

French elections—Olivier Besancenot: “I was never a Trotskyist”

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On the evening of Tuesday, March 13, Olivier Besancenot, the presidential candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire—LCR), spoke to about 200 supporters in Amiens.

Besancenot speaks at a rapid pace, with rushed staccato and without a script. He adopts a chummy tone, sprinkles his remarks with all sorts of trivialities and rhetorical questions, and underlines his message with exaggerated gestures of his hands and body—non-stop agitation for over an hour without drawing breath or allowing any time to reflect.

And reflection is precisely what he tries to prevent. Besancenot has not come to think and analyse, he has come to agitate. His purpose is not to inform and educate, but rather to encourage certain sentiments. He has nothing to say about the bitter experiences of the French working class in recent years, and is silent on international developments and experiences. For Besancenot there is no world outside of France—if one excludes the fleeting references and praise for a handful of politicians such as Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, who are currently en vogue in radical circles.

Another taboo theme is the politics of his own organization. Besancenot has adopted the principle of the conservative German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who once said: “I do not give a hoot about what I said yesterday!”

He began his speech with some thoughts on French President Jacques Chirac, who one day previously had announced he would not be standing in this year’s presidential elections. The right wing have been able to dominate French politics for the last five years and they are seeking to continue to do so, Besancenot complained.

Besancenot neglected to mention that he had called for the election of Chirac in the presidential elections five years ago and therefore shares responsibility for the policies carried out by his government. In 2002, as Chirac faced off with the candidate of the extreme-right National Front, Jean Marie Le Pen, in the second round of voting, the LCR exaggerated the dangers of Le Pen taking power in order to praise Chirac as a guarantor of republican values and a defender of democracy.

But Besancenot let the matter drop, and did not say a word about the experiences of 2002.

He also refrained from mentioning the French Communist

Party (PCF), which the LCR has sought to woo for many years without success. Following the rejection of a European constitution by French voters in the spring of 2005, the LCR has pursued the goal of establishing “a new anti-capitalist force” out of the “no” voters—“a left that is 100 percent left.” The PCF and the LCR were to constitute the core of this new formation.

Predictably, the PCF is determined to maintain its role as a reliable prop of the bourgeois order, and remain faithful to its alliance with the French “Socialist Party.” The project of an “anti-capitalist left” then imploded in a miserable fashion at the end of last year.

Once again Besancenot moved on to next business. Nothing critical was said about the PCF. After all, one does not want to poison the well from which one drinks and rule out future opportunist alliances between the two organisations.

Besancenot also refrained from addressing in any serious manner such immediate political questions as the Iraq war or US preparations for war against Iran. He is obviously of the opinion that French foreign policy is currently in good hands.

Instead, Besancenot limited himself to condemning the evils of capitalist society and various bourgeois politicians—including Chirac, the liberal candidate François Bayrou and Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal.

He denounced speculators and the privatisation of publicly owned enterprises. In the time it takes to draw a breath he evoked the figures of the militant civil rights activist Malcolm X and Pope Benedict XVI, who had once compared capitalists with vampires. He accused the government of dividing the population. He condemned France’s system of social partnership and denounced globalization as the source of all social evils. He glorified the mass demonstrations of the past years and outlined his vision of a better society.

His speech resonated with the most superficial members of his, in part youthful, audience—young people who are at the start of their political development and are indignant and concerned about the state of society.

The struggle for a socialist society requires more than rage and indignation, however. It presupposes an understanding of social and political forces. It requires knowledge of the historical experiences of the workers movement and drawing

the necessary lessons. In short, it requires a scientifically based perspective, which allows the working class to intervene in political developments independently of the ruling class and its hangers-on.

This constitutes the significance of Marxism and the Trotskyist movement, which defended Marxism against all the attacks launched by reformists, Stalinists and petty-bourgeois radicals, in order to draw the lessons of the major experiences of the twentieth century.

Besancenot and the LCR reject such an approach. They deliberately seek to insulate the working class from Marxism and its own history. They attract radicalized young people, only to lead them into a dead end, which must inevitably culminate in defeats, disappointments and frustration.

While Besancenot's agitation may initially appear refreshing, after just half an hour one is simply put off. The 33-year-old father of one, with a degree in history, must go to some lengths to maintain his image as a raw, youthful postman. Banal denunciations are no substitute for real analysis. He has simply chosen to close his eyes to the urgent problems confronting the working class in France and worldwide.

The upcoming presidential election is bound up with a clear political shift to the right. The main candidates are a so-called Socialist, who regards British Prime Minister Tony Blair as a role model, and a Gaullist who sympathizes with the views of the National Front. The mood of the population is tilting to the left, but finds no political expression because the traditional workers organizations, including the trade unions, have made their own pronounced shift to the right.

Besancenot closes his eyes to these issues and tries to mobilise and agitate his supporters by appealing to the large protest movement of the few past years—the referendum against the European Union constitution, or the mass demonstrations against the First Job Contract (CPE).

But these movements were primarily political experiences. They were incapable of preventing the rightward shift of official politics, but did contribute to revealing the bankruptcy of the old workers' organizations, including the trade unions, which sabotaged the popular movements.

But Besancenot is silent on all these questions. His presentation of the political situation is a mixture of political light-headedness and deliberate deception. He represents the left wing of bourgeois politics and serves as its fig leaf. His over-the-top performance only serves to mask his own turn to the right. In Italy and Brazil the fraternising organizations of the LCR have already gone one step further and taken up posts in bourgeois coalition governments.

The LCR, however, is already in the process of losing its former influence. In 2002, and to his own surprise, Besancenot won 1.2 million votes or 4.25 percent in the first round of the presidential election. Now polls predict a total of 3 percent at most.

The other parties of the so-called left and extreme left are also

faring poorly in the polls. Taken together they are polling at the lowest level in many years. Public opinion analysts assume that the election could possibly be won or lost on the basis of voting within the conservative camp, i.e., between the supporters of the Gaullist candidate Sarkozy and the liberal candidate Bayrou. This is an expression of widespread disillusionment in "left" policies, which have nothing to offer apart from clichés.

Besancenot is very conscious in his own denial of Marxism. That became clear when he was asked from the audience why he had publicly dissociated himself from Trotskyism. Leaving his response to this question till the end of the meeting, he then addressed it with vehemence.

"I have never called myself a Trotskyist activist," he answered. He is a member of a Trotskyist organization and has a great deal of respect for Trotsky, he stated, but he also has great respect "for different currents, such as libertarianism and syndicalism." He is critical of the Russian Revolution because it was not democratic. He also bases himself on other revolutions, such as the Spanish or Cuban.

He declared that any concentration on Trotskyism amounted to "sectarianism." He is and remains a "revolutionary," Besancenot declared, but his aim is to unite all those organizations which stand to the left of the "plural left", i.e., those not directly associated with the Socialist Party.

This is not just an issue of labels. The Trotskyism rejected and denounced by Besancenot as sectarianism is the insistence of Marxism on drawing lessons from the historical experiences of the working class. Trotsky was uncompromising in this respect. If the working class is unable to draw the lessons from its past victories and defeats, then it is condemned to suffer similar bitter experiences again and again.

In particular, Trotsky drew a decisive lesson from the Spanish Revolution where one organisation, the POUM—like the LCR today—elevated the aim of uniting the left above the struggle for Marxist principles. At the peak of the revolution the POUM betrayed the working class by joining a Popular Front government and sealing the defeat of the workers' uprising. Today's LCR, however, stands much farther to the right of the POUM in the 1930s—representing merely a pale shadow of official French politics.



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