A vanguard behind the times?

--- Bernard Moss on the French communists

The 1981 elections in France represented a victory not only of the left and the forces of labor over the right and capital, but one also of the gradualists over the radicals in the labor movement. Step by step Francois Mitterrand had achieved his grand design — uniting and revitalising a socialist party out of the ruins of the SFIO, engaging a political alliance that strengthened the socialists at the expense of the communists, defying and defeating his allies in electoral competition and forcing their capitulation before a program bearing the marks of class compromise. For the victory of the left, essentially electoral in nature, came as a setback for the PCF, the CGT and working class movements, which remained divided and generally immobilised by the delegation of power. Bowing to popular aspirations for change, the PCF conceded defeat, fell into line behind Mitterrand and undertook a review of past errors that had led to the loss of one quarter of its electorate.

This exercise of self-criticism, initiated and orchestrated by the leadership, culminated in the final resolution approved with only two abstentions at the 24th congress of the PCF in February. The criticism, evasive with respect to current responsibilities, was sweeping and radical with respect to the historic past. Blame for the May defeat was attributed to late de-stalinisation after 1956 and the delay in chartering the democratic road to socialism currently embodied in a stratégie autogestionnaire — a strategy relying upon trade union struggles and worker initiative and tending toward a society of self-management. As a result of this delay, the PCF fell behind the times and resurrected a popular front strategy that was ill-suited to the new aspirations for self-management and to a Presidential regime that gave the advantage to the more centrist partner in any electoral alliance. The form of unity adopted — a common program of government — had served to hamper the independent initiative of the class and the party and to conceal differences with the socialists. The Common Program was too abstract, general and advanced for popular comprehension. Because it failed to articulate a more decentralised participatory approach, it left the PCF open to charges that it wanted a Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism for France. With the exception of the form of intervention in two notorious incidents — Marchais' televised approbation of the Afghan invasion direct from Moscow and the bulldozering of an insalubrious immigrant hostel at Vitry during the Presidential campaign — the leadership scrupulously side-stepped criticism of its conduct since the break with the socialists in 1978. By assigning blame to Maurice Thorez and the historic past, the criticism served to justify current...
French communists policies and leadership and to mask those structural problems and errors that had led to the May defeat.

The blanket repudiation of the popular front strategy — a criticism extended to the 1930s as well — was an historical sleight of hand that was unworthy of a party conscious of its heritage. Whatever the problems of a popular front, it has been a mainstay of revolutionary parties since Marx. Marx in the Communist Manifesto, Lenin in 1922, the Comintern in 1935 — all advanced joint programs of government with the forces of social democracy as a way of uniting the working class, winning over the peasants and middle class and isolating the forces of capital. Under the Gaullist regime such a program was essential for uniting the opposition and reviving prospects for a non-capitalist alternative.

The pursuit of a program for popular unity entailed the condemnation of those ultra-left slogans — power is for the asking, imagination takes power, all is now possible — that flourished in the general strike of May-June 1968. To suggest that the PCF would have made greater headway with a program of self-management is to anticipate upon events. For even if the communists had been sufficiently de-stalinised to consider such a prospect in 1968, a perspective alien to both Second and Third Internationals, a program of self-management would have been far less comprehensible to workers recovering from ten years of repression and demoralisation than were demands for greater political and social democracy, for trade union rights and wage and hours improvements.

Launched by the social democratic CFDT in solidarity with the student movement, the slogan of autogestion meant everything and nothing. Gaullists and social democrats, including elements of the CFDT, took it to mean worker participation in capitalist management, while Trotskyists brandished it as a call for revolutionary power. As it was, only a small fringe of the working class, chiefly professional workers with links to the university, took it up as a concrete demand for corporate autonomy. So hazy was its meaning that most workers actually identified it with the program of the PCF! As the PCF said at the time, democratic political change by means of a common program of the left was a precondition for any kind of autogestion involving working class control.

Post-1968 strategy

Despite the mistakes it made in dealing with the student movement, the PCF was quick to recover and to incorporate lessons of May-June into its grand strategy. The Manifesto of Champigny issued in December of that year was a new synthesis that marked a decisive break with the Soviet bureaucratic model. It outlined the perspective of a
peaceful transition to socialism without civil war, of a socialism respecting political pluralism and liberty, and of a party acting as the vanguard of the working class rather than an instrument of state control. The dynamic element in the strategy was working class struggle from below leading to common programs with social democracy that would be supported by popular forces at each stage of the way. To succeed with the strategy the PCF had to avoid the shoals of reformism and extremism. The reformist danger lay in a common program that was not supported and articulated by independent initiatives and working class struggle, one that could be recuperated by reformist elements in the alliance. The extremist danger was a syndicalist strategy that concentrated on trade union and workplace activity to the neglect of left unity and a common program. In the end, the PCF succeeded in committing both errors — the opportunist one during the period of the Common Program and the ultra-left one since 1978.

The Common Program signed in 1972, largely on the basis of the communists' own program, was the kind of transitional program — similar in nature to that of the Paris Commune or Lenin's April Theses — that had always eluded the Second and Third Internationals. It sought to free the state and economy from capitalist domination, to improve working and living conditions for the vast majority and to democratise the institutions of daily life. Reflecting the strength of revolutionary forces in France, it was a more radical version of what had become known in English-speaking countries as the alternative economic strategy. Its main features were: 1) the nationalisation of all credit institutions and key industrial groups, to give the public sector the capacity to control the private sector; 2) new powers for workers and unions to control production in the private sector and to co-manage the public sector; 3) rises in wages and social expenditures linked to increased productivity and output; 4) channelling production away from specialised export, the global capitalist division of labor, toward meeting local consumer and social needs and increased trade with third-world and socialist countries. Designed as a program of government for five years (the life of parliament), it left room for worker participation and initiative, notably with respect to demands for further nationalisation. It was a coherent program of change, balancing supply and demand factors under a new economic logic and offering credible prospects for peaceful transition within the basic institutions of the Fifth Republic.

Had the PCF integrated this program into its long-term strategy, had it avoided opportunist and ultra-left errors, it would have surely found it self further down the road to socialism today. It was handicapped in finding the proper equilibrium by the Stalinist legacy. The Comintern under Stalin had forged monolithic parties that linked a dogmatic version of marxism with a highly centralised command structure and agitational style of propaganda and work. For communists formed in this mould de-stalinisation was an extremely difficult and painful process. Rather than return to the theoretical source and elaborate anew a strategy to suit particular national conditions, communists tended to frame every issue in terms of the old versus the new, ancients and moderns, Stalinists versus Euro-Communists. The fact that a policy was Stalinist, that it had been practised by communists between 1928 and 1956, was of course no more proof of error than of worthiness. No party went through de-stalinisation without some damage to its internal cohesion and fidelity to marxism.

In the case of the PCF, committed to a strict sense of unity, the debate took place not so much between sharply delineated factions as between old and new sensibilities, usually identified with the party apparatus and intellectuals respectively, but often raging within each individual breast. Within the political bureau debates, kept a closely guarded secret, may have pitted old guard personalities like Gaston Plissonnier and Claude Poperen along with the more complex Roland Leroy against the more liberal Paul...
French communists

Laurent, Pierre Juquin and Jean Kanapa on some but not all issues. Under the pressure of events and the socialist challenge the decisions taken by Georges Marchais, the Secretary-General, were marked by haste and improvisation. The most egregious example, from a theoretical point of view, was Marchais' sudden announcement on television in 1976 that the PCF was abandoning the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As dissident Althusserians pointed out, the PCF could repudiate the Stalinist dogma, which associated proletarian rule with terror and the one-party state, but it could not banish a basic marxist concept that was synonymous with working class democracy.

Rank-and-file discussion

Nearly all the critical decisions of the '70s — to sign the Common Program, to abandon the dictatorship of the proletariat, to accept the nuclear strike force, to break with the socialists and adopt the *stratégie autogestionnaire* — were taken without consultation of the rank and file and with only ceremonial discussion in the central committee. Kept in the dark about the debates, motivations and reasoning of the political bureau, this committee could only rubber stamp decisions.4 With only laconic pronouncements to guide them, even members amenable to the leadership had a hard time following the party line. Due to the lack of clarity and political education, few members were capable of justifying the basic options of the Common Program when they came under fire in 1977. By then, the leadership was faced with widening divergences between those members, chiefly intellectuals, who thought the party had not gone far enough in the direction of Euro-communism, and officials of the apparatus, who felt it had gone too far and was in danger of losing its strength and identity to the socialists. The practice of a highly uniform centralism that filtered out divergent opinions in the cells above the section level and that concealed debates among party leaders was not conducive to real political unity. A leadership cut off from party debate — including its own — was not likely to measure its words, weigh decisions, find adequate responses to criticism and achieve proper synthesis.

The major fault of analysis in the '70s concerned the nature of the new Socialist Party. The PCF treated the PS in a schematic way as a social democratic party that was naturally inclined to compromise with capitalism and imperialism, but which could be pushed along the path to socialism by mass action. It could not conceive that an electoralist party composed of teachers, politicians and technocrats could be any more sincere about achieving socialism than a blue-collar social democratic party, it refused to exploit, or recognise, the manifold contradictions in the PS between socialist ideals and reformist practices, between national goals and international commitments, and among the diverse tendencies and personalities vying for Mitterrand's attention. When the alliance broke down, the crude attacks on the PS as a social democratic party returning to capitalist austerity, the NATO alliance, and a centrist coalition lacked credibility because they did not wholly correspond with reality. The fault of analysis was compounded by a style of agitational propaganda. Hammering slogans rather than seeking to persuade by suggestion and reasoning may be effective in peasant countries or among committed workers, but in this case drove intellectuals and sceptics away from the party in droves.

Another handicap — at least it turned out to be — was the Soviet connection. Anti-communists succeeded in turning the strident anti-Sovietism of the '70s — the USSR as Gulag — against the party and its program. The actual degree of association with Soviet communism was far more limited than people were led to believe. The PCF had broken with the one-party state model of socialism beginning in 1963. As it chartered a democratic path, it began to criticise measures of political repression in socialist countries and to call for democratisation within the limits of existing institutions. By
1978 criticism of bureaucratic distortions in the Soviet Union had reached Trotskyist proportions.6 The only respect in which fidelity to Moscow was unyielding was in the international arena. The PCF was determined not to support any position that might tend to weaken the Soviet bloc as a counter-weight to US and Western imperialism. Support for Soviet policy internationally made it even more imperative to distinguish PCF strategy from the Soviet model. Despite its stratégie autogestionnaire the PCF paid a heavy price for its unqualified support for the Afghan invasion and more conditional approval of the martial law regime in Poland. Of the million or so voters who deserted the PCF in 1981, most expressed dissatisfaction with the party’s position in these matters.6 But these positions proved to be a serious handicap only because of more fundamental weaknesses in party policy and practice.

The Stalinist legacy made it difficult to deal with the challenges that came from the New Left and SP. If the frontist strategy in 1968 was basically sound, it was carried out with a crudeness and brutality that alienated an entire student generation who were accused of being unwitting tools of the bourgeoisie, if not agents provocateurs.7 Student radicals like Daniel Cohn-Bendit were more intent on crushing the “Stalinist scum” than on overturning De Gaulle — their design was to confront De Gaulle over the corpse of the PCF — but they did not represent the whole of the student movement whose aims deserved better than the ridicule and invective of the PCF. A less defensive party would have known how to take up the demands of the “new” social categories — youth, women, immigrants, professionals and the unskilled, radicalised by May-June. Instead, the PCF allowed itself to be outmanoeuvred by the CFDT which could criticise their excesses while sympathising with their aspirations. As a result of the alienation of these categories, the communist-led CGT lost its unquestioned leadership over the trade union movement.

After 1972 the PCF mishandled the problems arising from left unity. The results of the alliance were more positive than the PCF is now willing to admit. During the period 1972-1978 the PCF doubled its membership — to 700,000 — increased its total number of votes (while suffering an erosion of less than one percent) and hold over local governments, maintained a high level of strike activity of a political character during a period of industrial decline, won wide acceptance for its demand for a role in government and popularised the themes that underlay Mitterrand’s presidential platform — nationalisation, reindustrialisation, greater equality of income and wealth, and an increase in popular consumption.8

The problem with the Common Program was not the form of unity — nothing prevented the PCF from criticising the PS or taking independent initiatives — but the opportunistic way in which the program was promoted and justified. Until 1977 the party treated it with almost the same inattention as Mitterrand, as an electoral platform and symbol of unity rather than a series of measures to change society. In the 1973 elections, the PCF presented itself as the guarantor of the program, but it neglected to explain or justify the measures it contained. Doubts about socialist sincerity, expressed in a secret report to the central committee, were hushed up. In the Presidential election of 1974, the PCF rallied unconditionally to Mitterrand who not only presented a much attenuated platform, but recruited rightwing critics of the Common Program like Michel Rochard to his campaign staff.

Following Mitterrand’s narrow defeat, the PCF tried to emulate the socialists’ electoralism by calling for a union of the entire French people against monopoly capital and by soft-pedalling the socialist character of the program. The sudden reversal — the outburst of attacks on the PS — that occurred after losses in six by-elections in September seemed motivated by narrow partisan concerns. Rather than make a detailed critique of the accommodationist trends in the PS — Mitterrand’s swing away from the leftwing CERES and alliance with the Ricardians, his penchant for “brilliant”
technocrats like Jacques Delors and Jacques Attali — the party simply accused the PS of abandoning the program and accepting capitalist austerity. Instead of pinning Mitterrand down on his interpretation of the program, it relented on its criticism once he protested his loyalty and agreed to a series of mass meetings to denounce capitalist austerity. Without the material evidence of socialist accommodation, PCF polemics merely bewildered and angered newcomers to the left who had never personally experienced social democratic betrayal.

By the time the PCF did undertake its full-scale campaign against socialist betrayal, which was real, it had become so enmeshed in the myth of left unity that it could only criticise its partner at its peril. The party waited too long, until after it had racked up municipal gains on joint lists with the socialists, before proposing the necessary updating of the program. Indications are that it was taken by surprise by Mitterrand's obduracy, his unwillingness to discuss new terms, his refusal to compromise, his insistence on keeping a free hand. By standing up to the PCF, Mitterrand indeed hoped to increase his popularity and to force the party into accepting an auxiliary role. By background and training, PCF leaders were prepared to expect ideological deviation, but the Gaullist hauteur and rule of Mitterrand was something they did not know how to handle. Several years of complaisance punctuated by occasional fits of ill temper had left the PCF in a weak position to counter Mitterrand's design.

In retrospect, the PCF campaign for the program against the socialists, which was decried by some liberal elements in the party at the time, appears fully justified, but it was conducted with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Instead of exploiting the manifold contradictions in socialist positions — made apparent in the course of negotiations — the party simply denounced the PS as a social democratic party that had turned to the right under pressure from the bourgeoisie and German Social Democracy, accepting the need for working class austerity and preparing the way for a reversal of alliances with the centre-right. The party did not explore the possibility of a "third way" whereby the PS would implement an attenuated version of the Common Program with the PCF in harness in a Left alliance. While the PCF was virtually forced in May 1981 to accept the possibility of a "third way" under the more favorable conditions of a Mitterrand presidency, it could not have afforded to surrender to a PS oriented further to the right under Giscard, without a fight. If, on balance, the propositions of the PS in 1978 were no more accommodating to capital than those of 1981, Mitterrand was then allied with Rocardian advocates of austerity who would have weighed heavily in a left
government. But for its combination of opportunistic and sectarian errors, the PCF nevertheless could have won the fight.

Once the decision to break was taken — neither side was interested in compromise after September — the PCF veered to the left when it announced that it would no longer automatically withdraw for a better placed socialist on the second round and that it would run its own Presidential candidate in 1981. Little notice was taken of a decision approved without discussion that not only marked a reversal of PCF policy but also of a deeply-rooted tradition of republican discipline against the right. The inference drawn was that the PCF considered the socialists to be no better than the right, a startling suggestion that was to have disastrous consequences in 1981.

Rather than open discussion on the reasons for the defeat of the Program in the March elections — a strong communist vote might have saved it — the party clamped down on debate and castigated those dissident intellectuals who were criticising from behind the security of their professorial chairs. The leadership drew into its bunker, the industrial working class, and quietly abandoned the struggle for unity and the Common Program. In the absence of any project for left unity, voters were left with no hope for political change. To satisfy the need for change the PCF substituted its so-called stratégie autogestionnaire. According to this strategy, workers would achieve through trade union struggles those reforms that would anticipate upon socialism. This was precisely the kind of syndicalist strategy that the PCF had denounced in the CFDT! Its reformist limits had just been tested in the trade union campaign to save the French steel industry. So long as the state remained under capitalist domination, a situation which the PCF had no strategy for changing, how could trade union struggles result in anything but the mild reformism of the CFDT and FO?

The blunders committed in the 1981 Presidential campaign flowed directly from the new strategy; indeed, they were made deliberately to accustom people to it. The PCF had abandoned left unity and the hopes of electoral victory to the socialists in order to concentrate on workplace struggles. It assumed that its vanguard role in the factories would eventually be rewarded at the polls, forgetting that voters respond to quite different appeals and motivations from strikers. Since the experience of the Common Program had presumably shown that workers could not understand abstract and general programs, they were to be presented with 131 separate objectives of struggle, all drawn from the Program! In a campaign that put struggle before persuasion, Marchais was given free rein to act out the role of the aggrieved working class primitive who delighted in scandalising self-satisfied bourgeois and confounding simpering TV journalists. Short on media coverage, for reasons for which it was partly responsible, the PCF relied upon enthusiastic solidarity meetings with the blue-collar faithful and commando-like propaganda of the deed — the bulldozing at Vitry, the shutdown of a live television discussion on youth and unemployment which had deliberately excluded the CGT, the vigilante denunciation, without adequate proof, of drug traffickers at Montigny.

The broadsides fired at the PS fell even wider of the mark than in 1978, for Mitterrand had taken a few turns to the left in 1979 when he marginalised Rocard. Taking no notice of the shift, the PCF now flatly asserted that Mitterrand was no better than Giscard; nay, his commitment to the Atlantic alliance made him even worse. Mitterrand’s platform, drawn from basic options of the Common Program, was denounced as a smokescreen for capitalist austerity. From the faulty analysis came a tactical error that proved fatal in May — the refusal to guarantee support for Mitterrand on the second round. If the Marchais candidacy had been presented as a way of leaning on Mitterrand and pushing him to the left, it would have attracted a much larger following that would have given the PCF greater leverage with the new regime. By refusing to acknowledge that a Mitterrand presidency could be an instrument of change, the PCF confirmed suspicions that it might by calling
for abstention on the second round, play the spoiler role and help re-elect Giscard (some old-guard leaders may indeed have favored this tactic in hopes of splitting up the PS). To vote for Marchais under these conditions was to risk the re-election of Giscard. One quarter of the PCF electorate deserted because they preferred even a reformist socialist to accelerating unemployment and industrial decline.

The grey of PCF strategy was overtaken by the green of popular will. The collapse of the PCF vote and swing toward Mitterrand, wholly unexpected, compelled the realization that he was not only better than Giscard, but that with his own hesitating gait and European rhythm, he might even open the way to socialism. In his first year of office, Mitterrand carried out most of his pledges, taking measures to increase social expenditure, the minimum wage and public service employment, to open space for union and worker initiative, to decentralise the state and guarantee civil liberties, and to nationalise all credit institutions and seven key industrial concerns. Falling into line without in the least revising its stratégie autogestionnaire which was quite compatible with reformism, the PCF agreed to keep its own action and criticism within the bounds set by the voters in May. Without apologising for recent aggressions against the PS, the PCF subscribed to a new rule of conduct “not so much to denounce as to explain, not to much criticise as propose, and not only propose, but construct, achieve, realise, concretise”.13 It used its participation in government to urge it forward, its legislative function in parliament to weigh the positive, negative and insufficient, and its trade union position to accomplish in the workplace what the government and legislature had failed to do by law. As a party of government and struggle, the PCF enjoyed the benefits of being in both worlds, gaining recognition for the dedicated work of its ministers and for the combativity of its militants in the factories. In short, the PCF was compelled by circumstances to adopt a position of critical support, of unity and struggle, of struggle within unity, for its socialist partners.

If the PCF currently enjoys such an enviable position as a party of government and struggle, why undertake criticism of past and recent errors? The PCF has been seriously weakened by the defeat of May 10. Satisfied with its role of tribune and vanguard of the working class, it has surrendered to its stronger inter-classist partner the job of determining national policy and goals. Whatever happens to the governing coalition, the PCF is not likely to recuperate its electoral losses in the next four years. Nor with the most combative trade unionists in the world, is the CGT likely to regain leadership over all elements of the working class, particularly white collar workers, so long as the PCF lies under a political cloud. In late 1981, the CGT was running with the wind, gaining in factory elections for the first time since 1969, until martial law was declared — with the acquiescence of the PCF and CGT — in Poland.

Mitterrand has forced the PCF to play an auxiliary role which will not be easily overcome. The PCF has been impressed into service of a regime whose destiny is by no means assured. The contradictions of French socialism — between socialist ideals and an accommodationist practice, between advocates and opponents of austerity, between socialist domestic policies and European Community trade policies, between support for the Third World and a commitment to US militarism — have yet to be resolved. How to increase wages, social expenditures and employment in an economy open to competition from Western partners in
the midst of the greatest depression in half a century?

The structural reforms of the first year accompanied by minor wage and hours gains may have arrested economic decline, but they have not produced sustained growth or reduced unemployment. In the absence of firm government directives the newly nationalised firms have continued to implement prior corporate plans for lay-offs, shutdowns and foreign investment. The first anniversary of the Mitterrand election was marked by a record balance of trade deficit and the announcement of a social pause, including tax relief for business, a moratorium on new social expenditures and reforms, and a wage-price freeze that will reduce average real income over the next two years. Restraints on social expenditures and new taxes on working people were features of the recent 1983 budget.

By aiming to please all classes the French government may end up satisfying none. Appeasement of big business has neither spurred industrial investment nor disarmed the hostility of the right while it has disappointed workers who have yet to see any general improvement in working and living conditions. The absence of working class enthusiasm was apparent in the local cantonal elections in March which were won by an aroused right wing. Preparations for local municipal elections in March 1983 do not augur well for the Left.

The PCF knows that the way to industrial recovery under Mitterrand will be crooked and narrow. It has probably averted a more serious drift to the right and austerity. The tragedy of past and recent errors is that it may have lost the capacity to stay the course.

NOTES

*The author attended the congress as correspondent for the Australian Left Review.


7. Despite the avalanche of anti-PCF literature about May-June an informed critique remains to be written. For the official PCF version, see Laurent Salini, Mai des prolétaires (1968).

8. Cf. Hincker, op. cit., who is perhaps too sanguine about this period.


