

France's Independent Workers Party backs bourgeois “left” presidential candidate

Antoine Lerougetel, Alex Lantier
1 May 2012

The petty-bourgeois “left” Independent Workers Party (POI), which did not run a candidate in the 2012 French presidential elections, is backing pro-austerity Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande in the lead-up to the May 6 run-off elections.

The main demand advanced by the POI is that the incoming French president should refuse to ratify the fiscal pact agreed in March by 25 of the European Union's 27 countries. The pact binds its signatories, including France, to deep social cuts to eliminate budget deficits. The POI presents its call for the non-ratification of the pact as a demand the next president might grant, if Hollande wins the election instead of right-wing incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy.

In its April 23 statement, the POI writes: “This demand is addressed to all forces that claim to represent the working class and democracy. It is addressed, on this April 22, above all to the person placed in the lead by the first round of this election, François Hollande. He should respond clearly to the question which is asked of him: Will he do it?”

This question is absurd and dishonest: Hollande has made quite clear that he intends to pursue ruthless austerity policies against the workers. He has publicly stated his accord with what he called the “austerity component” of the fiscal pact, leaving open whether he will try to tack onto it a “growth component” of handouts to banks and selected businesses. He has campaigned on the basis of slashing the budget deficit to zero by 2017, which would force yearly spending cuts of €115 billion in France.

Under these conditions, asking Hollande whether he will block the fiscal pact—and acting as if he represents “the working class and democracy”—is a reactionary diversion. He will not.

Workers can oppose the measures being prepared

against them only by preparing for a political struggle against whatever president comes to power. If Hollande wins, this means a struggle against the PS and its allies—the Left Front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the union bureaucracy, and petty-bourgeois “left” parties like the POI itself. This is precisely what the POI seeks to prevent.

The POI's limited criticisms of the reactionary EU bureaucracy themselves seek only to mask its own right-wing politics, aligned on the PS. Its April 26 statement began by invoking the “austerity turn” carried out by PS President François Mitterrand in 1983, denouncing “thirty years of an anti-working class consensus dictated by the European Union.”

The POI then undermines its own presentation of events, however, noting that the EU was created only in 1992 and with Mitterrand's active participation. This attempt to blame Mitterrand's anti-worker policies in the 1980s on the EU is a clumsy attempt to hide the POI's own role.

The POI's predecessor, the Internationalist Communist Organization (OCI), broke from Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1971, in the aftermath of the 1968 student protests and general strike. It adopted the call for a “union of the left,” the false perspective that the OCI could create a mass revolutionary movement by forcing the PS and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) to form an electoral alliance. It thoroughly integrated itself into the PS machine, with many of its members passing into the PS in the 1970s and 1980s.

The result was a political catastrophe for the working class and a bitter lesson on the implications of a party's decision to turn against Marxism, as the OCI did. The OCI called for a Mitterrand vote in 1981, and maintained its orientation to the PS during and after the

1983 “austerity turn.”

The organization’s subsequent development confirmed its French nationalist orientation and its hostility to the working class and to Trotskyism. In November 1991, in the run-up to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s liquidation of the USSR, the OCI transformed itself into the Workers Party (PT) on a nationalist platform, merging with three smaller factions—social-democratic, anarcho-syndicalist, and Stalinist. Having renamed itself the POI in 2007, its party slogan is “Republic, Socialism, and Democracy.”

Now, the POI is again backing the PS—this time, promoting illusions in Hollande, who began his career in the late 1970s as a PS functionary under Mitterrand, helped carry out the “austerity turn,” and makes no secret of his intention to attack the workers. Significantly, France’s imperialist interventions in Libya, Ivory Coast, and Syria do not even rate a mention in the election statements of the POI.

Its political line is largely indistinguishable from the nationalist, pro-PS campaign of Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. A former OCI member who joined the PS in 1976, Mélenchon became a minister in the 1997-2002 PS-led government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin—another former OCI member—and ran this year as the candidate of the PCF-dominated Left Front. Mélenchon is now actively campaigning for a Hollande vote.

The POI is presenting 130 candidates in 60 departments in the June legislative elections. According to statements by POI members to WSWs reporters, they are considering some form of alliance with Mélenchon’s Left Front.

The POI is not a left-wing or socialist party, but a reactionary party controlled by petty-bourgeois or bourgeois interests. Its main constituency has become the Workers Force (FO) union bureaucracy and the officials of the rural communes, exemplified by POI secretary Gérard Schivardi—who was elected mayor of Mailhac in 2001 on a PS ticket. The POI glorifies local officials as independent from the national state, when in fact they are largely dependent on policies and socio-economic conditions set by the national government and the world market.

It is the domination of official “left” politics in France by such cynical operators that has led to the rapid growth of the neo-fascist National Front (FN),

which got 18 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections. Large sections of the working class correctly view parties like the POI as integral parts of a corrupt political establishment. To the extent that they seek to register a protest vote, amid a political vacuum on the left, their votes go to the FN.

The POI’s maneuvers aim to block any move by the working class to the left, objectively creating better conditions for the FN to progress in the polls. Astonishingly, its April 23 editorial failed to mention the FN.

Its subsequent statement issued completely bankrupt advice to the PS on how to block the FN’s rise: “If François Hollande and Jean-Luc Mélenchon had clearly promised to destroy the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties, to break with the European Central Bank, to refuse to pay the debt and reserve available funds for defending jobs and outlawing sackings, what would Mrs. Le Pen’s vote be?”

In fact, Hollande and Mélenchon could have promised all this and more, and they would still have little impact on broad layers of workers and students, who would not believe them. The aim of the POI’s proposed slogans would not be to mount a struggle for these demands in the working class, but to use them as the basis for another campaign to promote illusions in the PS.



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