

French media lay out the red carpet for Olivier Besancenot

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The vast support by the French media for Olivier Besancenot, twice presidential candidate (in 2002 and 2007) for the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League), signals profound shifts in French politics. And raises profound questions.

The favourable media treatment of Besancenot, 35, a part-time postman, is not new, but it reached a crescendo around his participation in a popular three-hour Sunday celebrity TV chat show, “Vivement dimanche”, on France 2 TV, hosted by Michel Drucker. The show, which was broadcast on May 11, was pre-recorded and copiously previewed.

Le Monde, May 9, reported: “The programme started to have an impact even before it was broadcast.... Olivier Besancenot attracted dozens of journalists during the recording. It made the front cover of *Nouvel Observateur* and got half a page in [the celebrity magazine] *Gala* and created a buzz on the Net.”

The conservative daily *Figaro*, which is owned by right-wing industrialist Serge Dassault, a consistent supporter of President Nicolas Sarkozy, published a long article entitled “Red carpet for Besancenot”. It painted a portrait of a man of stature: “Make no mistake. Behind his youthful appearance and his eternally relaxed manner, Olivier Besancenot is not a soft character, nor is he a man of compromise.”

Figaro also quoted, without contradiction, Drucker’s remark: “Olivier Besancenot has real charisma, he has a presence, it is not there by chance and I think many people will be affected by his sincerity.”

The pro-capitalist newspaper also expressed admiration for the LCR leader’s handling of the political interview by Claude Sérillon, towards the end of the show: “Olivier Besancenot kept in charge of the situation.”

The right-wing weekly *L’Express*, recently sold by Dassault to the big Belgian publishing business Roulata, also devoted a long article to Besancenot, which concludes with the prediction: “He savours the pleasure of permanent opposition and expects a real success in the 2009 European elections.”

The May 8 edition of the weekly *Nouvel Observateur*, which is generally close to the Socialist Party (SP) right-wing, featured a full-face cover photograph of Besancenot with the message “The Besancenot mystery”. It made the following astonishing assessment: “At 35, he enjoys a special status: the absolute opponent and absolutely popular, giving nothing to Sarkozy nor to his [Sarkozy’s] opponents, the ‘clowns’ of the institutional left, and, condemning ‘capitalism’ en bloc. On television, his talent amazes. In the striking firms, he’s on an equal footing with the workers. The media treat him

like a prince. His invitation on Michel Drucker’s show on Sunday on France 2, is a consecration. Besancenot is protected: his status as tribune of the people forbids political or personal criticism.”

It is worth recalling that when the French people voted no in the referendum on the European Constitution in 2005 in the teeth of the combined pressure of the mass media and the Chirac-Raffarin-Sarkozy government, allied with the “opposition” Socialist Party, *Liberation*, *Le Monde* and *Nouvel Observateur* bitterly denounced those who led the campaign against it, notably the LCR and the Communist Party (CP) and blamed them for encouraging backwardness in the working class and playing the game of the chauvinists.

How can it be that TV stations and newspapers financed by big business, imbued with a visceral hatred of socialism, communism and their modern expression, Trotskyism, and firmly committed to the capitalist system, are boosting Olivier Besancenot and the LCR’s campaign to form a new “anti-capitalist party” by the end of the year?

The LCR in its weekly *Rouge* of May 15 does not ask this question but disingenuously affects pleased amazement: “Such a flood was most unexpected.”

In reality, the red carpet treatment given to Olivier Besancenot is not hard to understand. The collapse of Sarkozy’s authority and the isolation of his regime, coupled with the meltdown of the SP and the CP as opposition parties, disturbs the political elite. French capitalism, under pressure from global competition exacerbated by the world financial crisis, needs to accelerate its inroads into the living standards and social and democratic rights of the mass of the population. However, it is faced with growing mass resistance from the youth and workers. It fears that there is no party on the left capable of acting as a credible opposition which will prevent a mass social movement from getting out of hand. It needs another prop to take the place of the spent forces of the left, now largely identified as servants of the capitalist class.

The LCR has been around for 40 years. It has convinced the French ruling class that, notwithstanding its anti-capitalist rhetoric, it does not represent a danger to its rule and can be trusted to take the place of these spent forces of the “left”. This is the reason why it is now groomed for this task.

In recent years, the LCR has worked with the trade union and SP and CP bureaucracies to isolate and depoliticise the struggles of the high school and university students, the inner-city youth, the *sans papiers*, the transport and energy utility workers and the public service workers. It has acted to prevent a revolt against these bureaucracies and the development of any movement representing the independent interests of the working class and the youth.

The May 10 edition of *Le Monde* is very clear on this that “the opposition is inaudible”. Stéphane Rosès of the CSA opinion research organisation, in the same edition, expresses fear of the collapse of political authority in France: “The development of Sarkozism has swept aside any even slightly credible alternatives. The country, in its different components, dreads that the failure of Sarkozism may lead to an unprecedented situation. Against him there exists nothing, and he knows it. To his advisors, he seems to be saying: ‘Do you have anyone apart from me?’ The danger of this situation is that, in the national mind there is the image of the monopoly of Sarkozism and at the same time this image has profoundly disintegrated in that self-same mind.”

Besancenot’s reputation as a spokesman for the revolt against the government’s reactionary policies, while tying the working class to the old props of the system, is what makes him appealing to the French political elite. *Nouvel Observateur* writes: “[T]his man, still young, in whom so many of the discontented recognise themselves. Not so often is it that a revolutionary is a star in this temperate country!” The magazine adds: “The LCR leader’s youth and also his style, both in his dress and in his speech, open up a space for him ... and attract the youth ...”

This makes him and his “anti-capitalist party” valuable for the bourgeoisie because the resistance, amongst the youth, the immigrants and broad sections of the workers to Sarkozy’s anti-working class policies, is becoming increasingly explosive and difficult to contain by the traditional “left” and trade unions.

The media have a delicate task: while boosting Besancenot, they must not destroy his revolutionary credentials in a situation where the popularity and the credibility of the Sarkozy government are at an historic low.

Aware of this, *Nouvel Observateur*, affirms that “Besancenot has adopted from the veteran Trotskyists the cult of enduring patience: what do defeats matter, the struggles will recommence.” *Figaro* also vouches, lyingly, for his left credentials: “Not being a man of compromise, some would say he is sectarian, he has always rejected any rapprochement with the reformist left.”

Commentators have pointed out that Besancenot was the only candidate on the “left of the left” whose vote in the 2007 presidential elections held up in relationship to the results in the 2002 presidential election. A recent opinion poll commissioned by *Figaro* established that if the first round of the presidential elections were to take place the next Sunday, the LCR spokesman would double his 2007 score to 8 percent far ahead of other “far left” candidates.

Figaro explains: “He manages to appear as Sarkozy and big business’s most determined opponent”. *L’Express* puts it this way: “In reality, he is perceived a left opponent of Sarkozy and the bosses, who is a little tougher than the others, a semi-political, semi-trade-unionist battler, a social icon.”

In the Drucker show, where Besancenot was apparently given a free hand to choose the studio audience and the invited guests, the only politician invited was Christiane Taubira the deputy from the French colony Guyane. She supported SP presidential candidate Sérgolène Royal’s right-wing campaign in 2007. Taubira has long been in and around the bourgeois PRG (Left Republican Party). Besancenot was unabashed by the exuberant praise lavished on him by this woman, who lauded his “respect for parliamentary institutions.”

Despite his claims to be an internationalist, Besancenot made no critique of the bi-partisan UMP-PS French foreign policy: its support for the devastating neo-colonialist US-led occupations of Iraq,

Afghanistan and ~~Iran~~ joint threats of military intervention in Iran, nor its support for the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians and Lebanon. He made a brief reference to the reinforcement of the French contingent in Afghanistan, but merely in contrast to the cut-backs in education.

Figaro notes Besancenot’s display of inoffensiveness for the ruling class while mouthing left phrases. Referring to the political interview made by Claude Sérillon at the end of the show, it comments: “Questioned again about the new anti-capitalist party which he hopes to create and which would go beyond the LCR, Olivier Besancenot remained vague. So much so that Claude Sérillon ended up concluding that he was ‘a super trade unionist, up with all the struggles, rather than a true party leader who would have a real political analysis, for example of the institutions’.”

While telling Sérillon: “I am the spokesperson of an organisation which is Trotskyist,” he expressed his admiration for the anti-Trotskyist Che Guevara and gave a classical justification for opportunism: “I do not reject absolutely any political affiliation: there is absolutely no revolutionary tendency which by itself can claim to have synthesised all the revolutionary experiences. We will take the best ones.”

Thus, when asked by Sérillon if he would make alliances with Taubira, the Communist Party, the SP left Jean-Luc Mélenchon or other components of the 2005 campaign of opposition to the European Constitution, he assured him that he would: “on a clear basis we are ready to make alliances.”

The working class should be warned. As far as it is concerned, the role for which the French capitalist class is clearly grooming Besancenot and the LCR is far from inoffensive. In appearing as an alternative to the discredited official “left” and the trade union bureaucracies their job is to head off any independent movement of the working class and the youth and preventing it from making a complete break from these props of capitalism, with disastrous results.

An example is Italy, where the LCR’s Italian counterparts, as an integral part of Rifondazione Comunista, participated in the coalition behind the government of Romano Prodi and practiced the policy of the lesser evil to the point of supporting the despatch of Italian troops to Afghanistan, the expansion of the American military base at Vicenza, and cuts in pension rights. This refusal to fight for the independent interests of the working class has played an important role in the return of Berlusconi in the recent elections and the encouragement of the fascists, now carrying out pogroms against immigrants with the approval of the authorities.



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