

# An errand-boy for French imperialism: NPA's Olivier Besancenot visits Tunisia

Alex Lantier  
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On January 25-26, New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) spokesman Olivier Besancenot made a perfunctory visit from France to Tunisia, where French-backed dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced from office by mass protests on January 14. Other figures of France's "left" establishment—Communist Party (PCF) chairman Pierre Laurent and Eva Joly of the Greens—have also made plans to travel to Tunisia.

The NPA press release said that Besancenot was meeting "the organisations of the 14th of January Front, a recently-formed united left grouping. Meetings are planned with Hamma Hammami, leader of the PCOT [Communist Party of the Workers of Tunisia], leaders of the Left Workers League, post office union officials, and human rights associations."

The 14th of January Front is a coalition of trade unionists and political parties including the PCOT, the Movement of Nasserist Unionists, the Baathist Current, the Democratic Nationalists, and the Patriotic and Democratic Labour Party. It issued a brief founding document on January 20.

Besancenot also visited a night-time demonstration in Tunis. There were no reports that he spoke publicly, though French is widely spoken in Tunisia.

These visits are part of high-level policy coordination between the NPA, the PCF, the Greens, and France's main bourgeois "left" party, the Socialist Party (PS). They issued a joint statement as Ben Ali fled Tunis, calling for a "true democratic transition."

The PS—like the French and US governments—hopes to cobble together a coalition of official "opposition" parties and union officials into a coalition to give a "democratic" fig leaf to the post-Ben Ali regime and halt mass protests. Demonstrations are continuing against the current regime, led by Ben Ali cronies like Mohamed Ghannouchi and Fouad Mebazza.

Besancenot gave an interview to the *Journal du Dimanche*, trying to present the Tunisian uprisings as a victory for social-

democratic, trade-union politics. He said: "I'm taking notes on the organisation and the structure of the movement, it's fascinating." He did not say, however, what organisational points he had learned in Tunisia.

Noting the "collective effervescence" in Tunis, Besancenot said it was "exciting" to see "unions that are ultra-mobilised to demand the resignation of the 'new' government."

He added: "Our job, in France, is to defeat our own government, our own imperialism. It's not the right [France's current ruling party] that will do it, that's for certain.... And the PS will not do anything either! I want to recall that until a few days ago, Ben Ali was a member of the Socialist International [the coalition of social-democratic parties that includes the PS]. It's not just the current government that supported the Ben Ali regime."

Though the Tunisian uprisings ousted a dictator backed by European social-democratic parties, including the PS, Besancenot called the Tunisian events a "social-democratic revolution." He said, "We need a social-democratic revolution, too."

Besancenot's statements are a string of lies and half-truths. Despite his praise for "ultra-mobilised" trade unions, it is well known that the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT, Tunisia's only labour union) was a fixture of the dictatorship. The UGTT national leadership at first denounced the protests against Ben Ali. They then sent officials to participate in the unpopular Mebazza transitional government, only pulling out after it became clear that protests would continue against Mebazza.

As for his comments about imperialism, they raise more questions than they answer. If the NPA leadership knows the PS to be a defender of French imperialism, and a backer of the murderous Ben Ali dictatorship, why do they sign PS documents on Tunisia? Why do they associate themselves with the initiatives of the PS, or its PCF and Green satellites? Why do they not denounce such initiatives as attempts to defend

## French imperialist interests in North Africa?

The NPA's position on Tunisia is a clear signal—it backs French imperialism. It is consciously working to support imperialist parties like the PS, while hiding behind empty, cynical phrase-mongering about a “social-democratic revolution” to try to “defeat our own government.”

This policy has profound objective roots. Tunisia has emerged as a major source of cheap labour for French and international firms (see “France: Continental offers €137-a-month jobs in Tunisia”), and also of immigrant labour in France itself. Its population is overwhelmingly opposed to the policies of US and European imperialism: the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the global torture and prison networks developed in the “war on terror,” and the oppression of the Palestinians by the Israeli state.

The tasks of a Tunisian regime supported by the PS or other imperialist parties would be to keep wages ultra-low and suppress popular opposition to imperialist foreign policy. Such policies cannot be pursued by peaceful or democratic means. The police-state methods of Ben Ali emerged directly from the class interests of his imperialist backers.

This indicates the deep connection between the struggle for democracy in Tunisia and the revolutionary struggle of the working class—both in Tunisia, and in the imperialist countries of Europe and America. As the WSWS has pointed out, the critical task now facing the working class is building revolutionary parties internationally to lead this struggle (see “The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution”).

Besancenot's visit also demonstrates the correctness of the WSWS's analysis of the character of the Revolutionary Communist League's (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—LCR) transformation into the NPA in 2009. The LCR's rebranding of itself, the WSWS noted, was an attempt to publicly cut its former association—however tenuous—to Trotskyist politics. The LCR knew it was preparing to undertake pro-imperialist policies that would contradict the traditions of proletarian revolution and Marxist internationalism associated with Leon Trotsky.

Now, the NPA has emerged as a cynical promoter of “social-democratic revolution” in the midst of a popular uprising against Ben Ali's dictatorship, backing various syndicalist and nationalist elements of the official “opposition.” The NPA's talks with the PCOT, which was technically illegal under Ben Ali, aim to hide these issues under vague promises of “democracy.”

The PCOT plays the role of the NPA in France: the left flank of the officially sanctioned “opposition.” A Maoist party promoting the views of the late Albanian Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha, the PCOT has issued calls for a constituent assembly and democratic reforms. Before joining the 14th of January front, it was in the 18th October Coalition, formed in 2005 and led by the Democratic Progressive Party (PDP). The PDP was the main recognised “opposition” party under Ben Ali.

The PCOT is currently promoting the view that the Tunisian army will defend the people. This lie will dangerously lull the population to sleep, making it easier for the Tunisian army to ultimately crack down on protests in the interests of imperialism and the national bourgeois regime.

It is precisely “opposition” forces like the PCOT that the imperialist powers will use in an attempt to reconcile the Tunisian masses to continued oppression, in the threadbare costume of “democracy.”

In trying to carry out this manoeuvre, however, French imperialism's leading politicians face the problem that their ties to Ben Ali are well known. The PS's affiliation to Ben Ali through the Socialist International is public knowledge, as Besancenot noted. As for the ruling French conservatives, Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered to send French police to help Ben Ali suppress the mass protests shortly before he fled Tunis. Were they to travel to Tunisia, such figures would provoke mass protests.

The task of trying to piece together a new pro-imperialist regime in Tunis thus falls to the B squad—lower-ranking state figures like Laurent and Joly, but first Besancenot, to give the affair a youthful, “protest” look. In taking up this assignment, Besancenot is playing the role assigned to him by the ruling class: the errand-boy of French imperialism.



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