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FRENCH CP IN DECLINE CHOOSES HARD-LINE ISOLATION

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: The French Communist Party, which withdrew from the Socialist-dominated government after three years of participation, has formally abandoned the strategy of the Union of the Left. A long report by Secretary-General Georges Marchais to a Central Committee plenum placed the blame for the collapse of the alliance entirely on the Socialist Party, which was accused of having moved to the Right. The PCF's forthcoming 25th congress will instead develop a strategy of popular mobilization against the government's austerity program.

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The three-day Central Committee meeting that has just ended marks, as expected, the formal abandonment of a strategy that has intermittently dominated the French CP's political activities for more than two decades: the strategy of the Union of the Left. To say that the strategy did not pay off is to put it mildly, indeed. Three years of communist participation in a Socialist-dominated government, from 1981 to 1984, began with a disastrous drop in the party's electoral strength from over 20% to about 16% in the elections of June 1981; it ended shortly after the PCF had suffered a further catastrophic decline to 11.2% in the European elections of mid-June 1984.

At first it seemed as if the PCF might react to this political disaster by changing its leadership, reassessing its purposes and policies, undertaking internal democratization, and perhaps changing the posture of traditional solidarity with the Soviet regime that had undoubtedly been a factor in the decline--in short, by taking a leaf or two from the Italian CP's relatively

successful book. Among the "innovators" calling more or less clearly for a reassessment of traditional attitudes were the four communist ministers in the coalition government. One of them, Marcel Rigout, told reporters on a trip to Rome in late June that only greater internal democracy would save the party from further decline, that its greatest handicap was that the French public equated it with the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union with the gulag, that Georges Marchais had been a failure as a leader, and that the party now needed "a real cultural revolution."¹ The fact that Rigout later denied having made these provocative statements, to which journalists could attest, was, however, an ominous indication that "reformers" were unlikely to prevail against the entrenched power of the apparat.

Harder Line

The position of the conservative apparatchiks was also strengthened by changes in the policies of the ruling Socialist Party (PS), which had also suffered serious losses in the European elections (down to 20.7%), but had drawn the opposite conclusion: that it must sacrifice leftist dogmatism to political pragmatism and strengthen its appeal to the center. This was evidenced, for example, in the abandonment of the controversial education bill, seen as a threat to private schools, but more obviously in mid-July, when President Mitterrand replaced the "old Socialist," Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, with the younger Laurent Fabius, widely viewed as a pragmatic centrist.

When Fabius offered the PCF seats in his government, while stressing that he would develop the policies of austerity that the Communists criticized, late-night debates in the Politburo and Central Committee ended with the announcement that the PCF was withdrawing from the coalition. This decision was, of course, blamed on a swing to the right by the Socialist Party; and the PCF's continued commitment to the cause of left-wing unity was defensively stressed. Moreover, two Politburo members, Pierre Juquin and ex-minister Charles Fiterman, made statements stressing that, although the PCF had left the government, it still remained part of the parliamentary majority supporting President Mitterrand.

Choice of Identity

In the ensuing weeks, however, the "innovators" visibly lost heart as the harder line became more marked. With Secretary-General Marchais himself, *L'Humanite* director Roland Leroy, and PCF parliamentary leader Andre Lajoinie as its main spokesmen, this line found expression in mounting criticism of the Socialist Party, which it accused of "managing" the capitalist crisis at the expense of the workers. The new strategy was emerging: the PCF would try to rebuild its strength by exploiting popular discontent with the austerity measures imposed by a Socialist government constrained to recognize economic and political realities and would use for this purpose the organizational strength of the

CGT labor federation. On a deeper level, however, lay a choice of identity: a decision to maintain the traditional characteristics of the PCF as a militant force in opposition to the established order, in basic solidarity with communist regimes; a besieged fortress of the counterculture; and a party tacitly accepting the ultimate price of becoming a marginal force in the social and political life of France.

On the eve of the annual festival of *L'Humanite* two weeks ago, Roland Leroy flatly declared that the PCF was no longer in the majority, since it was no longer in the government, the policies of the Socialist Party having made it "morally and politically impossible for us to participate in it." That gave the lie to Prime Minister Fabius, who had just made the conciliatory claim that the Communists were still part of the majority and had not yet voted against the government. In his own militant television interview at the festival, Secretary-General Marchais declared that the PCF had "no responsibility for the management of the country's affairs," that the forthcoming budget "will be a bad one" (implying that the PCF would vote against it), and that in place of the alliance with the Socialist Party, the PCF would try to build up "a wide movement (*rassemblement*) of popular forces."² As for the Union of the Left, he said that the PCF must now "draw the lessons from an experience that has lasted almost a quarter of a century," implying that it was now ending.

By the time the Central Committee met on September 17, discipline had been (almost) completely restored,³ and the combative Secretary-General was in the saddle again, as he presented his magistral, 150-page report.⁴ In his long analysis of the party's experiences during the past three years, Georges Marchais charged that responsibility for the present economic and social crisis lay solely with the Socialist Party, which had 9 out of 10 ministers and an absolute majority in Parliament. The Socialists were also responsible for the crisis of the Union of the Left, because of their abandonment of joint commitments and their attempts to gain centrist support. If the PCF itself was also open to criticism, it was largely for having nourished illusions about the possibility of a stable alliance with the PS. In signing the Common Program in 1972, the PCF "nourished the illusion that the Socialist Party was really favorable to profound reforms, to a real break with capitalism," whereas the PS, violating its own commitments, was now "spreading erroneous and pernicious ideas on the inevitability of the crisis, of unemployment, and of austerity." The Socialist Party, "and in particular Francois Mitterrand, has understood how much it can profit from this situation in order to attain its fundamental objective--the weakening of the French Communist Party."

Congress Plans

Marchais repeated his charge that the Socialist Party had taken a rightist turn in abandoning the Common Program in June 1982 but evidently found it somewhat difficult to explain why the

Communists had remained in the government for another two years. His explanation was that the PCF, eager above all to prevent the victory of the Right, hoped against hope that it could persuade the Socialists to reverse their course and return to their commitments. It was finally "constrained to make the only decision possible in the situation created by the Socialists," because the new Prime Minister's program "aggravated the crisis on the economic level and led to defeat on the political level."

The Secretary-General devoted much of his long report to the preparations for the coming 25th party congress, to be held in February, and is clearly planned to mark the institutionalization of this "choice of identity." The draft document to be prepared by a committee which he would chair would cover five main themes, he announced: an analysis of the national crisis; a development of the political orientations of the three preceding congresses (thus stressing both continuity and his own reaffirmed leadership); an elaboration of the idea of a national *rassemblement*; the project for a socialist society "in French colors"; and the strengthening of the party.

Significantly, it was in connection with the project for a French type of socialism that Marchais reaffirmed the PCF's solidarity with the USSR and other existing communist regimes. Noting that some people urged the party to sever the chain attaching it to the "ball" of the socialist countries, he said: "Such an attitude is profoundly mistaken." What the Communists wanted for France was a society that would indeed be original, democratic, profoundly different from existing models, but still socialist.

Whether one likes it or not, to form their judgment the French people who look toward us and who could be won over to our project for a new society will always refer to socialism as it is being built in several other countries.

That is plain enough: the PCF's choice of identity is also a choice of camp. It is, however, a camp to which the mass of the French nation clearly does not belong nor want to belong. It is now over three years since a disillusioned communist scholar, Jean Elleinstein, in a book with the blunt title, *They Are Deceiving You, Comrades!*, gave the prophetic warning: "Either the French Communist Party will transform itself or else it will be left on the margins."⁵

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1 See AFP (Rome), 30 June 1984, and John Vinocur's report in the *New York Times*, 5 July 1984.

- 2 *L'Humanite*, 10 September 1984.
- 3 In an apparent gesture of rebellion the PCF weekly *Revolution* (7 September 1984) carried a long interview with the ex-Communist scholar Henri Lefebvre, in which he criticized the party's failure to analyze Stalinism and said that its national role would depend on its "capacity for renewal." The leadership had reportedly forbidden *Revolution* to hold political debates at its stand at the *L'Humanite* festival.
- 4 The Marchais report covers 10 pages in *L'Humanite* of September 21; for extensive excerpts see *Le Monde* of the same date.
- 5 Jean Elleinstein, *Ils Vous Trompent, Camarades!* (Paris: Belfond, 1981), p. 203.

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