

# A new voice tries to reinvent the French left

Friday 3 October 2008, by [ERLANGER Steven](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2008).

**This article is a different version from the *The New York Times*' one posted earlier on line on ESSF: [Olivier Besancenot - Light on the Left Guides His Comrades Toward France's Mainstream](#)**

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MONTREUIL, France: He looks like a sprite - boyish, handsome in his black Hugo Boss T-shirt and bluejeans. He reminds some of Tintin, the eternally young comic-book hero of so many childhood adventures.

But Olivier Besancenot, 34 years old, is the extremely adept leader of the hard French left, a beacon for disaffected young members of the Socialist Party and the remnants of the once-powerful Communists. Having already run twice for the French presidency, and an articulate presence on news and talk shows, Besancenot has higher favorability ratings in some polls than established politicians like Ségolène Royal, the Socialist Party presidential candidate who lost last year to the conservative Nicolas Sarkozy.

In the 2007 presidential election, Besancenot won 4.1 percent of the vote with the slogan, "Our lives are worth more than their profits." But in the year since, as the Socialist Party has squabbled over its leadership and Sarkozy has picked off a few Socialist figures for his own cabinet, the young radical has become almost mainstream - serious surveys show that more than 60 percent of the French regard him favorably.

In a representative poll last month by the firm CSA, 49 percent of respondents saw Besancenot as Sarkozy's leading opponent, behind the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, a Socialist (54 percent), but ahead of other Socialists like Martine Aubry (36 percent) and Royal (32 percent).

Besancenot is, by occupation, a letter carrier, a member of the working class who delivers the mail for the state in the wealthy Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, working part time. But he is also the leader of the Communist Revolutionary League, and he described himself without blushing as a revolutionary in a long interview here, in party offices above a printing factory in this racially mixed city just east of Paris, where cheap clothing stores abut shops selling North African and Middle Eastern spices and take-out food.

But given the travesties of the past, from the bureaucratic savagery of Soviet communism to the chaos of Mao, he said, "revolution needs to be reinvented, for no revolutionary experiment has ever succeeded." They have only been betrayed, either crushed by an armed elite or destroyed by "bureaucratic counterrevolution," he said, adding, "We are trying to strike that balance of taking power without being taken by power."

Capitalism is in a deep crisis, he said, "losing the leeway to buy social peace" in the huge credit crunch that began with subprime mortgages and has not finished.

"This time it's not on the periphery," but "touches the heart of the system" and so has a domino effect, he said. "This is a major turn in the evolution of the world economy."

The credit crisis is pointing up further contradictions, Besancenot said.

"We are heading straight for catastrophe from a social standpoint, the human standpoint, from war and the environment," he said. "For us, today, to be environmentalists means to understand that this model of socioeconomic development is out of breath, and if we don't change we will destroy our own planet."

Media savvy, he understands that the name of his party, affiliated with the Trotskyist Fourth International, is wrong for the modern world, having a stink of dead ideology and the last bloody century. "We asked ourselves about finding a name based on what unifies everyone," he said.

So he is attempting to gather other small, leftist parties into a new grouping: the New Anti-Capitalist Party, which is intended to provide an umbrella voting list for those unhappy with the impact of capitalism and globalization on the poor, the environment, the third and fourth worlds, and on the rights of women and gay people. The new party intends to run in the elections for the European Parliament next June.

"We aren't soldier-monks," he said. "We are the exploited, oppressed, the young and the salaried, who don't whine but want to be respected - and for that, at some point, we lift our heads through engagement."

Besancenot speaks quickly and fluently, dotting his answers with references to the philosophical canon of Marxism and post-Marxism, but he has a sense of humor, too, especially about revolutionary purity. Asked about the way human fallibility has ruined previous utopias, he said that serious change must come from below, not from a dictatorship of the proletariat, and that he believes in the protective guarantees of legal rights, decentralization of authority, local responsibilities and multiparty democracy.

The goal, he said, is "to find a political process that permits a revolutionary process to be controlled by its base - especially to not trust each other's promises."

"If we arrived tomorrow," he said, "saying that this time we have the guarantee that it won't be messed up, we should definitely not be believed, even if we were sincere - which we would be, by the way."

Born in Levallois-Perret, near Neuilly, his father a teacher and his mother a psychologist at a school, Besancenot is sensitive about his upbringing. Teased about being a son of the academic bourgeoisie, he bristled, making it clear that his father taught in a primary school in a Communist neighborhood, and that his parents were salaried employees with "a working-class background."

Then he softened. "It would be no problem, by the way," if they had been bourgeois, he said, then added, "My parents exploited no one."

He was politicized by youthful violence and racism. "We had a friend, a buddy in the neighborhood who was attacked by someone who shot at him," he said. The neighborhood mobilized, and "we young people went to be militant for SOS Racisme," a group fighting prejudice. He joined the Revolutionary Communist Youth at 14.

He studied history at the University of Paris X Nanterre, where the May 1968 student uprising began, and then earned a master's degree in contemporary history.

His goal, he said, is to try to define a new model for human society that somehow avoids a permanent ruling elite.

“Until now we’ve had two types of societies: we’ve had the bureaucratic societies in the East and we’ve had capitalist societies,” he said. “And in both cases it’s a minority of individuals that decide for the majority. We are for a model where the majority decides for itself.”

And how to avoid the great failure of socialism, its inability to motivate individuals? “The only answer to motivate the individual in a different economic process would be democracy” in which there are “inalienable liberties,” he said, where the communitarian spirit cannot be violated either by the wealthy or the apparatchiks.

He said he admired Che Guevara because of his “concentration on the individual” and not the collective. “We can find stimuli that aren’t simply material but are also moral in the construction of another society,” Besancenot said. “For Che, communism wasn’t just a phenomenon of production, it was first a phenomenon of conscience.”

Besancenot is regularly mocked by more traditional French figures for his earnestness and naïveté, dividing the left to the benefit of the right. He is “the dream of Sarkozy, who wishes him to be to the left what Le Pen is to the right,” said Pierre Moscovici, a candidate for the Socialist leadership, referring to Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front.

The contempt is returned. Besancenot calls the Socialists dupes of the system. “What they think is their biggest strength is their biggest weakness: the practice of power,” he said, “implementing right-wing ideas” and sacrificing principle for minor reforms.

The French are deeply pessimistic about the future, and what may attract many to Besancenot is his rejection of certitude.

“My generation is full of doubts,” he said. “For me that’s not a problem; it’s almost better to have doubts than certainties. We don’t have a social project key-in-hand. We don’t have a New Jerusalem where we can go live.”

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## **P.S.**

\* From The International Herald Tribune (Europe). Published: September 12, 2008. Basil Katz and Maïa de la Baume contributed reporting from Paris.