

Why is the NPA's Olivier Besancenot sitting out the 2012 French presidential race?

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On May 5 Olivier Besancenot, the long-time spokesman of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), announced that he would not run in the 2012 presidential campaign.

The major parties and publications of French bourgeois politics are aflutter with speculation on the consequences of the event for their short-term electoral fortunes. Broad media coverage of Besancenot, since he began his 2002 presidential run at age 27, has made him by far the NPA's most widely recognized figure. With Besancenot out of the race, competing parties hope to pick up the 4 percent of the vote that he received in 2002 and 2007.

In a period of more stable capitalist rule, this might benefit other candidates of the bourgeois "left," such as the Communist Party (PCF)-led Left Front and the big-business Socialist Party (PS), with which the NPA has close political ties. Thus, Benoît Hamon, the spokesman for the PS, which is likely to stand International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn as its candidate, hopefully said: "On the positive side, this will limit the division of the left vote." Others hope that Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon might benefit.

These are not, however, such times. There is mass anger as trade unions and bourgeois "left" parties negotiate or directly implement social cuts demanded by governments across Europe and North America. As revolutionary working-class struggles break out in North Africa, the French ruling class is deepening a racist campaign against the burqa and immigrants' rights, under cover of defending "secularism"—which the NPA, PCF and PS have supported. In March, France, with the US and UK, launched a war of aggression against Libya that was applauded by the NPA.

Events are shattering the illusions on which Besancenot based his artificial media persona, as a friendly but "militant" part-time postman. Instead, there is a rising feeling that the NPA is distant and irrelevant to the concerns of working people.

This disenchantment is reflected even in the letter Besancenot wrote to justify his withdrawal.

Besancenot said that for the NPA to re-nominate him "would be giving in to pernicious 'conservative' instincts that we must leave to others. ... It would also be, in my eyes, an untenable contradiction: we would be denouncing a system in which politics has become a commodity on one hand, and on the other we would begin to subconsciously integrate ourselves into the traditional political landscape, by ossifying our party and our ideas in the televised slot of an 'eternal presidential candidate.' This ultimately means becoming a caricature of ourselves, or even an alibi for the existing system."

Coming from Besancenot, this is a fairly devastating portrait of the role he has played in a decade of public life. His ability to identify the NPA's integration into the political establishment underscores, moreover, that this integration is not subconscious. The NPA functions consciously as an alibi for the system, a pseudo-"left" cover to block the rise of working-class opposition to the political establishment and of a Trotskyist

perspective in the working class.

The results of the rapid right-wing turn by the ruling class highlights the bankruptcy of bourgeois "left" parties like the NPA. Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) is rising in opinion polls, as mounting oppositional sentiment in the working class produces no increased support for the discredited so-called "left" parties. To the extent that Besancenot's tired calls for "militant" protests with no revolutionary perspective dominate what is seen as the "left," her far-right demagoguery appears to be the most oppositional option to more confused and backward layers of the population.

Le Pen has significant appeal within the social layers from which the NPA recruits its forces; one of her more prominent new supporters, union official Fabien Engelmann, is an ex-NPA member. Under these conditions, numerous journalists expect Besancenot's withdrawal to benefit Le Pen.

Thus, news magazine *Marianne* commented: "To whom will [Besancenot's] electorate go? [Left Front candidate] Jean-Luc Mélenchon? He's a fraternal rival of the NPA. The Greens and Nicolas Hulot? [Green Party leader] Daniel Cohn-Bendit is not sure that their movement needs a candidate. Dominique Strauss-Kahn? A gulf separates the striking postman from the very pro-business director of the IMF! Nicolas Sarkozy? His friends at Fouquet's [a luxury restaurant where Sarkozy held his post-electoral victory dinner] are not really anti-capitalists. Why not Marine Le Pen? Her discourse is a break with existing elites, a desire to deconstruct Europe, positioning itself with the losers in the system. Let's wait and see what polls say."

Whatever poll results are ultimately presented to the public, however, Besancenot's political evolution testifies to the right-wing drift of French and European politics. While his letter presents this as the outcome of years of political routine he has endured as a TV figure, he was, from the beginning of his political career—in the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), the NPA's predecessor—a cog in a reactionary state machine.

Besancenot's 2002 candidacy, which lifted him to public prominence in the bourgeois media, was consciously arranged by PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin as a safety valve for working-class opposition to his "Plural Left" government. Its privatizations and attacks on working conditions, bound up with the passage of the 35-hour work week law, led to a series of strikes and protests. In 2002 Jospin went down to ignominious defeat, eliminated by a surprising third-place finish behind incumbent President Jacques Chirac and FN candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen.

As revealed in journalist Eric Hacquemand's 2008 biography of Besancenot—recently available for sale in the NPA bookstore, which did not object to its contents—his 2002 candidacy was the outcome of secret negotiations between the LCR and PS officials at the highest level of the state.

In April 2001, LCR (now NPA) leader Alain Krivine met with the PS's Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, at Cambadélis's summer home. Cambadélis's goal in the interview was to arrange some type of candidacy

to the left of the PS to serve as a harmless outlet for opposition to the PS government. He told Krivine, “The radical demands of the recent social movements are not finding a political outlet.”

Cambadélis initially proposed Christophe Aguiton, an ex-LCR union official, but he ultimately let Krivine convince him that Besancenot was the best man for the job.

As presidential candidacies in France need the support of 500 local officials, the LCR had to again approach the PS to obtain the necessary signatures. The LCR’s François Sabado contacted Cambadélis in the spring of 2002, promising that the LCR would endorse the PS in the second round of the elections if the PS put the LCR on the ballot.

According to Cambadélis, Sabado “said the following: ‘We need 70 or 80 signatures to stand our candidate.’ I asked him why we should help a ‘far-left’ candidate in this campaign. He answered, ‘Besancenot will not say that Jospin and [conservative incumbent Jacques] Chirac are the same on the second round.’”

Cambadélis notified Jospin and PS Party Secretary François Hollande. Having received the go-ahead, he met again a few days later with Sabado, who told him: “We promise you, Olivier will make a declaration where it will be very clear without directly calling for a PS vote. But it will be clear, easily understandable ... Fundamentally we do not see Jospin and Chirac as the same.”

Ultimately, however, both the PS and the LCR underestimated the depth of popular opposition to Jospin. His elimination in the first round produced a major political crisis, with mass protests erupting against elections in which the population could only choose between the conservative Jacques Chirac and the neo-fascist, Le Pen. Under these conditions, the LCR applied the same dishonest method Sabado planned to use to call for a Jospin vote against Chirac—except it was to call for a Chirac vote against Le Pen.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) wrote an open letter to the LCR, and other “far left” French parties, Workers Struggle (LO) and the Workers Party (PT), calling for a boycott of the election and the preparation of a campaign of working-class opposition to the cuts Chirac would carry out once in office.

The LCR ignored this letter, however. According to Hacquemand, on election night leading LCR officials, including Christian Piquet, were discussing their public response with PS headquarters on Solférino Street in Paris. They chose to endorse Chirac, and bear political responsibility for the wars and cuts in pensions, social services, and working conditions that he oversaw from 2002 to 2007.

These discussions were carefully hidden from the public, however. The reactionary charlatans at the LCR continued to posture in public as “far left,” and even at times as revolutionaries—an imposture for which they were richly rewarded, though it became increasingly ludicrous.

In exchange for the LCR’s endorsement of Chirac, they had continuing access to mainstream media and television. These ranged from debate shows to celebrity interviews where—in one of the more memorable moments of Besancenot’s political career—he was crowned as the “Ideal Son-in-Law” in 2003 on Daniela Lumbroso’s France3 show, “Everything starts somewhere.”

The Besancenot phenomenon was thus, from the beginning, dependent on the support of the PS and the bourgeois media. The LCR leadership consciously embraced this situation, which of course meant that they were incapable of any serious opposition to the policies of the French bourgeoisie, let alone revolutionary politics.

Like its relations with the PS, this state of affairs was hidden from the public. Nonetheless, as Besancenot biographer Julien Beauhaire noted, based on interviews with LCR party members, they were conscious of having to fabricate an image of Besancenot as a “revolutionary” that was at odds with his media-driven existence. He writes, “Inside the party, people do not hide it, the media are seen as a very delicate question: they

must promote Olivier Besancenot without destroying his credibility as a revolutionary.”

The issue apparently came up because Besancenot himself was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of a “revolutionary” being proclaimed France’s most desirable son-in-law by the corporate media. However, the LCR leadership and Krivine in particular pressed him to keep appearing on television.

Beauhaire continues, “For Alain Krivine, such collaboration [with the media] is imperative, even if the spokesman does not like it. Refusing to participate in these shows would condemn him to disappear. According to the far-left parties, the popular classes are so depoliticized that to make contact with them they have to play at being stars on celebrity shows.”

Behind this demoralized and patronizing perspective lay not only a dramatic underestimation of the objective crisis of capitalism, which exploded only a few years later in the 2008 global economic crisis; it also reflected the deep objective hostility to the working class from layers of academia and the trade union bureaucracy—from which the LCR largely draws its membership—who were convinced that no political, revolutionary appeal could be made to the proletariat.

This perspective has been completely refuted by events. This year, mass working-class struggles in Tunisia and Egypt have forced out long-standing dictators, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and President Hosni Mubarak, and have shaken bourgeois rule throughout the Arab world. Europe and the United States have seen mass strikes against social cuts demanded by the ruling class after massive bailouts handed over trillions to the financial aristocracy.

The rising class struggle has pushed the NPA into ever closer collaboration with the ruling class. During the October 2010 oil strike, amid mass protest strikes and high school student protests, the NPA called for only “playful” protests against police strikebreaking, backing the unions’ acquiescence to President Nicolas Sarkozy’s cuts. Besancenot himself personally disappeared from public view for over one week at the height of the strike.

Besancenot personally seems to be moving on in life, as his situation has become more comfortable. In 2003 he married Stéphanie Chévrier, formerly a top editor of political writings at the major publishing firm Flammarion and now the owner of the publishing house Don Quixote Books.

He has also taken to traveling internationally as a political celebrity, a role in which he has conformed to the political needs of French imperialism as much as when he was working in France. In January he went to Tunisia as the NPA deepened its ties with petty-bourgeois parties like the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid movement and the Maoist Workers Communist Party of Tunisia (PCOT). Several of these parties are now in the Tunisian government, where they are trying to overcome working-class opposition to the formation of a new capitalist regime in Tunisia.

Besancenot’s visit was the first by a series of emissaries of the French bourgeois “left”—including PCF chairman Pierre Laurent and Eva Joly of the Greens—who aimed to re-establish relations between France and its former colony that were shaken by the fall of Ben Ali, a French-backed dictator.

In February Besancenot accompanied PS chairwoman Martine Aubry, Cambadélis, and various PCF and Green Party figures to the Dakar social forum, where Aubry met with Brazilian ex-President Lula da Silva. French imperialism was, at the time, trying to put the finishing touches on a contract it believed Brazil would sign to buy French-made Rafale fighter jets—as well as to defend its prestige in Africa. shaken by the fall of Ben Ali.

As *L’Express* wrote, one of the PS’s main objectives in traveling to Dakar was to “clean up France’s detestable image in Africa.” Besancenot lent his name to this, just as the NPA later gave credence to the “humanitarian” pretenses of defending civilians upon which the French

government launched its war in Libya.

Behind Besancenot's evolution lies the trajectory of an entire social layer and the outcome of an essentially demoralized, middle-class political perspective. Besancenot's political career was, in the final analysis, the product of a period in which the media, the political establishment, and the union bureaucracy could manipulate and suppress the class struggle. His decision not to run not only testifies to the deepening political crisis of the bourgeoisie, but heralds the emergence of mass revolutionary struggles against the domination of the trade union and state bureaucracies.



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