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France

“Things could go into a spin very quickly in the Macron camp”

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Olivier Besancenot is a spokesperson for France’s Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA - New Anti-Capitalist Party). He was interviewed by Mathieu Dejean of the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* on 19 April 2018. Since then the movement has continued, meeting with severe repression in evicting occupations from universities and on the occasion of May Day demonstrations. See the NPA statement of 2 May below the article.

Emmanuel Macron has had a very high-profile week in the media. Does he come out strengthened in your view?

I don’t think so. All the signals show that the movement is continuing to take hold. In the universities, it’s underway. On 17 April there was a mass meeting of 1,800 people in Nanterre. I remember what I knew in 1995. [1]. If there are mass meetings like that, it’s because something is happening. More and more colleges are occupied, like Science Po recently. Among railway workers, the rates of strikers are stronger than in previous movements. The RATP is involved. There is no halt. The battle of opinion will not be won on a TV show, but in the period of social struggle ahead.

During his interview on BFM and Mediapart, Emmanuel Macron reproached Edwy Plenel [2] for wanting to create “a coagulation of discontent”, whereas for him, “there isn’t that much there”. Is he right?

No, he’s deluding himself. In fact, it is he who is coagulating anger. As often in conflict situations, the powerful are much more effective than the militants in doing that. It is he and his entourage who consciously decided to light all the fuses at the same time: by persisting in the reform of university entry, reforms on pensions, while pensioners were being pressured with the CSG (Contribution sociale généralisée - social security contributions), or by violently evacuating the ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. [3] In reality all he has managed to do is to remobilize the movement: there have never been so many zadistes as today. By destroying the “Ferme des 100 Noms”, which was a focal point of the movement, he federated all sectors against him. He thinks he can succeed where previous governments have failed, in all areas and at the same time, but should beware of overconfidence.

In the first round of the presidential election only 18% of the voters voted for him, and yet he is reforming the country without making concessions. Why does this not raise more street protests?

To move from non-acceptance to fighting back is a very big step, which is built over time, always in particular conditions. I think that French society is responding to this attack. And that he is too sure of himself, just like his performance against Bourdin and Plenel on BFM. This class arrogance, which he usually displays with a lot of contempt, may make him stumble. He thinks he can do what others have not done before him, because they were held back by their political affiliation. But French society remains very attached to its social model, to its social achievements. Of course, it is not generalized conflagration, but history tells us that conflagrations do not occur spontaneously: they are built.

In May 68, contrary to what the editorial of *Le Monde* claimed, France was not bored. There were plenty of warning signs, strikes, mobilizations. It would be misleading to think that the bulk of the battle is going on right now. Other sectors can do it. The role of activists in this context is to put oil in the wheels, so that when it happens, convergence takes place effectively. The challenge is not just to undermine Macron’s legitimacy, it’s to win. We need to win.

In the cultural battle that is going on between the government, which points to the “privileged” status of railway workers, and you who say that “we are all the railworker of somebody”, is the relationship of forces changing? [4]

I do not think it's a question of argumentation or education. Some people think on the left of the left that we need to educate the masses. It's not the case with me. There is, in the depths of the collective memory – to use an expression that Daniel Bensaïd liked – a deep attachment to social protection. The prospect of railway lines disappearing, emergencies in public hospitals which are even more saturated than today, and publicly-acknowledged selection for university entry hurts people, well beyond those who are mobilized. [5]

With his speech on the “damaged link between Church and State”, his statements on “professional troublemakers”, and the violent police action at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, do you think Emmanuel Macron is moving to the right?

For me, there has never been any question that basically he has always been on the right.

But his strategy is indeed to become the leader of the right. For him, this is the political space to occupy permanently. He thinks he has done the job on the left, and that he should turn to this camp now. He has therefore chosen the party of law and order, in all areas: moral and security. But it's double-edged. When the CRS evacuate peaceful students from an amphitheatre in Nanterre, it strengthens and multiplies the mobilization. And at the same time, it frees the entire pack who thinks it's time to attack, even beyond his own camp. This is what happened in Montpellier. [6] All reactionaries now feel legitimised in attacking.

On the front of the School of Science Politiques, now occupied by students, we can read this message: “Students of Science Po against Macronian dictatorship”. Fifty years ago, their elders opposed the “Gaullist dictatorship”. Do you think there are similarities?

The walls are taking the floor again. I saw a poster in Tolbiac saying, “Do not take the elevator anymore, take power.” This type of boiling over is peculiar to times when thousands of people are preparing for political action. Of course, we are tempted by parallels, but don't copy and paste. The best way to commemorate May 68 is precisely not to commemorate it, but to remake it under different circumstances. But keep in mind that 1968 was not just a big party, it was also 9 to 10 million strikers. That's what turned everything upside down.

The government argues that the Vidal law will not endorse selection in university entry, it is a counter-truth. Is this a question of language?

If they choose to say that it is a pedagogical problem, that students have misunderstood, they will trip up, because the university community - students and teachers - is well informed, and knows what selection is. It was also a cause of May 68. An activist told me that when he was studying geography at the beginning of 1968 at Censier, his first striking image was that of an activist in the Unef [students' union] who went into the lecture hall and said, “Look, at the end of the year, a fifth of this amphitheatre will graduate, the rest will not”. He was not politicized, but since he had already passed his baccalaureat [high school graduation] twice, it immediately spoke to him. Selection was already very strong because of social inequalities. And even today there is an unlisted, unconfirmed and effective selection in the university. But putting selection in the law - because that's what we're talking about - is a ticking time bomb.

Far-right groups have been noted for their aggressive actions in occupied universities. How do you explain this resurgence?

“Things could go into a spin very quickly in the Macron camp”

This is the sign that they understand that something is going on, and that's their way of reacting, through violence. Beyond the fact that there will be opposition to them, it says a lot about the political risk of being the party of law order chosen by Macron: not only will it exasperate and revolt even more those who mobilize against selection, but he is also risking disappointing his own supporters. There are always those who are more royalist than the king. He can lose on both counts.

Since the second round of the presidential election, the FN has almost disappeared from the political landscape. Can we credit this to Emmanuel Macron?

Beware of optical effects. The election period certainly weakened Marine Le Pen, but the FN occupies a deep political space. This political space cannot have disappeared like that, it can reappear at any moment. There is a gap between the electoral representation of the political landscape and the forces actually present in society.

On the left, there is a political exasperation that goes beyond the parliamentary and institutional framework. It is certainly partly relayed by some deputies and political currents, such as France insoumise, but it is deeper than that. There is a radical left in the generic sense of the term, which is extra-parliamentary. This is an important reality.

How do you conceive the role of political organizations, revolutionary or simply progressive, in the current social moment?

Their role is to connect to political time and social time to the greatest extent possible. When social life is speeding up, political life is often delayed. We must be in unison, and there must be a combination of old and new. That is, between that which goes well beyond existing social, union and political structures, and traditional organizations, because their experience is needed. Our role is to work towards this unity.

This unitary framework exists. [7] We meet regularly, we call for joint initiatives, and a meeting is in preparation for the end of the month. Our contribution is however modest, because the political organizations, even united, cannot replace the real balance of forces, which will crystallize in the fight itself: the strikes, the occupations, the demonstrations, the blockages, and things we have not thought about yet ...

Macron spoke of “the tyranny of minorities who have become accustomed to being surrendered to”. But what has the government surrendered over the last fifteen years?

From memory since the CPE there has been no strong social victory. [8] To win, the social movement always has to be strengthened at the base, and at the same time the regime is divided at the top. But the ingredients can be brought together: something is happening in society, and at the top, things could go into a spin very quickly in the Macron camp. We see it on the asylum and immigration law. Making political conglomerates is fine, but this is also a nest of enormous contradictions, which can explode at any time.

In the twelve organizations that form part of the unitary framework that you have built, there is one missing: Lutte Ouvrière. Why?

They came to the first meeting before 22 March [the first strike day of the current wave called for state employees and railworkers], at our invitation, but said they would not be involved. It's their responsibility. However, it is a matter of building a basic unity of action, while acknowledging our disagreements. We know what separates us, but we need to stick together to strike together. One does not lose one's soul by displaying political unity, while clearly acknowledging our differences. In this unitary framework, we do not tell stories: between Hamon and us it is crystal

clear. But we have the common will to act despite our differences when we agree to do so. It's pragmatic.

Philippe Martinez (the general secretary of the CGT union confederation) has said he will not go to the demonstration on May 5, while you have said you will attend. How do you analyse this decision?

Missed opportunities all originate from the systematic battle for leadership. At the level of political organizations, everyone has come back. That is why in this unitary framework, everyone can get involved in the preparations, and we support all the mobilizations: 1st of May, 5 May, and after 5 May. Not only is this unitary framework holding, it is expanding, while we didn't manage to do this on the XXL employment law at the beginning of last year. This is a good thing.

Paradoxically, it is in periods of social unrest that you appear most often in the media. Do you prefer intervening outside election campaigns?

In the NPA, that's how we act, we do not only do politics during elections. The sequence that is opening now will be a moment of politicization that is worth a lot more than election campaigns. For me the two aspects - social and political - are eminently linked. I feel freer since I made the choice to match what I think with what I do. I gave myself the freedom not to be the eternal candidate of the far left in elections. But I waged the campaign for Philippe [Poutou], I travelled the country, I made broadcasts... I felt completely free at that time too. But this story of the “return” is so far removed from me that I do not know what to say about it.

Despite your real differences, do you think it's positive that Jean-Luc Mélenchon has managed to establish a left-wing political force on the political landscape?

My hope is always directed to an alternative political representation. We saw the dynamic of campaign. This was positive because these large gatherings allow activists and non-activists to regain self-confidence. But I still do not feel represented by him today. That does not stop us being able to do things together. What is significant is that we are no longer in the previous period: everyone has understood that he cannot embody by himself the left political opposition to Macron.

There are former NPA or LCR members in the Assembly: Danièle Obono, Eric Coquerel ... Does this forum that they have acquired seem useful to you?

It's probably useful for a series of conflicts that they relay in the Assembly, but I'm not going to lie: my eyes are really not focused on that right now. This is not to downplay what they do, and the energy they expend. It's hard to answer that question: I might not say the same thing if we had parliamentary representation. But I think that even if we did, the political support we need to build something in the period starting now would not be there. They have a platform, but I imagine that they themselves are conscious of the fact that it is only a platform.

Do you think this point of support will always be in the social movement? You don't believe in the interaction between a strong social movement and leftist deputies, as under the Popular Front?

This would imply an electoral period that would occur in a totally different context. In 2017 [presidential elections followed by parliamentary election in May-June], we can clearly see that the Assembly is a theatre of shadows. I believe that the solution is extra-parliamentary from a political point of view, I believe it deeply. It is not related to France insoumise or the last electoral sequence: I have believed it for a long time. And this belief only gets stronger.

Several NPA activists have been victimized in recent months: Gael Quirante was fired from La Poste, Aurélie-Anne Thos (a leader of the student movement in Toulouse) was arrested at a demonstration on April 3rd, Victor Mendez was also arrested during the evacuation of an amphitheatre by the CRS in Nanterre. Do you think there is a hardening of repression?

Absolutely. The cost of activism has been known for several years, and we are not alone. The government wants to create a climate of fear. This policy of disciplinary councils, procedures, summonses and custody has become systematic. But in the poor neighbourhoods, it is much worse: you only have to see the harassment reserved for the Traore family. The systematization of this policy has released forces that the central government does not necessarily control, but to which it has given the green light. We are not crying about our fate, but it is a reality.

Have these persecutions brought a surge of sympathy around you?

In the 1970s, the equation “action – repression” was very fashionable. It was thought that repression necessarily generated solidarity. I will not make a theory about it. And what's more, we waste a lot of time in getting people out of prison, of police custody, preventing disciplinary decisions being made by dismissals ... Common sense would require all labour movement, union, social, campaign and political activists to unite to set up a defence structure, which says: “You touch one of our activists, you touch everyone”. It would be a strong signal, and it is more than necessary.

Is the case of Tarnac, which ended on April 12 in the release of the defendants after ten years of prosecution, part of the same repression?

Yes, that's why we gave them solidarity from the start. [9] Behind the trial of the ultra-left, a message was sent to all the population: be activists at a cost, if you start it, that's what awaits you. This is also what happened to Gaël Quirante, after three rulings from the labour inspectorate rejecting his dismissal on the grounds of trade union discrimination, the validation of these reports by the General Directorate of Labour, and a political decision taken by Xavier Bertrand not to authorize his dismissal, Muriel Penicaud [Minister of Labour] finally authorized it. It's harsh.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, we have been experiencing an eclipse of the idea of great utopias. You are a child of that, a revolutionary without revolution. What makes you keep going? Are there any experiences that make you optimistic?

I do not think that the sequence is characterized by the closing down of our political horizons. I have grown up politically in a world where there is no readily available model, but I have the impression that in recent years, other possibilities are opening, that we are less locked into a role of resistance. For example, the current mobilization is an opportunity to talk about what the public service could be in an alternative way. In the ZAD, we are experimenting with another way of life, another type of agriculture. When there are redundancies, from Arcelor Mittal to Fralib, the idea of creating a cooperative arises. That's why I do not internalize a regression at this level.

You'll be at the fête de l'Humanité, I guess, to see (French rap band) NTM?

(Smiles) For sure, yes.

What do we need to spice things up?

Just to be a little more numerous! (Laughter)

Translated from by *International Viewpoint* from *Les Inrockuptibles* 19 April 2018 [“Olivier Besancenot : “À ça pourrait partir en vrille très vite dans le camp Macron”.](#)

Despite police violence, mobilization continues

The demonstrations of 1 May gathered 200 000 people, which represents an important mobilization, with well-filled demonstrations. The Paris demonstration was particularly massive, while part of the other events took place during the school holiday period in their region. This is the sign of anger rising against Macron, in universities, among railworkers but also in the world of work and youth.

Faced with this mobilization, the government has continued its repressive front. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, it sent police against students in their universities. In Rennes, they attacked the student cortege. In Paris, it used the presence of “autonomists” at the front of the demonstration to attack the young processions and cut the event, it is its attitude that forced the unions to change the itinerary. The students had to turn back in the face of police violence, whether with batons or mass teargassing. This police violence was planned, anticipated by the communiqué of the Prefecture of Police and by the arrangements put in place, not to mention the provocateurs, police officers in civilian wear mixed with the demonstrators.

While we do not share the politics of the autonomist groups, we understand the growing anger of some of the youth, who face social and police violence in their daily lives. It is the government that bears the responsibility for the current confrontation, it is at the origin of aggression against the world of work and youth. The response of the social movement must above all be to protect its demonstrations, in a unitary way between the different organizations, to refuse the police violence ... and to continue the mobilization, on May 3rd, May 5th and in the coming weeks, to stop Macron.

Montreuil

2 May 2018

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[1] Besancenot got his degree in history at Nanterre

[2] Edwy Plenel, former editor of *Le Monde* newspaper is the director and a founder of the Mediapart online-only information website.

[3] The expression ZAD or “zone à défendre” refers to a militant occupation that is intended to physically blockade a development project.

[4] This remark by Olivier Besancenot during a television interview has become popular as a challenge to the government propaganda campaign about the “privileges” of railworkers.

“Things could go into a spin very quickly in the Macron camp”

[5] Up to now any French school leaver with the baccalaureat has been able to enrol in university.

[6] There was a particularly violent evacuation of occupying students by a far-right gang, including, it is alleged, some professors.

[7] Besancenot for the NPA has launched an initiative for a unitary framework bringing together twelve organizations to the left of the PS. These include among others the Communist Party (PCF); Génération.s the movement of Benoît Hamon former SP presidential candidate; Ensemble, a former split from the NPA which joined the Front de Gauche and is today partly in France Insoumise; the parliamentary group of France Insoumise, Europe Ecologie-Les Verts – the Green party; the movement of Gerard Filoche who recently left the Socialist party.

[8] The CPE, or first employment contract, was introduced by Jacques Chirac’s government in 2006 but subsequently withdrawn following mass protests.

[9] The case in Tarnac involved criminal charges against nine alleged anarchist saboteurs.