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France

# Raphaël Arnault, the antifa who wants to be an MP

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## **Raphaël Arnault, the former spokesperson for the Jeune Garde collective, is standing in the French parliamentary elections in June in Lyon, He won't be wielding the megaphone adorned with the anti-fascist logo of the "three arrows" for a while.**

A few weeks ago, Arnault left his position as spokesperson for the Jeune Garde Lyon (JGL, an anti-fascist collective created in 2018) to become a candidate of the "social, ecological and popular left" in the parliamentary elections of 12 and 19 June, in the second constituency of Lyon (Rhône). He is running with the support of the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA) against the candidate nominated by the Nouvelle Union Populaire écologiste et sociale (Nupes - New People's Ecologist and Social Union, the left-wing political coalition led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon), the former member of Macron's party En Marche Hubert Julien-Laferrrière. The ultimate metamorphosis of a new generation of anti-fascism.

On 20 May, near the Gros Caillou, in the Croix-Rousse district – one of the areas most targeted by far-right groups, which have their strongholds in the city – the echo of the "siamo tutti antifascisti" slogan seems distant. The 27-year-old activist, an educational assistant, polished his style to launch his campaign – his ponytail has disappeared, and he speaks without a microphone, in shirt sleeves. The memories of the attacks of the most radical far right are still fresh in the memories. The event has not been announced publicly, as a security measure. The fifty people present were alerted by internal loops, in a closed circuit. During the presentation of the duo he forms with Mathilde Millat, his 24-year-old running mate, an NPA activist and an employee in a popular education association, a *service d'ordre* (SO – security service) made up of JGL activists discreetly monitors the surroundings.

## **A tense campaign**

"In Lyon, as soon as there is a social movement, out of experience, we pose the question of attacks. It's a systematic concern," explains Raphaël Arnault. His campaign will not escape their rule. Since his face became known nationally – he appeared on the show "Touche pas à mon poste" on the C8 channel, a way of challenging media hegemony on the far right – this football enthusiast lives in a state of permanent vigilance. In September 2021, activists from the far-right group Zouaves Paris ambushed him as he arrived at the Gare de Lyon in Paris. He got away with a bloodied eyebrow

"When your commitment is to be on the front line against the fachos, politics becomes something physical," say left-wing YouTuber Usul, a Mediapart contributor and a friend of Raphaël Arnault, who has also been exposed to the threats of these violent groups established in Vieux-Lyon. The genesis of the JGL is linked to this local configuration. In January 2018, after a series of attacks by the Parti nationaliste français and the Bastion Social on the Croix-Rousse, a group of five friends, activists in various circles – Raphaël Arnault became involved with the NPA when he was a student at Lyon 2 university – decided to organize self-defence.

"[In Lyon] there is an immediate need to push these groups back, to close their offices, their boxing halls, to weaken them so that activism for emancipation in the broad sense can be further deployed, whether it be the various feminist, anti-racist, trade union struggles..", says sociologist and anti-capitalist activist Ugo Palheta in *Défaire le racisme, affronter le fascisme* ("Undoing Racism, Confronting Fascism"-, La Dispute, 2022).

Unlike autonomous anti-fascism, which is viscerally anti-state and operates by affinity network, the JGL practices

“class” anti-fascism, which responds to this local situation by forging links with more traditional left-wing groups. “The only time I've seen neo-Nazis retreat in Lyon is when they were confronted with the SO of the CGT (major trade-union confederation). This is what guided us: we do not pride ourselves on having reinvented anti-fascism, on the contrary, we are inspired by the heritage of the workers' movement,” says Arnault, who has tattooed above his right ear a branch of laurels, symbol of his anti-fascist identity.

Quickly, the collective “Fermons les locaux fascistes” (“Close the fascist premises”) was set up and won some victories. This is the crucible from which he says he derives his legitimacy today. Present in the small crowd on 20 May, Cédric, who is an activist in Alternatiba, confirms this description: “The Jeune Garde has absorbed the far-right violence directed towards the activist milieu. It has become our shield.”

“Bringing visibility to anti-fascism has been important for the people who are campaigning here,” Usul said. Now they have someone to turn to. The JGL has a concrete existence that does good in the milieu.” Annie (first name changed at her request), a 20-year-old activist in the JGL and a student in a preparatory literary class, says she grew up in a “racist village” near Lyon. The anxiety-provoking climate she felt when she arrived in the city, where fights with the far right are frequent, convinced her to join the organization. Now, she enthusiastically supports the metamorphosis of “Raph”: “This candidacy brings visibility to the fight against the far right. For us, this also plays out in the institutions. And the fact that we are young is also a symbol of our desire for a policy that comes from below, to reappropriate our means of action.”

## Occupying all terrains

Inspired by the rhetoric of Olivier Besancenot, who he mimics in his speeches – big hand gestures, a mixture of pictorial language and political jargon, recurring references to “our social camp” – Arnault seems to embody the motto of Scred Connexion, a rap group the former NPA spokesman likes: “Never in the trend, but still in the right direction.”

In the highly codified milieu of anti-fascism, his candidacy appears to be a transgression. Tensions between the Groupe antifasciste Lyon et environs (Gale), recently threatened with dissolution, and the JGL have thus redoubled in violence at the beginning of the campaign. Both sides accuse each other of physical attacks – the JGL tried to close the case by issuing a unitary statement calling for “de-escalation”.

Safak, one of the co-founders of the Jeune Garde, a tiler in real life, who cultivates a look close to the rap duo PNL – impeccably trimmed beard, white T-shirt, beltbag worn across the body, tattoo “ACAB” (“All coppers are bastards”) on the forearm – supports this strategy: “This struggle was privatized by a very inward-looking activism, concentrated in the university environment. We founded the Jeune Garde together to escape this logic.”

And then, he notes that the far right does not have the same modesty about entering the institutions. “Former *identitaire* activists are being recycled as candidates for the legislative elections, and many are already parliamentary assistants. After Marine Le Pen's score, it's all the more important to counter them wherever they are,” he argues.

The step is all the easier for Raphaël Arnault to take as he sees in the score – 21.95% – of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (for whom he voted) in the first round of the presidential election as an opportunity to win on a line “of breaking with neoliberal policies”.

“When I became an activist, after the betrayals of François Hollande, there was no longer any hope of reconnection

between the institutions and us, the new generations active on the ground. This presidential election has changed the situation, we say that the left is once again becoming the left,” he says, sitting on a bench in the courtyard of a downtown area in Croix-Rousse.

His deputy, Mathilde Millat, who voted for NPA presidential candidate Philippe Poutou and cites Usul, Olivier Besancenot and feminist activist Andrea Dworkin as sources of inspiration, shares this analysis: “Mélénchon has pushed the cursor to the left compared to a few years ago on anti-racism, feminism, animal rights... What he said about ecological planning has been listened to, without it being considered extremist or populist,” she said.

The tectonic plates on the left work, on paper, in favour of their radical political offer. However, in the second constituency of the Rhône, which voted more than 30% for Mélénchon – the district of the Presqu’île, bourgeois and Catholic, being an exception – the pairing does not enjoy the support of Nupes.

## Repairing an anomaly

At the end of the negotiations between the apparatuses in Paris, the NPA was not included in the agreement [1], so the outgoing deputy Hubert Julien-Laferrière, a member of Génération écologie, elected in 2017 under the banner of *En marche* after having been a member of the Socialist Party (PS) tendency of Gérard Collomb (a former mayor of Lyon turned Macronist), was selected as the Nupes candidate.

A decision very little appreciated by local left-wing activists. “Those who know him know that he has long been overseen by Collomb and that he passed Macron's laws for three years [before breaking with him – editor's note], so he sticks in their throats. We are trying to repair this local anomaly,” says Arnault, who therefore presents himself under the label of a “social, ecological and popular left”.

In fact, Sarah, an activist in La France insoumise (LFI) in Vieux-Lyon since December, confides that all the action groups (GA) on the slopes of Croix-Rousse and La Duchère are campaigning for him: “His candidacy reassured many activists who, in this particular configuration, did not see themselves voting for the Nupes candidate.”

Exit, therefore, the campaign tools of the Popular Union, such as the application “Action Populaire”, very practical for organizing leafletting and door-to-door canvassing, and the recognizable logo in the shape of “V”. Raphaël Arnault rejects the term “dissent”: if elected, he wants to join the parliamentary group of the Popular Union.

Contacted by phone, Hubert Julien-Laferrière agrees that he expected his candidacy to cause a stir. However, he defends himself: “Many on the left believed in some of Macron's promises. I left after two and a half years, and since then I have been fighting faithful to the commitments I made in 2017, for human rights, the reduction of inequalities, against pesticides and neonicotinoids. I ask that you look at the work I have done in the Assembly, beyond the label ‘ex-LREM’. He also believes that the Nupes is an “opportunity” to seize.

In front of his supporters, including many young people and some more seasoned activists, Raphaël Arnault concludes his first speech by claiming greater fidelity to the spirit of the label: “The real popular union is there, at the base. This candidacy does not come out of nowhere. We can really win, we aren’t here to pick poppies.”

For logistics, he will be able to count on the support of the NPA, the only organization to officially support him – elsewhere, the NPA has decided to support to varying degrees the candidates of the Nupes when they embody a “left of rupture”. Philippe Poutou will make a trip to Lyon to support Raphaël Arnault and Mathilde Millat on 8 June.

The rap group ACS (“À contresens”) should also participate in the festivities.

In the group photo, on 20 May, some make the “V” of victory, symbol of the Melenchonist federation. Safak smiles, satisfied: “I know he is able to shift the boundaries that anti-fascism had set for itself.”

*This article is translated by International Viewpoint from [Mediapart](#).*

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[1] See [“A new electoral union on the French left”](#).