

Sophistry in defense of opportunism: an exchange with a member of the French LCR

20 July 2002

The letter posted below was received by the WSWS from a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), one of several organizations in France claiming adherence to Trotskyism, in response to "The French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire defends its opportunism". A reply by David Walsh follows.

In the first round of the presidential election April 21, the LCR's candidate Olivier Besancenot received 1.2 million votes in the balloting, 4.25 percent of the national total. When that first round produced a runoff between ultra-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front and the incumbent Gaullist president, Jacques Chirac, a major political crisis developed in France. The parliamentary right and left, along with the media, initiated a campaign to stampede the population behind the candidacy of Chirac, the supposed "defender of Republican values." The LCR joined this campaign in support of the chosen candidate of French big business, calling for a vote "against Le Pen."

A letter from a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire

Regarding your article "The LCR defends its opportunism":

1) Not a single left voter, and even less so a far left voter, except for narrow-minded sectarians of your type, has interpreted the call to vote against LE PEN as a vote of confidence in CHIRAC.

2) This voting recommendation was preceded by warnings against the right wing and Chirac, and by calls to get ready to fight them. Your article, by omitting this, resembles a shameful falsification of the facts.

3) Your dishonesty also clearly emerges when you feign having understood—but give it an opposite meaning—Besancenot's reply, which relativized the difference between the call to vote against LE PEN and the call for an abstention.

It is precisely because the danger of neo-fascism is real that we finally chose the first formulation, and took part in the mobilization against such a party, as we have always done in the past and as we will do in the future.

In conclusion, I naively thought that we could genuinely debate with you and strive, while marching separately, "to strike together"; your intellectual dishonesty discredits you completely in my eyes.

P.S.: to still talk today about Pablo, who left the 4th International long ago and was never a reference within the LCR, is a further manifestation of ridicule, bad faith and your desire to falsify reality to try and harm a "sister" Trotskyist organization.

A reply by David Walsh

Your reply to our articles on the politics of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) is full of invective, but does not respond in a serious fashion to any of the political points we made. I can only assume that the hostile and provocative tone is aimed at blocking a debate on these questions and shielding the members of your organization from our criticisms.

Your letter charges us with "intellectual dishonesty," "shameful falsification" and other sins. The implication that we somehow falsified the positions of the LCR and its presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot specifically is absurd. We went to the effort of interviewing the LCR presidential candidate June 5 in Paris for as long as he was able to speak

to us and reprinting his words in full. We posted a good portion of his reply to our criticism in the public meeting that evening. A peculiar technique for "dishonest sectarians."

You assert that not "a single left voter, and even less a far left voter ... interpreted the call to vote against Le Pen as a vote of confidence in Chirac."

This was the claim as well of the Socialist Party (PS) and the French Communist Party (PCF) in the days following the first round of the presidential election April 21, which produced a runoff between incumbent president Jacques Chirac and ultra-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen. The PS and PCF leaderships also asserted that their differences with the Gaullist leader remained intact and that they were merely calling for a Chirac vote as a tactical measure to block the path of the neo-fascist Le Pen. They too issued empty warnings about the consequences of a Chirac victory.

In reality, what disturbed the media and political establishment so deeply April 21 was the rejection by a good portion of the population (54 percent either abstained, voted for the far left or the far right) of the two parliamentary blocs, right and left. The mobilization of the youth and wide layers of the population in the wake of the presidential first round against Le Pen further frightened the French ruling elite. It was clear to every observer that the political system was in deep crisis and that the situation might get out of control. The pro-Chirac campaign was organized, not to defeat fascism, as it was claimed, but to preserve the existing bourgeois political set-up.

Le Pen was not in any position to impose a fascist dictatorship on the French population. The danger of his coming to power was greatly exaggerated in order to stampede the population. In any event, if such a result had been a serious possibility, a campaign in favor of the bourgeois reactionary Chirac would have done nothing to stop the fascists. In the first place, there are no fundamental political differences between Chirac and Le Pen. For its own narrow political purposes, the PS leadership between the two rounds of the legislative elections pointed to numerous instances of right-extreme right collusion—and this under conditions where Le Pen had been officially anathematized.

Moreover, the fundamental source of the support for the National Front (FN) lies in the betrayals of the working class carried out by the social democrats and Stalinists over the past several decades. The right-wing, pro-business policies of the Jospin-Plural Left government disgusted and outraged wide layers of the population. Masses of people in France are searching for a political alternative. This is why some three million voted for "Trotskyist" parties, including your own. The "left"-right campaign for Chirac following April 21 provided Le Pen with greater credibility in the eyes of many who are hostile to the establishment.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the WSWS, in an open letter, urged the LCR, along with Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT), to organize a boycott of the second round of the presidential election. We called on these organizations, which had received 10 percent of the votes cast April 21, to mobilize their forces

and supporters in opposition to the two bourgeois candidates, to tell workers and young people the truth, that there was no choice between the “crook” Chirac and the “fascist” Le Pen. We personally delivered a copy of the “Open Letter” to the offices of the LCR on May 3, on which occasion we were promised an answer. We never received one.

It is impossible to say what percentage of the population would have responded to a boycott appeal. Only a resolute struggle for the policy, which the LCR, LO and PT rejected, would have determined that. We are convinced that it would have materially changed the political atmosphere, strengthened the working class, weakened the neo-fascists—who could claim to be the only pole of opposition to the political establishment—and prepared workers and youth for the struggles to come under Chirac or Le Pen.

The political results of the pro-Chirac campaign were disastrous for the left. The incumbent president sailed into office on the wave of an 82 percent majority. In the first round of the parliamentary elections, the left parties suffered a major defeat. The vote for the LCR and LO dropped substantially from the levels of April 21. The second round confirmed the victory of the right. Chirac’s forces had leveraged a showing of 14 percent of the eligible voters in the first round of the presidential election into an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly June 16, a feat only possible with the complicity of the so-called left. Meanwhile Le Pen’s party, which is not favored at this time by the most powerful section of the French ruling elite, failed to elect a single deputy. Chirac and his forces now have a considerably freer hand, even a degree of legitimacy, with which to prosecute an assault on the historic gains of the French working class.

There is nothing to indicate from its public statement—although Olivier Besancenot indicated to us that there were differences—that the LCR ever considered the boycott tactic. From April 21 onward, your organization took up a position on the left wing of the official pro-Chirac campaign. While you never permitted yourselves to utter the phrase, “Vote Chirac,” “Vote against Le Pen”—your slogan—could only mean one thing in a two-man race.

Your implication that the “Vote against Le Pen” slogan was a step in the direction of an abstention call (“Besancenot’s reply ... relativized the difference between the call to vote against LE PEN and the call for an abstention”) can only be interpreted as a sign of political unseriousness.

The general public had no doubts about the LCR line. Why should it have? Besancenot, in the week before the second round May 5, announced that he was casting a ballot for Chirac. The French-language Associated Press ran a story May 2 headlined “Olivier Besancenot calls for a vote for Chirac” (“Olivier Besancenot appelle à voter Jacques Chirac”), which reported that Besancenot “had called on voters once again to vote for Jacques Chirac.”

On that same day Besancenot called for Chirac’s election on *Europe-1* and added: “We suggest all voters wash their hands on Sunday evening [i.e., after casting their votes for Chirac], and organise a third, social, round by going onto the streets in substantial numbers.”

One of the final press releases issued by the LCR before the second round vote declared that it was necessary “to block the National Front at the ballot box as we have done in the street. On May 5 vote against Le Pen.” The position of the LCR could not be clearer. Your organization advocated a vote for the chosen candidate of French big business. Whether you care to acknowledge it or not, you played a role in legitimizing Chirac in the eyes of tens of thousands of people and helped clear the path for a right-wing victory in May and June.

If you can urge workers and young people to vote for Chirac “to block the route” of the fascists and defend democracy, what will prevent you from calling for support for his program on the same basis, or even joining a Popular Front-style regime?

We do not conceal our view that the LCR and its leadership under Alain

Krivine is bound in that direction. How else can one interpret the comments made by Krivine in an April 30 interview with *Le Figaro*?: “The leadership of the Greens and the PCF had invited the LCR to a meeting, which it naturally accepted. The Communist Party has experienced an electoral implosion, and many members would have voted for Besancenot. In the long run, the implosion of the Communist Party could lead to the emergence of a new feminist, ecological, anti-capitalistic party, which is not limited to the present extreme left. Also, thousands of the politically homeless, members of the trade unions and other action groups could find a place in it.”

We believe such a regroupment would represent a political trap for the French working class and another attempt to direct widespread popular opposition and disaffection with the status quo back into the old reactionary channels, with extremely dangerous consequences. Such an inevitably impotent and toothless left formation, dominated by the practiced traitors of the Stalinist PCF, would propel even greater numbers into the arms of the National Front, the only party promising decisive action.

While you assert that Michel Pablo (1911-1996) was “never a reference point” within the LCR, your present political line suggests otherwise. Members of the Communist Party, faced with the charge of Stalinism, often point out that Stalin died some time ago too. We call ourselves Trotskyists. Political systems and theories outlive their originators.

Pablo was a leader of the Fourth International (FI) in the late 1940s and early 1950s who, under the difficult circumstances facing the Marxist movement at the time, developed the theory that Trotskyism could never win the leadership of the working class and had to content itself with playing the role of adviser to the existing social democratic, Stalinist and petty bourgeois nationalist organizations.

To impose such a liquidationist line within the Trotskyist movement required waging war against the historically accumulated cadres of the FI. Pablo led a thoroughly undemocratic campaign against the majority of the French section in 1951-52, who opposed his policies, in an effort to install a leadership subservient to his faction within the international leadership. This pro-Pablo minority in the French Trotskyist movement is the origin of the tendency that is today the LCR. Only the intervention of James P. Cannon and the Socialist Workers Party, with the November 1953 “Open Letter” opposing Pablo and establishing the ICFI, prevented the dissolution of the Trotskyist movement.

In any event, you may not wish to be reminded of Pablo, but your line is an expression of Pabloite-liquidationist politics.

You refer to us as “sectarians.” By that you apparently mean we failed to join or acquiesce to the hysteria whipped up by the French establishment to ensure the victory of Chirac and the right wing. We consider it an elementary principle of Marxism to withstand such pressure, which you could not, and strive for the political independence of the working class, which you have abandoned. We intervened in France and criticized your positions along these lines, and we will continue to do so.

David Walsh



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