

Letter from Paris

A Nice French Red

In France, far-left candidates are a dime a dozen

Friday 6 February 2009, by [SERAFIN Amy](#) (Date first published: 3 February 2009).

When the McCain campaign labeled Barack Obama a socialist, it was one of the worst slurs they could think of. But here in France, socialists are banal. Hell, we've got more than a million communists — Marxists, Trotskyists, anarchists, even Bolsheviks.

French far leftists of all stripes have been in a flurry of activity in recent months, even though the next important elections are still three years off. One reason is that President Sarkozy serves as a perfect catalyst for radical rage. There's also the meltdown of the financial system, seen by many here as the end of the free market system as we know it. And finally, the Socialist Party itself has been self-destructing, plagued by overinflated egos and endless infighting. The most recent embarrassment came during the election of a party secretary last November, with two main candidates: Ségolène Royal (you might remember her as the pretty one who lost to Sarkozy) and Martine Aubry (aka "Madame 35 heures," in honor of her plan to increase employment by reducing the work week.) The count was so close it dissolved into Florida 2000-style wrangling, with Aubry ultimately coming out ahead.

A staunch leftie turned off by these shenanigans and troubled by the socialists' perceived embrace of a free market system might find an alternative in one of several French extreme left parties. All subscribe to the same basic belief — share the wealth. But what they really share in common is that they can't stand each other.

The Parti Communiste Français is the communist party closest to the center, created in 1920 (Ho Chi Minh was a founding member). In their glory years, following World War II, they attracted a quarter of the French electorate. That figure had dropped to less than two percent in the 2007 presidential elections, though the National Assembly consistently includes PCF members. (The party is also closely linked to the newspaper *L'Humanité*, whose Web site surprises with rather capitalistic banner ads for the telecommunications giant Orange.) Of course, it wouldn't be a real communist party without quarreling factions, in this case hard-line Bolsheviks versus reformers. Recently the party's former leader, Robert Hue (who bears a remarkable resemblance to a garden gnome), created an association called the Nouvel Espace Progressiste to counter what he calls the "aging" character of a party that's "prisoner of the Bolshevik matrix."

Moving further left, you have the Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle), a party founded in 1968 whose precepts are based on Marx and Engel's Communist *Manifesto*. The party is personified by Arlette Laguiller (fondly and familiarly known as Arlette), who in 1974 became the first woman to ever run for the French presidency. She's taken six runs at the job, managing to get over five percent of the vote in 1995, but only a mere 1.3 percent in 2007. In early December she announced she was turning over her functions to a new spokesperson, Nathalie Arthaud — a schoolteacher who looks remarkably like Laguiller's younger self. The Lutte Ouvrière is not to be confused with the Parti Ouvrier Indépendant, born last spring after the dissolution of the Parti des Travailleurs (both mean Workers' Party, though the new name sounds a smidge more blue collar), and composed of

Trotskyists, socialists, anarcho-socialists and others. Gérard Schivardi is their best-known member and the PT's most recent presidential candidate; he is a bricklayer and the mayor of a small southern town, and is rumored to have a weakness for red wine.

But the most intriguing development on the French communist front these days comes from a party with the no-nonsense name *Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire* (the Revolutionary Communist League). They, too, will be dissolved early this year before rising from the ashes with a new moniker, something along the lines of the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*. The LCR proclaim themselves to be anti-capitalist, internationalist, ecological, feminist, and "revolted by discrimination of all kinds."

The LCR's most famous representative is Olivier Besancenot, a 34-year old with a round, boyish face and close-cropped hair. He looks like a postman — and indeed, he delivers mail for a living, by bicycle. (Ironically, the neighborhood to which he has been assigned is the well-heeled Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, Sarkozy's fief.) A lifetime political radical with a degree in history, Besancenot joined the Revolutionary Communist Youth at age 14. In 2002, at age 27, he became the youngest presidential candidate in French history, receiving 4.5 percent of the vote as the LCR's candidate. He ran again in 2007, picking up close to 1.5 million votes. Aside from excellent timing, Besancenot appeals because he is charismatic, well-spoken — and hey, who doesn't love the neighborhood mailman (aside from the guy who doesn't resemble his own kids!)?

I called the LCR to see if I could meet Besancenot, but everyone I spoke with let me know that he was extraordinarily busy, due to his having a job and all. I spoke instead with one of the party's other leaders, Pierre-François Grond. He explained that his party supports neither capitalism nor a Soviet-style system, in which the State makes all the decisions. They reject the unfairness and inefficiency of a free market society. If they ever came to power, they would kill off the stock market, nationalize large corporations and make it illegal for profitable companies to lay off their employees. In the place of private banks, they would create a public banking service overseen by the populace. "The people would choose how to invest in crucial sectors such as the environment, health care, and housing," he said. "The free market can't, because it operates on a short-term mentality and expects immediate returns. Only the general public can make long-term collective decisions."

Grond didn't sound like a wacko revolutionary. I gave another call to a French friend of mine, Eric Vallée, a family man with a wife and two kids. Self-employed, he makes a decent living as a computer systems project manager for a large insurance company. He resides in an upscale suburb west of Paris, in an apartment that's fully paid off, and has investments in two other rental properties as well. He buys stock. For fun he runs marathons (a bourgeois hobby if there ever was one). In 2007, during the last presidential elections, he voted for Besancenot.

He told me that it was the first time he voted communist in a presidential election, and was careful to point out that he's not a card-carrying militant, but a sympathizer, like the majority of Besancenot's supporters. He was attracted by many points in the LCR's platform, and equally disgusted by the backpedaling of the socialists. "Besancenot stands for a principle of redistribution, for more social programs, from hospitals to education. He believes that the State should take under its wing those incapable of looking after themselves," he said.

And though Besancenot's party declares itself "anticapitaliste," my friend said he's not averse to capitalism per se, but feels the government must reign in the excesses. "If the State doesn't control the financial system, you have every possible extreme. Enron, Lehman Brothers, Fannie Mae, Jérôme Kerviel — all of this happened because the monster escaped its maker's control."

I asked how he would respond to the accusation that one can't be both a landlord and a communist. He responded that his property is his safety net, and that his income won't cover his retirement

needs. "I'm the best example of capitalism," he said, "because I live day to day. France is a caste system, where the middle class is dying of insecurity. If you don't have the connections or family background to succeed, you have to make sure you don't fail."

Indeed, France is a hierarchy where the president is king and the people are addicted to revolution. The French love nothing more than to hit the streets en masse and chant angry slogans. And if there's a certain hypocrisy in the land of Dior and Dom Pérignon, where "capitalism" is a dirty word, then can't the same be said for America, where accusations of socialism can threaten a political career, even while the government aides many ailing industries?

Ultimately, there is little chance that France's communists will ever lead the nation. This is a conservative country, and left-wing leaders have been the exception, not the rule. "Would you be pleased if Besancenot were elected president?" I asked my friend. "No," he responded, unhesitatingly. "Some people are made for power, others for opposition. You musn't confuse the two." It may well be that Besancenot feels the same way. After all, somebody has to deliver the mail.

P.S.

* From The Smart Set, 3 February 2009:

<http://www.thesmartset.com/article/...>

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