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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AT THE PCF CONGRESS

Summary: The 19th Congress of the French Congress Party was largely a demonstration of reconsolidation after the trials of the recent past. Traditional solidarity with the CPSU was reaffirmed (although the PCF has not withdrawn its criticism of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia), and the rebel philosopher Roger Garaudy, his views formally condemned, was ousted from his leadership posts. But he was not expelled from the party -- and the congress brought other signs that the PCF is not immune to the winds of change.

Television coverage of the 19th Congress of the French Communist Party (PCF) left the viewer with one unforgettable picture. It was that of Roger Garaudy, sitting in lonely detachment among the delegates of Val-de-Marne: arms folded, eyes somber behind spectacles, stubborn lines etched around his mouth -- impassively watching the tribune where, as Politburo and Central Committee member, he ought to have been seated with the rest of the leadership, while a succession of speakers denounced him for "anti-Sovietism" and for holding positions "completely opposed" to the line of the party.

Garaudy's very presence in the Nanterre Palais des sports was an act of moral courage. He could easily have absented himself on the ground of ill-health, as did Louis Aragon, his friend, fellow-Central Committee member, fellow-champion of Czechoslovak reform and, occasionally, fellow-critic of Soviet dogmatism (whose illness lasted until the evening of the third day, when he entered the congress hall to warm

applause -- just after Garaudy had made his unrepentant speech, and departed). Since October 1969, when he broke a year's silence by publishing the book, Le grand tournant du socialisme, (1) Garaudy had been repeatedly denounced by the Politburo, the Central Committee and a drumfire barrage of major and minor party spokesmen, while his views on such subjects as the Communist regimes, intraparty democracy and the French path to socialism had been condemned in one section of the Congress Theses. He knew that at the Nanterre Congress he would be subjected to further attacks and formal condemnation, that he would lose his leadership posts and might be expelled from the party; yet he came -- and came not to offer the traditional self-criticism, but to reaffirm his stand in lonely integrity. In a way, the outcast was the central figure of the congress.

"Normalization"

But only in a way. The 960 delegates were participants in a well-staged demonstration of organizational unity which brought few surprises. This was, as expected, a congress of "normalization" and consolidation, intended to manifest the PCF's recovery from the trials of the recent past -- notably the Czechoslovak crisis, which obliged it break hallowed tradition by disassociating itself from Soviet actions; the student uprising of May 1968, which exposed it as an essentially non-revolutionary force; and domestic developments, which confirmed its position as the opposition force but left it as far as ever from its primary goal, a Leftist alliance based on a common program.

The PCF's loyalty to the CPSU, already demonstrated at the Moscow Conference of Communist parties in June, has been reaffirmed. The party would "fight intransigently against any manifestation of anti-Sovietism, from whatever source it may come," declared its new strong man, Georges Marchais. (2) In line with this posture, L'Humanité quietly censored certain passages in the speeches of the Yugoslav and Rumanian

(1) See RFE Research #0470, "PCF Seeks to Close Ranks at 19th Congress," of 4 February 1970, by Kevin Devlin, pp. 4-5.

(2) L'Humanité, 5 February 1970.

fraternal delegates which must have grated on the ears of the strong Soviet delegation. (3) Omitted, for instance, were the passages in which the Yugoslav Mika Tripalo and the Rumanian Paul Niculescu-Mizal called for the abolition of military blocs in Europe.

Then there was the curious case of the chief Italian delegate, Giorgio Napolitano, who had been expected to restate his party's well-known views on such subjects as Czechoslovakia and inter-party relations, but instead delivered a blandly uncontroversial address. The puzzle was solved by Le Monde, whose reporters discovered from "sources close to" the Italian delegation what had happened. The PCF leadership had twice insisted that Napolitano modify passages of his prepared speech dealing with Czechoslovakia and the Moscow Conference. Napolitano refused: rather than make the changes demanded, he dropped those passages. (4)

The Czechoslovak Issue

As for Czechoslovakia both Marchais in his opening address and Etienne Fajon in his report on the theses reaffirmed the PCF's "disapproval" of the August invasion, but they did so briefly and linked this with a declaration of solidarity with the Soviet Union. So the "disapproval" remains on the record, but the PCF -- in contrast to more progressive Western Communist parties, notably the Italian, Spanish and British -- has ceased giving active support to the cause of reform in Eastern Europe. Indeed, it seems that the PCF has actually helped Czechoslovak conservatives to demolish the heritage of the Prague Spring. During the congress Le Monde confirmed with circumstantial details the revelation -- made a little earlier in Czechoslovakia by the conservatives Indra and Bilak (5) -- of the ignoble role that the PCF recently played

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- (3) See L'Humanité of February 7 for partial reports of both speeches.
- (4) See report by Andre Laurens in Le Monde, 7 February 1970.
- (5) Indra made the revelation at a speech on January 14 and it was repeated, again without details, by Bilak at the Czechoslovak plenum at the end of the month. Bilak headed the Czechoslovak delegation to the PCF congress.

in the sorry process of Czechoslovak "normalization." Last November (1969) a three-man delegation of the PCF had gone to Prague, and there handed over the minutes of conversations which Waldeck Rochet had with Dubcek on July 14-15, 1968 (a few days after the French leader returned from Moscow, where he warned the Russians against invading Czechoslovakia). According to Le Monde (6 February 1970), Rochet expressed the PCF's concern about developments in Czechoslovakia, its amazement that the Czechoslovak CP could tolerate the existence of the K-231 society (for victims of Stalinism) and the "reactivation of the social-democratic party." By handing over these notes, taken at the time by Jean Kanapa, the PCF of course provided Czechoslovak hard-liners with more ammunition to use against the fallen Dubcek and all that he stood for.

Down - But Not Out

As it reaffirmed the PCF's traditional positions in interparty matters, so the congress also reaffirmed its tradition of disciplined unity. The challenge to that tradition was, of course, personified by Roger Garaudy; and, as noted earlier, the issue was never in doubt. In a series of unanimous votes during the closing session, the congress formally condemned his positions -- "on all points the antithesis" of the party line, said Fajon. Garaudy -- Stalinist turned Marxist humanist, member of the Central Committee for 24 years and of the Politburo for 14, Communist deputy for 11 years, author of 21 books -- was duly dropped from the top leadership; dismissal from his post as director of the party's Center for Marxist Studies and Research (CERM) will certainly follow.

But he was not expelled from the party; and before he was formally condemned he was allowed to defend his heretical theses (as he had already done during the pre-congress discussions, in his Humanité statement of January 2) in a frigid silence broken only by occasional groans and angry whistles. He did so with subtlety, eloquence and courage. While avoiding the more extreme formulations of his book, Garaudy repeated his call for a profound transformation of the PCF, a fuller acceptance of open debate, a more convincing commitment to democracy, a less dogmatic analysis of political realities -- and a new attitude to existing socialist regimes. The PCF, he insisted, must state clearly what aspects of those regimes it approves of and what aspects it rejects; in particular, it must declare that "the socialism that we intend to build in France is not the socialism that has been militarily imposed on Czechoslovakia."

Signs of Change

The fact that an influential intellectual who has challenged the leadership so radically, and has been condemned so vigorously, remains a member of the Party (at least for the time being) is without precedent in the purge-ridden history of the PCF. It is the most dramatic demonstration -- though not the only one -- that, despite the stage-managed show of continuity, the Party is being affected by the winds of change. Other signs included the pre-congress "debate," which was more of a true debate this time than ever before, and the presentation of "unscreened" amendments from the floor of the congress. (6)

This is not merely a matter of showing outsiders how "democratic" the PCF is, although the need to impress this on the other left-wing parties (with which the PCF is, so far in vain, trying to conclude an alliance) must have been an important factor. Even more important, however, is the fact that Garaudy represents a wider current of unrest within the Party. Just before the congress, 175 Communists and ex-Communists signed a manifesto condemning the "normalization" imposed on Czechoslovakia. The independent review, Politique Aujourd'hui, produced by dissident Communists and leftists, has entered its second year of vigorous life. Garaudy's friend, the writer Aragon, continues to criticize authoritarian Communism in his weekly, Les Lettres Françaises. The dissident magazine, Unir-Débat, which represents a "clandestine" anti-Stalinist faction within the Party, and claims a readership of 20,000, prepared for the congress by issuing a strongly anti-Soviet "draft program" of its own. (7) "New Left" militance continues to make inroads.

Thus, despite the conservative temper of its leadership (strengthened by the election of Georges Marchais as Deputy Secretary-General to the ailing Waldeck Rochet), the Nanterre congress has shown that the PCF cannot escape the pressures of change. As Garaudy reminded the congress, the Party can

(6) See Roland Leroy's report on amendments made to the Theses. L'Humanité, 9 February 1970.

(7) "Une ligne communiste pour la France," Unir-Débat (Paris), 10 September 1969, pp. 11-30.

get rid of those who raise inconvenient problems, but the problems will continue to be posed by life itself. To sum up the 19th congress one might, perhaps, adapt a familiar French saying: "Plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change."

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