—considered entirely apart from the political means by which they were to be defended. Members and supporters of the organization had at all costs to be spared a serious political discussion.



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