

French elections: Olivier Besancenot holds final campaign rally

Tuesday 24 April 2007, by [DUGGAN Penelope](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2007).

Four thousand people crammed in to the Mutualité meeting hall on April 18 to hear Olivier Besancenot, despite the rally falling in the school holiday period. A giant screen was erected outside the hall so that several hundred people who couldn't find places inside the hall could follow the meeting.

This was the culmination to a very successful campaign which has seen packed meetings throughout France and Olivier Besancenot consistently ahead in the opinion polls of the other radical left candidates, Marie-George Buffet of the French Communist Party, José Bové supported by a sector of the unitary collectives merging from the NO campaign on the European Constitution, Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière or Gerard Schivardi, supported by the Parti des Travailleurs (Lambertist).

The first speaker was Philippe Pierre Charles of the Revolutionary Socialist Group of the French Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, which are still today a departement of France. He explained that the GR had decided after long reflection, and unlike the majority of independents organisations, to participate actively in this French presidential election campaign because the programme of Olivier Besancenot's campaign corresponds to what the Antilles need.

Also invited to speak were representatives from the ongoing struggles in the PSA Citroen car factory in Aulnay where, despite a recent return to work, the workers are continuing their struggle, and the striking print workers from JDC Torcy. A representative from the National Collective for Women's Rights, in which the LCR is an active participant, outlined the different forms of discrimination and oppression women that suffer in France today, illustrating the need for the demands taken up during the campaign. Mathilde from the JCR spoke of the specific situation of young people in jobs, unemployment and education which have also been constant themes taken up by Olivier Besancenot and called on young people attracted by the ideas of Olivier Besancenot to join the JCR and participate in the international youth camp in France this summer.

Olivier Besancenot insisted throughout his speech that the "useful vote" was not a vote for the PS candidature Segolène Royal in the first round, despite the real menace of Sarkozy, but a vote for ideas and conviction for

"I am fighting for (...) the home straight to take a 100% left course," he insisted. He attacked the right and the bosses, but didn't leave out the Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal, whom he accused of being in a "curious dialogue" with the UDF candidate François Bayrou, in a reference to a proposal made by some leading SP members of an alliance with the centre-right candidate.

"I have always recognised the difference between the right and the left, and I fight for other people to make the difference again," he said before insisting for the benefit of Royal, "When one is from the left what talks of the right to work, not of the value of labour," waving Royal's election manifesto.

There is indeed a remarkable similarity between the opening of her manifesto, "I want with you to rehabilitate the value of labour" and that of UMP candidate Nicolas Sarkozy's: "I want to be the president of the value of labour".

"I don't trust the left to do more than it has done against the right in the last five years," he continued, "whatever the result of the elections neoliberal policies are going to continue in good health." He asked leftwing electors to take a stand for a "100% let counterweight", independent of the Socialist party, "for a left which thinks it is still possible to change society".

"What we are proposing to you is that at least one voice from the far left is heard from this first round," said Olivier Besancenot to the thousands of people listening in the hall, outside the hall, and following the meeting live on the campaign website.

This was probably the biggest meeting of the LCR since 1968, and Besancenot told journalists he was "super satisfied" with his campaign and that "whatever the score the campaign has already won". He told the same press conference that he had found that the mass of electors were much more interested by questions such as housing, jobs and pensions than in 2002 when the campaign was largely centred around questions of law and order and "insecurity".

During the meeting Besancenot outlined his proposals such as banning job cuts and redundancies, increasing the minimum wage and benefits by 300 euros a month net, building a million council homes and introducing new public services for the care of children and the aged. One of the popular slogans and posters of his campaign, reproduced on the t-shirt he was wearing at the meeting, is "our grannies are worth more than their profits", a reference to the profiteering rife in the old people's homes business in France.

Coming back to the question of the rejection of the European Constitution and the social movements, Olivier Besancenot assured his audience he didn't have the impression of being "unuseful" as the right wing so often say and invited them not to forget him when they were in the polling booth.

"For us to be useful in the next five years we have to be credible, including in the first round," he affirmed. "The overall relationship of forces for the next five years won't be the same if the votes of the anti-neoliberal left are counted in thousands or if they are counted in millions."

Olivier Besancenot campaign site: <http://besancenot2007.org/>

P.S.

* International Viewpoint website.

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