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France

"An unknown to represent the unknowns"

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ON Saturday March 23, 2002 the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, French section of the Fourth International) deposited at the Constitutional Council the 500 "sponsorships" that will enable its candidate, Olivier Besancenot, to be on the ballot in the first round of the presidential election on April 21.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/lcr.jpg>]

These sponsorships must come from councillors of the départements, regions, elected assemblies of the overseas territories or mayors, a total of more than 46,000 potential sponsors. In France every commune - 37,600 of them - has its elected mayor. It is essentially on the mayors of the small rural communes that the candidates outside the main parties must rely for their sponsorships. These mayors are in general local figures unaffiliated to any party apparatus and are thus more open to agreeing to give their sponsorship, either in the name of the defence of democratic rights or through sympathy with the candidate.

So since last autumn the activists of the three far-left groups (Lutte Ouvrière and the Parti de travailleurs as well as the LCR), a variety of ecologist or other "small candidates" as well as the far right Front National and Mouvement National Républicain have been crisscrossing the countryside to obtain first promises of support and in the last month definitive signatures. While Lutte Ouvrière benefits from its well-known candidate, Arlette Laguiller, now at 8-10% in the opinion polls, the LCR as such has not been present in a presidential campaign since 1974 and last campaigned for a candidate in 1988 when it was a leading force in the independent campaign of Pierre Juquin, a former leader of the CP.

Last June the LCR decided in a national conference that not only would it present its own candidate, following the refusal of Lutte Ouvrière to envisage a joint campaign around the candidacy of Arlette Laguiller, but that it would make a radical change and choose a new candidate rather than running Alain Krivine, until now the LCR's only presidential candidate (in 1969 and 1974) and its major spokesperson.

Olivier Besancenot at 27 is the youngest candidate in the election and indeed will only reach the legal age of candidacy on April 18. He started his political life as a high school student in 1988 in reaction against the rise of the National Front and against racist incidents in his school; he then participated in the movement of high school students against the Gulf War in 1990.

As a student he continued to be an activist both in student life and in the part-time jobs he had at the same time, notably as a worker in a supermarket where he played an active role in unionising his fellow workers. Since 1997 he has been a post worker, taking one year out in 2000 to work as an assistant to the LCR's European MPs (Alain Krivine and Roseline Vacchetta). He joined the JCR (youth organisation in solidarity with the LCR) early in his political life and rapidly the Ligue as well.

Since 1998 he has been a member of the LCR political committee. The LCR has not waited for the official confirmation of its candidacy and has been waging a vigorous political campaign. Despite the fact that he continued working up to the end of February, Olivier has already spoken at dozens of meetings up and down the country as have Alain Krivine and Roseline Vacchetta, alongside him or separately. The presence of a young candidate, who talks directly from his experience and who is, as he says, "an unknown to represent the unknowns", has attracted a new and younger audience to the meetings.

They appreciate his stance as an anti-globalisation activist, present at all the major mobilizations including Porto

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Alegre on both occasions, as a workplace activist, who denounces the fact that Chirac will never appear before a tribunal charged with rigging elections or diverting public funds to his own pocket while a young black from the socially deprived suburbs will find himself in prison for six months for having simply smoked a joint.

They appreciate his stance as a young worker who stands on the picket line with the young part-time and underpaid workers from McDonalds, who participates in forums such as that on "New challenges for feminism" or the conference organised by the Centre for Research and Information on Cannabis.

A recent opinion poll indicated that 74% of those questioned saw no difference between Jacques Chirac, the current president and candidate of the right, and Lionel Jospin, current prime minister and candidate of the Socialist Party.

The free market right takes its line from the programme of the MEDEF, the bosses' organisation, and makes great play of the question of "insecurity", but Chirac cannot unify it into one political party. His "Union in movement" seems divided, without any real perspective other than unity around his candidacy. Increasingly discredited by financial and political scandals, he can no longer campaign as in 1995 around overcoming the "social fracture". This is opening a space for Jean-Pierre Chevenement, representative of a populist current misled into a reactionary nationalism. A former leader of a "left-wing" current in the SP, he is increasingly associated with "law and order" and anti-Corsican positions.

And the left? Lionel Jospin proclaims that he has not got a socialist project, and that the main regret of his government is its failure to deal with the question of "insecurity". But no excuses for its failure to deal with continuing inequality, mass unemployment, job casualisation. And on key questions such as privatisation, pensions and the European Union there is not much difference between the right and "pluralist left" of the governmental majority.

This intensified social-liberal profile of the SP is speeding up the crisis in the CP. The sharpest indication is the fact that Arlette Laguiller is well ahead of the CP candidate in the opinion polls. Millions of CP voters do not see any sense in voting for a CP that is just a satellite of the SP.

The significant showing in favour of Arlette Laguiller in the opinion polls indicates that there is a current which wants to show its disapproval, from a leftwing stance, of the government's policies. This trend has existed in French politics since the big strike movement of winter 1995.

But although we, like Arlette Laguiller, are on the side of the workers, we also think that revolutionaries should be involved in the struggles of new generations, like the workers of McDonalds, the feminist struggle, the ecological movement and all the new social movements like the global justice movement. This is the message of the Besancenot campaign, which is also showing the way to building a new anti-capitalist force.