



FRANCE GOES TO THE POLLS .

This article was written by an Australian leftist who has been living in Paris for several years.

I

The present political situation in France could hardly be described as simple. A few months ago, however, it looked fairly cut and dried - at least up to a certain point. The Union of the Left looked certain to win the elections in March 1978. The left had just won the local elections throughout France with two-thirds of the municipalities electing communist or socialist mayors. Paris itself, despite the fact that its working class base

had been eroded by the pressure of high rents and "development" projects, just failed to have a communist by 2,700 votes. Then there was May 24, the day of the national strike. The demonstration in Paris was over 16 kilometres long - the atmosphere was festive; the smell of victory was in the air for the first time since May '68.

Victory in the elections seemed certain and so the discussion centred on the possible scenarios after the elections. One scenario was that the implementation of the Common

Program would "get the country out of the crisis" and then provide the bridge towards the construction of "socialism in the colors of France". This was the official position of the Communist Party and included the acceptance of the possibility that the right could possibly return to power in future elections.

A second, more utopian, scenario was that the victory of the left in the elections would mark a "point of no return" where the Common Program would be just a starting point and that a socialist-communist government would have to rely increasingly upon a popular mass movement to combat the attacks and economic sabotage of national and international capitalist interests. The Common Program would be inadequate to satisfy the demands and rising hopes of the masses of people who voted for it and France would quickly fall into a revolutionary situation.

Then there was the "eurocommunist" perspective. A rupture with capitalism in France would coincide with similar movements in Italy and, hopefully, Spain, Portugal and even possibly Belgium, leading to the establishment of a southern European bloc, differing radically in its democratic form from all previous communist societies.

Such a bloc would be economically, socially and politically viable, would alter all existing alliances in the third world and would set a model for workers in other capitalist countries where the political struggle was less developed.

One way or the other, the future, although uncertain, was full of hope. One certainly had the feeling of at least being on the winning side.

Shortly after the May national strike the situation started to look a little more complicated. The Common Program of the three left parties (the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Left Radicals) which had been signed in 1972, a period of relative prosperity, had to be renegotiated to bring it up to date. In addition, the Communist Party was demanding that many of the vague proposals should be made more concrete "for a good actualisation of the program, concretely defined, so that workers know exactly what they are fighting for and won't be deceived after the elections".

The heart of the debate quickly centred on the following major issues:

* **The nationalisations —**

The socialists and particularly the left radicals opted for a conservative reading of the Common Program. Nationalisations would be kept to a minimum with only the mother holding company nationalised and not the affiliates. The companies would be run by delegates appointed by the left government.

The communists counterposed additional nationalisations of companies such as Citroen, and steel, due to the crisis now present in these industries. The nationalisations should be total and not "just the brass plate on the door", but all affiliated companies. The control of the companies would be a form of workers' control.

* **The minimum wage**

The basic wage in the 1972 common program was to be set at 1,000 francs (\$200) a month - a ridiculous figure in 1977 with over 100 per cent inflation since then. The CPF proposed 2,400 francs while the socialists proposed 2,200 francs "negotiable with the unions after the elections".

* **The wage scale**

The Communist Party proposed a maximum ratio of salaries allowable in the country to be 5 to 1. The socialists and left radicals were against such a scheme, but would probably accept a ratio of 10 to 1.

* **National defence**

Major differences on defence policy, particularly as regards NATO. The situation was a little complicated also by a major about-face of the CP in going for a nuclear arms policy (a shock which is still reverberating in the ranks of the party).

The Communist Party attacked the socialists, the previous "champions of workers' control" for their watered-down "participation" scheme. The socialists retorted that the "workers' control" of the communists was only "union control" under the bureaucracy of the CGT union.

The negotiations dragged on with certain concessions being made on both sides. The question of the nationalisations, however, became more and more hotly debated with the two sides taking up intransigent positions.

Then Fabre, the leader of the Left Radicals in a typical radical party ploy, slammed the door of the negotiations, saying that the nationalisations of the communists were completely unacceptable.

Negotiations recommenced shortly after with the three parties very close to a compromise. The socialists proposed nationalising 270 of the affiliates against the 700-odd of the communists. The other questions were considered to be either resolved or "negotiable". The negotiations broke up at that point with neither side willing to concede another inch.

In the months that have followed the situation has gone from bad to worse. To the Communist Party, the Socialist Party has made a "turn to the right" and wants to "manage the capitalist crisis" and institute a plan of austerity after the style of the social democratic parties in Britain and Germany.

To the socialists, the Communist Party has returned to its old stalinist politics, doesn't want to take power and can't tolerate the notion of a strong socialist party.

A feeling of despair, gloom and hopelessness swept in to replace the heady heights of the municipal elections and the great May national strike.

II

After the municipal elections of March '77, with 70 per cent of the large cities in France electing socialist or communist mayors, one of the left dailies ran a headline **France is Pink!** Capitalist France had voted massively for the Union of the Left with many cities that before had never even had a socialist mayor electing communists. In many towns and cities, people were dancing in the streets. It was even reported in one town that the village priest joined in with the crowd to sing the *Internationale!*

A study of the voting figures showed two very important and interesting phenomena. The first was that the Union of the Left had

worked as it had never done before. In the French two-round voting system, a candidate wins if he/she gets over 50 per cent in the first round. If no one gets an absolute majority the vote is decided by a "first past the post" system in a second round which follows one week later. The electoral alliance of the Union of the Left is an agreement by which the left candidate who gets the most votes in the first round stands alone against the right in the second round.

The problem in the past has been that although the well disciplined communist voters would vote for a socialist in the second round it was much more difficult to get socialists to vote communist. The important point of the municipal elections is that the socialists **did** vote communist in the second round. As *l'Humanite*, the CPF daily put it: "The elections marked the end of anti-communism in France".

The second point was the incredibly high vote for the environmentalists and the extreme left in the first round. In many of the large cities they each received about 10 per cent of the vote. Practically all these votes then went to the Union of the Left in the second round. The environmental movement was previously very weak in France. It's startling electoral success marked its birth as a new and important political force in French politics - a point which didn't escape the French bourgeoisie. A few months later the ecologists organised the huge anti-nuclear demonstration at Malville where they had their first death as a result of a police offensive grenade - a deliberate attempt by the government to brand the environment movement as "terrorist", hoping to tarnish its wide electoral appeal.

The extreme left vote was a much more complex phenomenon, indicating a certain dissatisfaction of traditional working class voters with the ambiguities of the Union of the Left (17 per cent of one working class quarter in Orleans voted for the extreme left candidate) rather than a rapport with the philosophy of the extreme left coalition made up of three of the largest extreme left parties.

Paradoxically, after receiving its greatest electoral support ever, the extreme left then went into a state of crisis with the daily **Rouge** almost going bankrupt for want of support and having to launch itself into a long process of self-criticism. Many people

were leaving the extreme left parties and, in general, questioning the elitist attitudes of the movement and its leadership, its continual interventions "from outside", the idea of the "professional Leninist-type revolutionary" and the blind militancy demanded of its members. In addition, the extreme left was finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish themselves from the Communist Party.

Semi-crisis in the extreme left was followed by a real crisis in the Union of the Left. The starting point can be traced to the TV debate between Mitterand, the Socialist Party leader and Prime Minister Barre. Just before the debate, the Communist Party had released its version of the Common Program complete with costs and figures, which went rather further than the socialist version. In front of one of the largest TV audiences in French history, Mitterand flatly stated that the program and figures were unacceptable to the Socialist Party. People watched dumbfounded as he then engaged in a friendly dialogue with his apparent colleague and supposed arch enemy, Raymond Barre.

From that day onwards the debate over the concrete development of the Common Program continued, the Socialist Party and Mitterand strategically being forced into, or willingly taking, a conservative position. The debate was carried out at the top level of the party hierarchies with absolutely no participation of rank and file members. It was a mass media event with the passive audience, the French people, watching hopelessly as the "stars", Mitterand, Marchais and Fabre, tore up the last remaining shreds of the Union of the Left.

It was now the turn of the traditional left to engage in a process of criticism and recrimination.

To the Communist Party, the socialists had taken a "turn to the right" but it was having considerable difficulty convincing its members of this. The debate over the "actualisation of the common program" in 1977 was not that much different from the heated debates that preceded the signing of the program five years earlier. Every communist knows that the socialists can't be trusted but that is nothing new - they knew that when they signed the Common Program in 1972.

To many people, both inside and outside the party, the major disagreement seemed to be the nationalisation of 270 company affiliates as proposed by the Socialist Party against the 700 of the Communist Party. It seemed that the difference was hardly going to affect things one way or the other and was hardly worth threatening the prospects of the left in general and the aspirations of the millions of people who supported it.

Another point brought up in the debate that was now raging in full force in the press, the cafes and party cellules, was the political turn of the Communist Party. At the 22nd Congress two years ago, the party abandoned the notion - or at least the wording - of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" and in so doing also effectively accepted that the Communist Party was not the only legitimate party of the left. The present position of the CP is an apparent about-face with the party now claiming to be the only party of the left with the Socialist Party being hopelessly reformist and social democrat. Such a rapid and fundamental change has caused considerable apprehension among traditional supporters of the party.

Another point of concern to Communist Party supporters is the leadership's attack on the Socialist Party as a homogeneous unit when, in fact, it is a coalition of many conflicting tendencies including, for example, the CERES. The CERES is a sort of "socialist left" in the SP and represents 25 per cent of the membership. On many issues it is to the left of the CP and, due to its considerable intellectual prowess, has played an important role in the theoretical evolution of the Communist Party on such matters as workers' control, etc. By ignoring the diversity of the Socialist Party, the CP leadership may be unwittingly strengthening the hand of Mitterand at the expense of the more left forces in the party.

The debate and the political evolution continues and is not as destructive as it might first appear.

III

Paris has always been regarded as one of the most beautiful cities in the world with its wide avenues, its famous cafes and that

bewildering array of whites and greys reflected from its majestic buildings. Its image in places like Australia is of "gay Paree", accompanied by Paris fashions, visions of the Eiffel tower, Notre Dame, and the Folies Bergere.

But behind this facade is another Paris - a Paris which is dying. It is being choked to death by a tight 40 kilometre circular "freeway" which spreads out in a wide band of misery for the people who live anywhere near it. Cutting through parks and previously tranquil residential areas, it is already saturated with a continuously snarling, rumbling, multi-lane traffic jam. The automobile has invaded Paris to such a degree that the benefits of owning a car are at best dubious. The environmental impact has been disastrous. The noise and pollution are often unbearable.

The automobile is only part of the destruction of Paris; a destruction that is proceeding at such a rate that one can see it taking place every day. I live near the Place des Fetes, an old, previously working class area, where rents were cheap and life, although hard, was relatively gay with over 50 inexpensive bistros in a small radius.

Now it is all gone. The developers have moved in, razing it to the ground. The elderly who have spent all their lives in the quarter, have been forced out into the suburbs together with those workers who couldn't afford the new rents. The Place des Fetes is now dominated by massive high rise apartment and office buildings.

Life for a French worker is becoming increasingly difficult in Paris, as elsewhere in France, with cramped living conditions, increasingly longer distances to travel to work, spiralling prices and the ever-present threat of unemployment. For the hundreds of thousands of foreign workers, the situation is even more intolerable.

It would be simplistic to say that the present wide discontent is just due to economic causes. It goes deeper than that. Many contributing factors have led to the development of a deep-rooted social movement towards the left.

The uprising of May '68 marked its beginning, even though it terminated in an electoral return for the right - albeit with

many social and economic gains to the French working class. In the wake of the traumatic events of '68 the concept of the Union of the Left was conceived by the CP, gained acceptance by the newly-formed Socialist Party, with the Common Program being signed in 1972. The third party in the union, the Left Radicals, joined a few months later. The two big unions, the CGT and the CFDT, tacitly approved the program.

At that time the economic outlook was entirely different from that of today. The prospect was still one of continuing expansion despite some of the looming economic problems. The task of the Union of the Left was to break the stranglehold of the multinationals and monopolies on the economy, bring about a major improvement in social and economic conditions for the less favored and start the construction of socialism based on a new form of democracy - the worker-controlled socialism of the Socialist Party and the CFDT or the more paternalist idea of the Communist Party and the CGT at that time - that of democratic management.

The theoretical doctrine of the Communist Party which justified their political position was based upon an economic analysis of "State Monopoly Capitalism". According to this "SMC" theory, the chronic problem of periodic crises of overproduction in a capitalist regime had been solved by monopoly capitalist interests using the state apparatus to overcome the inherent contradictions of the system. The crisis of overproduction of the capitalist system, according to Marx, leads to an economic depression where capital is destroyed or devalorised. After this process has reached a certain level, the conditions become favorable for the beginning of a new wave of expansion, going on to a boom and of course another crisis. According to the SMC theory of the Communist Party, the capitalist state, dictated to by monopoly interests, had developed means of **continually** devalorising capital by, for example, the state becoming a consumer (building up the public sector, armaments, etc.), offering cheap credit facilities to the monopolies, and so on. In each case the surplus capital arising from overproduction for the available market, can be continuously "destroyed" or

"devalorised". In so doing, the state continuously guarantees profits to the monopolies and hence overcomes the periodic crises and depressions of capitalism.

The political conclusion of this analysis is that the objective enemy is the monopolies and that one must organise the great mass of the French people against two or three per cent of the population (the big bourgeoisie and the monopolies). The object was that the left was to take over the state apparatus and turn it from being a reflection of monopoly capitalist interests to being a reflection of the interests of the working class and its allies.

From 1972 to 1977, the economic situation had changed drastically. It is here that some left writers place the fundamental cause for the break-up of the Union of the Left, the changed economic scenario posing severe problems for the Communist Party at three levels.

At the practical level, the Communist Party feared the unknown consequences of being involved in a minority position in a Socialist-Communist government during a period of economic crisis.

This fear becomes clearer at the theoretical level due to the Communist Party's lack of any deep understanding of the overall world capitalist crisis. Its state monopoly capitalist theory served more as a justification of the previous political strategy than a theory which fitted with reality.

The third level is that of the conception of socialism. The Communist Party lacks a clear viable model of what it means by socialism. The old model of the Soviet Union, after the 1968 events in France and, more importantly, in Czechoslovakia, is no longer credible for the industrialised societies and practically nobody really doubts the existence of the Gulag reality. These events and their influence, particularly on the new wave of young communist militants, have necessitated an evolution in the conceptions of the party. This evolution, although positive and necessary, has not been one towards greater clarity but has unleashed certain contradictions and confusions in the ranks of the party. The model of socialism varies from the old Soviet model with the rider that it must be more democratic, to rather vague notions of what will happen after the implementation of the defunct

Common Program. The necessity to change and adopt a more democratic image has come into conflict with the centralised structure of the party. The evolution has taken place, however, at the cellular level where discussion is the most open it has ever been. The party is hence more democratic than it has ever been, but the contradiction is that it is at the same time more centralised and dictatorial than ever to counteract the first tendency. The new party line is now obtained by watching Marchais on television. What then follows is a free and open discussion on the wisdom of the party adopting the new line!

The theoretical and conceptual crisis in the French Communist Party becomes more clear when one notes that it refused to participate in the December Colloquium on Eurocommunism in Lugano, while Italian and Spanish parties sent top members from their central committees. To participate in such a debate, the French CP would have run the risk of contradicting many of their present official explanations in France.

If the economic crisis has plunged the left into disarray, it has also had its effect on framing the basic social reality against which all of the political and electoral aspects must be seen in proper perspective.

Despite the break-up of the Union of the Left, the government has not progressed one point! A recent poll has shown that the "intention to vote" for the left would give PC - 21 per cent, PSU - two per cent, PS and Left Radicals - 27 per cent, environmentalists - three per cent a total of 53 per cent against 47 per cent for the right. This is almost exactly the same as in June '77 just before the crisis in the left broke out! The relative rapport between the PC and the PS, if anything, shows a slight gain for the PC.

What then is taking place in France is the evolution of a deep, broadly based movement towards the left that goes beyond even the political parties. If the break-up of the Union of the Left has brought dismay and disillusion to France, it certainly has not changed the underlying social reality.

Despite all the contradictions and confusion, it is the French Communist Party that has the monopoly on the slogan of the hour ... "the French people want change ... they want a real change".