

New Anti-capitalist Party covers for union betrayal of French oil strike

Alex Lantier

1 November 2010

The isolation and betrayal of the French oil strike against the pension cuts of French President Nicolas Sarkozy is a major political experience for the working class internationally, as well as for workers in France still striking against Sarkozy. After two weeks of strikes and police strikebreaking, against which the unions organized no mass protests or sympathy strikes, the oil workers voted Friday to return to work.

A significant political consequence is the exposure of the class-collaborationist politics of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot. It has responded to this event by shamelessly covering for the betrayal of the unions and the bourgeois “left,” with deceitful pseudo-radical rhetoric.

The exposure of the NPA’s politics is a critical question of class strategy for workers. Their objective function is to prevent workers from breaking with the union bureaucracy, which has made its strategy clear: to isolate and sell out every section of the working class that struggles against Sarkozy’s cuts. In protecting the unions, the NPA is acting as direct opponents of the strategy advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site*: forming committees of action independent of the unions and the “left” parties, to organize mass political strikes to bring down the Sarkozy government.

Besancenot, who was silent in the last week of the oil strike, gave an extensive interview to *Le Parisien* yesterday. Remaining totally silent on the issue of Sarkozy’s strike-breaking and the complicity of the unions, he gave a pass to the unions and the bourgeois “left” parties.

Asked about the “wearing out of the [strike] movement,” Besancenot replied: “We were quite close to obtaining a long-term general strike.”

One wonders how Besancenot could possibly have arrived at this conclusion. Not only was there no serious attempt to organize a general strike, but no struggle was waged against the public opponents of a general strike. These included the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union and its leader Bernard Thibault, and the rest of the union bureaucracy.

Thibault denounced the call for a general strike as “abstruse, unclear.” As subsequent events have made clear, Thibault’s opposition to a general strike was part of a broader strategy of isolating strikers and negotiating with management behind the backs of the workers. Not only did Thibault abstain from defending oil workers from state attack, but the CGT is now refusing to disclose the details of the deal it negotiated, under which the Marseille oil terminals have gone back to work.

Yet no one in the “left” political establishment has moved to expose the rotten role played by the CGT. As *Le Monde* noted gratefully last week, Besancenot was among those who avoided criticizing Thibault and other bureaucrats. It wrote: “Compared to the beginning of October, Olivier Besancenot has put away his criticisms of unions, which he described as a bit weak, and his calls for a ‘new May 1968.’”

Claiming that the unions “got close” to a general strike is to lie shamelessly about their betrayal of the workers’ struggle.

The rest of the *Le Parisien* interview focused largely on the NPA’s relation with the Socialist party (PS), France’s main “left” bourgeois party of government.

The PS has issued various confusing statements to hide its agreement with Sarkozy’s cuts. It has opposed Sarkozy’s plan to increase the technical minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, while supporting the increase in the required pay-in period to 41, then 41.25 years. Since workers’ apprenticeships and internships usually do not count in the pay-in period, the pay-in period increase by itself tends to push the minimum retirement age into the mid- to late 60s, however.

Asked about his relations with the PS, Besancenot explained: “The PS was ready to participate in a united campaign to defend retirement at 60, saying the government’s reform was not fair. We are in agreement on the fight, but our divergences start on what we want to achieve. Saying, like the PS, that one must defend retirement at 60 while calling for an increase in the pay-in period, it’s

totally contradictory.”

Besancenot did not try to explain to *Le Parisien*’s readers the source of this glaring contradiction in the PS’s policies. He did express his concern, however, that he did not want the NPA to participate in a “left” governmental alliance where “in the name of unity, we would serve as a shield for a government that will not carry out left policies.”

The meaning of this obscure phrase is the following: Besancenot knows that the PS has right-wing policies, but wants to work (“fight”) with them anyway. His main concern is that, if he supports the PS too openly, he will end up discrediting himself, as well.

The PS supports cutting pensions and opposes workers’ struggles, but it does not dare say so publicly under conditions where over 70 percent of the population opposes Sarkozy’s cuts. The PS does, after all, want to run a candidate against Sarkozy in the 2012 presidential elections to posture as a “left” alternative to Sarkozy. It therefore chose to “oppose” Sarkozy on one number—the minimum retirement age—and to support other cuts that effectively render its supposed “opposition” meaningless.

The right-wing character of the PS’s social policy is also clear if one considers the identity of the man currently thought to be the PS’s most likely 2012 candidate: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As IMF head, Strauss-Kahn has helped impose massive social cuts to indebted countries in exchange for bailout money, most notably to Greece during this spring’s Greek debt crisis. The PS enthusiastically voted for the European-IMF bailout he organized this summer, imposing huge cuts on Greek workers.

The NPA’s role is to maintain the charade that the PS is a “left” party, and to welcome this agent of the class enemy into workers’ demonstrations. It does this quite consciously.

In an October 27 article on the NPA web site (“Enough with Sarkozyism: Let’s Prepare the Anti-Capitalist Alternative”), leading NPA member Fred Borras wrote: “The PS’s position is not really different from that of the government on the issue of pensions. The head of the PS in Marseille, [PS deputy Jean-Noël] Guérini drew all the conclusions and in the ‘capital of the strike,’ called together with [conservative Marseille mayor Jean-Claude] Gaudin for ... the end of the strike.”

Nonetheless, he applauded that PS members were “attending the demonstrations—and that’s a good thing.”

This raises the question: why is the NPA siding with the PS in the “fight,” as Besancenot puts it, and keeping silent on the CGT’s acquiescence to Sarkozy’s strike-breaking?

It is above all a question of class interests. Drawn from sections of academia and the union bureaucracy that emerged from the 1968 student protest movement as part of

the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), they speak for a middle-class layer with a long history of covering for the betrayals of the working class. Over the last 30 years, the financial aristocracy, and to a lesser extent the leadership of the unions and of the NPA, have made immense profits from social cuts and other defeats. The NPA itself has built up deep political ties to the PS.

It is critical to the NPA, therefore, to maintain the fiction that the PS is a party of the “left” and the unions instruments of “struggle,” on which the NPA can count to develop its political fortunes.

The NPA has used its pseudo-radical rhetoric to hide its alliance with right-wing, anti-working-class forces. Borras gives another mind-numbing example at the close of his piece: “The attitude of Sarkozyism sheds light also on the nefarious character of Republican institutions steered to defend the interests of the bourgeoisie. A real rupture depends on simultaneously acting on an anti-capitalist program based on the social appropriation of the great means of production, the redistribution of wealth, the protection of resources, and the rupture with institutions.”

The NPA’s charlatanry is exposed by its cowardly and unprincipled silence over the unions’ betrayal of the current strike. It is so thoroughly allied to the ruling class that it refuses to protest strike-breaking by riot police, under conditions of overwhelming popular opposition to the government. Does anyone believe that it would wage an international, life-and-death struggle to overthrow the French Republic and “appropriate” the financial aristocracy’s ill-gotten billions?

The NPA represents, and quite consciously so, a shield of the French political establishment from working-class opposition. Those fighting to develop an independent working-class struggle against the social austerity policies of Sarkozy and the financial aristocracy must begin by exposing the NPA’s cowardly defense of the capitalist establishment.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact