

● France: Party
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SIGNS OF CHANGE IN THE PCF

Summary: Despite the French Communist Party's condemnation of the ideas of the progressive intellectual Roger Garaudy, the 19th Congress has brought signs of change which, to some extent at least, show the influence of those ideas. Although the apparat remains firmly in control, procedures have become more democratic, and rank-and-file members have been promised more information.

Roger Garaudy's attempt to impose change upon his party was not a total failure. Small changes that could eventually lead to larger ones were evident throughout the 19th Congress of the PFC, which ends today.

Shift was already evident in the pre-congress debate, conducted in the column of the party press. This was so, first, because Garaudy and a few supporters were given the opportunity to state their case; second, because several people dared to stand up beside Garaudy and take that opportunity. In the past, when a leader came under fire, access to the party press was denied to him, except for the sole purpose of self-criticism; and in the past, when a leader was obviously destined to be condemned, no one would speak up for him. So this development reflected both a change of methods on the part of the leaders and a change of mentality among at least a part of the base,

who dared oppose the leaders.

The congress itself showed other effects of Garaudy's influence. It was marked even in the hard-line opening speech by acting party chief Georges Marchais. Marchais placed new stress, missing from the original theses, on the scientific and technological revolution, the role of the intellectuals and the possibilities of Christian-communist collaboration. All of these are starting-points for Garaudy's re-examination of the doctrine. The same stress was introduced last night into the final version of the theses themselves -- by means of amendments offered from the base. So on these issues Garaudy evidently struck a chord.

Obviously, Garaudy's far-reaching conclusions are rejected. But at least the party has been induced to take a closer look at the problems that are posed.

More Information

The line against Garaudy's demand for democratisation in the party was a hard one, particularly hard in the report presented on February 6 by Politburo member Etienne Fajon. But again there was a small sign of change. Fajon said that "numerous militants" had demanded that the leadership supply more information to the base. This was a "legitimate" request, said Fajon, and it would be granted. The party daily L'Humanité, would improve its presentation. And this was self-criticism: Fajon is political director of the party organ.

There was a small procedural shift also in last night's vote on the final version of the party's theses: instead of presenting the entire document for one, single, take-it-or-leave-it vote, the theses were put up chapter-by-chapter in a series of eight votes. Also to be added are a few more signs of a slightly different mentality among the militants. Last night, for example, when the delegates received the final draft of the theses, several groups of delegates gathered during a break to adopt, on the spot, additional amendments to be passed up to the responsible commission.

Finally, a small but significant straw: a speech yesterday by party intellectual François Hincker, member of the editorial board of the monthly, Nouvelle Critique. Hincker dutifully joined in the condemnation of Garaudy. But then added a brave public warning to the party: there are signs that we could be led into exaggerations in the campaign for ideological purity; he said in effect. We must guard against this danger.

None of these elements represents a great deal in itself. But what they represent together is, first, a greater recognition of the problems to be faced; second, a better flow of information on which to study them; third, a slightly more democratic method of debate in which the study can take place; and, fourth, a promising if limited readiness by certain militants to take advantage of new opportunities.

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