THE FUTURE OF THE FRENCH LEFT

By Kevin Devlin

Summary: Since the narrow defeat of the Union of the Left in the French national elections of March 1978, the Socialist and Communist Parties, while both proclaiming their commitment to the union, have treated each other much more as rivals than as allies. The PCF has been particularly vigorous in its polemics, claiming that the socialist PS was solely responsible for the electoral defeat, that it has "swung to the right," and even that it is ready to surrender some French sovereignty to the EEC. Meanwhile, a series of by-elections has shown that the PS has grown in electoral strength -- partly, apparently, because of its appeal to social categories and interest groupings beyond the working class -- while the PCF has stagnated. Within both parties, established leaders are being challenged as part of the process of evolutionary change, so that the future of the Left in France remains uncertain.

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At the beginning of this year, most observers of the French political scene were still taking it more or less for granted that the Union of the Left would win the crucial national elections in March -- an assumption based on the reasonable belief that the communist and socialist leaders, who had been exchanging polemics since the breakdown of the negotiations over the updating of the Common Program in September 1977, would settle their differences in their common interest. But interests of a different kind prevailed, particularly on the communist side: the agreement which could have been reached months earlier came only after the first round had made it fairly clear that the Left would, after all, be defeated. Now, as the year nears its end, with communist-socialist polemics continuing and with both parties being shaken by waves of dissent and disunity, the question is to what extent one can still speak of the Left -- not the Union of the Left -- as a force in French politics.

One plausible reading of the deeper reasons for the electoral defeat of the Left is that the neo-Leninism of the French CP prevailed over its Eurocommunist tendencies: rather than face the prospect of being the weaker component in what would amount to a reformist, social-democratic regime, the party -- or, rather, its leadership -- preferred to withdraw behind the ramparts of what Louis Althusser called the "fortress" of its sociopolitical counterculture. (1) Another way of putting that is to say that, finding itself on the threshold of a share, a minor share, in governmental power, the PCF chose to reaffirm its historical identity as the opposition party -- not merely in the traditional West European sense of the term, but in a more radical opposition to the existing sociopolitical system. (This may be contrasted with the attitude of the Italian CP, which more than a decade ago took to describing itself as "un partito di governo," meaning first a party capable of participating in national government, and then one whose administrative contribution was needed if Italy was to tackle its internal crisis.)

The Socialist Party, on the other hand, as the successor of the S.F.I.O. of Blum and Mollet, was essentially "a party of the government," even while in opposition, in the sense that it was viewed (and viewed itself) as a serious candidate for government. But, whereas the old S.F.I.O., under Mollet, had sought political power through co-operation with the centrist forces, the new PS, formed under François Mitterrand in 1971, took the Left as its strategic option -- which meant dealing with the Communists, and eventually responding to their call for a common program.

"Ideological Dominance" of the PCF

In doing so, the organizationally and (at that time) electorally weaker PS was being led onto terrain dominated ideologically by the Communists, so that the French political process was expressed in terms of proletarian idealism, class struggle, nationalization of industries, etc. Through a sort of ideological intimidation, the Communists succeeded, and to a large extent are still succeeding, in keeping the interparty confrontation on that terrain (e.g., through their "Maximalist" demands for an updating of the Common Program in the fall of 1977). One prominent Socialist, Jacques Attali, a confidant of

Mitterrand, put this central fact perceptively in a comment on the
electoral defeat of the Left:

What happened was that we thought the Left was ideologically dominant in this country -- and that is not true. And the reason why the Left is not ideologically dominant in this country is that the Communist Party is ideologically dominant in the Left. That is obvious: the Common Program was drawn up on the basis of a communist proposal.../it/ dealt with themes that are specifically communist.../and it/ was very largely dominated by communist analyses. (2)

This ideological dominance of the electorally weaker force was the more striking in that the proletarian dogmatism of the PCF was becoming increasingly inadequate, not to say outdated, when viewed against evolving French realities -- one might mention, inter alia, the expansion of the services sector, a shift (even among manual workers) away from emphasis on wage levels toward concern with the quality of work and leisure, the development of new interest groupings, such as the feminist movement, (3) and the economic interdependence of advanced societies.

Within the broad spectrum of the Socialist Party, there were tendencies making for the kind of adaptation to changing realities that the PCF could not make. The PS, indeed, spoke with two voices: one, in a direct challenge to the Communists even more than to capitalism, using the traditional Marxist terminology of class struggle, but the other appealing to a wider audience with its vague slogan of "self-management (socialisme autogestionnaire)," (4) its cultivation of social categories and interest groups beyond the working class, and its emphasis on administrative decentralization, on freedom of internal discussion (making a virtue of necessity, while at the same time frequently tarring the PCF with the East European brush), and on socio-political pluralism.

(2) André Harris and Alain de Sédouy, "Qui N'Est Pas De Droite?", Le Nouvel Observateur, 7 October 1978, pp. 76-86, at pp. 85-86 (extract from a book of Communist-Socialist interviews with the same title).

(3) In passing, one may note that, on November 18, a group of communist feminists demonstrated in Paris against their party's attitude to the movement, distributing a leaflet which said: "The Communist Party, by not recognizing the autonomy of the feminist movement and by neglecting the political character of certain areas of oppression and exploitation, such as the couple, the family, and sexuality, still underestimates the new historic dimension introduced by feminism into the political practice and the very concept of socialism" (see "Elles Voient Rouges," Le Nouvel Observateur, 27 November 1978, p. 48.

(4) Perhaps the writer may draw attention to an error in an earlier paper, "The French CP's 'Besieged Fortress,'" of 22 November 1978. In the last paragraph of p. 2, the phrase la gauche cogestionnaire should read "... autogestionnaire." While it has now adopted its own brand of autogestion, the PCF denounces cogestion, linking it with West German Mitbestimmung and with the social-democratic gérance de la crise in general.
On some of these issues — notably the emotive question of auto-
gestion — the Communists have manifested an uneasy sensitivity, with-
out radically modifying their positions. Four years ago, Georges
Marchais could make an indirect attack on his socialist allies by
criticizing Yugoslav self-management as leading to "anarchy" (he said
he preferred the Gaullist concept of "participation"). (5) Over the
past few years, however, the PCF has gradually made auto-gestion a slo-
gan of its own -- while denouncing the socialist version as "this
(pseudo) self-management which fits perfectly with the management of
the capitalist crisis." (6)

Which Socialist Strategy?

But the PCF's effort to defame and distort the socialist positions
on self-management, and thus to deprive the PS of its most useful ide-
ological weapon, draws attention to the need for a divided Socialist
Party to reach some fundamental decisions on its post-March strategy.
The two basic options have already been indicated. The party can carry
on with the strategy followed since its Epinay congress in 1971 -- the
effort to become the leading force, and ultimately the leading govern-
mental partner, in a dual alliance still largely conditioned by commu-
nist ideological positions. The alternative is to consign the Common
Program to the rubbish heap of history and seek to develop a "new left-
ist" program of its own: emphasizing a "social-democratic" concern
with adapting to social change, spelling out, in practical detail, just
what "self-management" would mean, taking an undogmatic approach to
economic problems, reducing inequalities, and improving the quality of
life for people in general.

If the "Epinay strategy" has historically been associated with
First Secretary Mitterrand, the alternative has recently been personi-
fi ed by Michel Rocard, former secretary general of the ultraleftist
PSU (Unified Socialist Party), who led a majority of the party into
the PS in the fall of 1974. In a broadcast of September 17, Rocard
said (in connection with questions about an opinion poll in which
Mitterrand had lost heavily in popularity) that "a certain political
archaism is being condemned," and that "we must speak more truthfully"
-- especially, he added later, with regard to the financial costs and
"economic rigor" that a profound transformation of French society would
require. This was viewed as a direct challenge to Mitterrand, and was
followed by a flurry of intraparty polemics in which Pierre Mauroy,
the Mayor of Lille, appears to have played a moderating and mediating
role. The national convention of the PS on November 25-26 restored a

(5) Andrée Harris and Alain de Sédouy, Voyage à l'Intérieur du Parti

(6) See Félix Damentte, "Autogestion: Reformisme ou Marche au Social-
isme," L'Humanité, 28 October 1978. Also relevant here is the
rapprochement between the PCF and the LCY, marked by Stane Dolanc's
recent visit to Paris, his lecture on self-management at the PCF's
party school and his interview on the same subject in L'Humanité,
11 November 1978.
semblance of unity, (7) but the differences in strategic emphases remain, and the debate over them will presumably be resumed before the party's congress in April.

These differences have been interestingly summed up by a perceptive Italian communist observer:

For Mitterrand, there is no alternative to the Epinay strategy, updated and once more made credible by a Socialist Party become the leading force of the whole Left, Communists included, even if the latter are recalcitrant about the idea of figuring as a subordinate force; and it is on this leftist strategy of a "break with capitalism" that the new socialist program to be presented to the April congress should be based...

For Rocard, this strategy is an anachronism. The socialist program must start, not from ideas, but from situations. The Left, as conceived by Mitterand, is a myth which has to be overcome, because the Communist Party, as it is today, "is no longer of use" -- it, too, is an anachronism. What France needs is a great Socialist Party, endowed with a rigorous and credible economic program, and such a governing party cannot be built up if one remains tied to archaic political conceptions. (8)

But can the "Epinay strategy" be credibly pursued in the new, post-March situation? It takes two sides to make an alliance. Despite continuing unrest in its own ranks, the PCF has kept up a polemical barrage against the PS since March, accusing it of veering to the right, of being influenced by the West German SPD, of tending to (if not planning to) surrender French sovereignty to the EEC and even to the Atlantic Alliance, of choosing "social-democracy" instead of "socialism," while concealing this through "double language" and a "double game," and so forth. One out of countless apposite quotations will suffice. René Piquet, Politburo member and CC secretary, sums up the results of the two Central Committee sessions since the elections, and dams the Socialist ally without even the faintest of praise:

When its electoral growth appears to it sufficiently strong to adopt a different line of conduct, it breaks its commitments and seeks to marginalize the Communist Party and impose its will on it. The interior and exterior pressures which tend to push it ever further to the right are intensified.

That is why to speak of the responsibility of the Socialist Party for the disunity and defeat of the Left is not to engage in polemics. It is just to say that the Socialist Party, by returning to social-

(7) For the communist daily, however, the convention was primarily a manifestation of socialist determination to weaken the PCF. See Michel Struloviczi, "Objectif No. 1 du P.S. -- Affaiblir le P.C.F.," L'Humanité, 27 November 1978.

democratic ways of refusing indispensable structural reforms, destroys all chance of democratic change. And that if it does so, it is because it is constantly drawn toward this by its nature, its social composition, its lack of a global theoretical analysis. (9)

Socialist Electoral Strength

A centrally important factor here is that, after the March elections as before them, the Socialist Party has continued to outstrip the Communist Party in electoral strength, even while the PCF maintains its organizational and financial superiority by a wide margin. This has been demonstrated in recent months by a series of by-elections in which the Socialists were the big winners and the Communists among the losers. Thus, in the Nancy by-election of mid-September, when radical leader Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber was ousted by a socialist newcomer, Yves Tondon, the first round vote of the PS went from 26 per cent in March to 37.5 per cent, while the communist vote dropped from 22.3 per cent to 14.9 per cent. According to one calculation, (10) in nine by-elections in July-September, the first-round PS votes rose by 8 per cent, from 25.86 per cent to 33.65 per cent, while the PCF vote dropped from 19.84 per cent to 18.48 per cent (down 1.36 per cent: not much, it might seem, but an alarm signal for Marchais in view of the remarkable steadiness -- or stagnation -- of the party's voting strength over the past two decades).

A poll published in early October gave the PS (plus its small left-radical ally) 32 per cent -- "a score unhoped for in the best days of the Union of the Left," commented Jean Daniel in the leftist Nouvel Observateur. (11) Indeed, the conclusion seemed to be that the socialist electoral score was rising precisely because the March defeat and communist polemics had weakened the damaging link with the PCF (which, incidentally, fell to 18 per cent in the same SOFRES poll).

One reason for that was itself significant: "The opinion polls show that the increasing mass of the socialist electors is more reformist than revolutionary, more moderate than the majority of the militants." (12) If the socialist leaders, and presumably most party members still hold that, despite the roadblocks set up by the PCF, there is no present alternative to the strategy of a leftist alliance, a considerable proportion of the socialist voters would prefer to see the party turn toward the center. In one IPOP poll some months ago, socialist voters were asked: "For the future, do you hope that the Socialists may reach an agreement with the Communists, or with the centrist Giscardians?" Less than two fifths (39 per cent), chose the Communists, while the rest either took the centrists (30 per cent) or were undecided (31 per cent). (13) The high proportion of undecided, after six years


(13) See "Marchais-Mitterrand: Deux Déclins," Le Point, 4 September 1978, p. 34.
of the Union of the Left, suggests that the PS leadership may have to reckon on an increase of this indirect "centrist" pressure from the electorate -- a factor which President Giscard d'Estaing, whose open ambition has long been to build up a centrist alliance, may be able to exploit.

Rivals or Allies?

Nevertheless, despite such centrist tendencies, the idea of leftist change is still strong in France eight months after the March defeat -- a narrow defeat, let it not be forgotten. This affects both the PS and the PCF, often in different ways. Particularly revealing, as far as the PCF was concerned, was the by-election held in the Pas-de-Calais in early September, when the communist leadership (going against the advice of local militants, it was learned) maintained the party's second round candidature in competition with a better placed socialist; the socialist won with a smashing 60 per cent, half of the communist electorate having deserted the party in disgust (Marchais admitted that the decision had been a mistake). Moreover, as elections draw near, the PCF's neo-Leninist tendency to criticize the "social-democratic" PS will be tempered, not only by unitary pressures from the base, but also by the simple fact that the PCF needs an electoral alliance, complete with second round désistements, even more than the PS. Thus, in the March elections, the PCF's seats in the Chamber of Deputies rose from 74 to 86, even though its percentage of the vote actually dropped slightly, from 21.4 per cent to 20.6 per cent.

If the short-term relationship between the two parties looks like continuing to be one of basic competition, modified at times by a mutually opportunistic alliance, something similar may be observed on the trade union level, where the communist-controlled CGT must treat the leftist CFDT, ideologically but not organizationally linked with the PS, now as rival and now as ally. Both the PCF and the PS have changed considerably within the past few years; and much will depend on how they both respond to the chances and challenges of further change. Will the "new ideas" which Rocard stresses -- political frankness, economic rigor, greater influence for the socialist base, and a tougher attitude to the PCF -- prevail at the April congress of the PS over the "Epinay strategy" associated with Mitterrand? Or will Mauroy preside over a compromise combination of the two? Will the coming EEC elections and Mitterrand's posture as an elder statesman of the Socialist International strengthen the party's social-democratic component? If so, will the one fifth leftist minority associated with the CERES research center defect?

For the PCF, the basic question is whether it will turn away from visceral neo-Leninism toward reasoned Eurocommunism. If it does not -- which, on balance, seems the likelier outcome -- then electoral stagnation may give way to decline, though the "fortress" of the communist counterculture will stand for many a year yet. But even within the fortress (i.e., the party membership), voices of protest and criticism are now being raised with impunity. One of them is that of the veteran intellectual Jean Rony, (14) who, in an article just published, calls

(14) Earlier this year, a book by Rony was published, Trente Ans de Parti: Un Communiste S'Interroge, in which he expressed the belief that the shock of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 had started an irreversible "procès d'ouverture" within the once-monolithic PCF. See the review in Le Monde, 27 April 1978.
on the PCF to adopt what may be called an "Italian" attitude to the European elections, urging that what Eurocommunist must do is ally themselves with the "dominant" social-democratic component of the West European Left in the movement for social reforms. The alternative, he suggests, is "sterilization and decline"; and, "to those tempted to see a capitulation in this proposal for readjustment, it is possible to reply that one can draw from it more serious reasons for being commu-
nist than from the solitary pleasure, which should be left as the priv-
ilege of sects, of being always in the right against everybody." (15)

Even if the PCF leadership continues to ignore such prophetic voices, it will remain an important political force for the foreseeable future. Similarly, the heterogeneous forces of the French Left, in dynamic evolution, will remain an extremely important factor in the national political equation. Whether it will develop into a genuine alliance, whether it will achieve governmental power (and on what pro-
gram), or whether it will continue to win battles and lose wars -- these are questions that the future will answer. One tentative conclu-
sion may, perhaps, be risked: that if the Left, as such, has a future (however uncertain), the Union of the Left -- at least as we have known it -- has only a past.

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