To Live Better, 
To Change Life

by Mark Burford*

The Common Programme of the French Left, 
1972-1978

Soon after the signing of the "Common Programme for a Government of Left Union" by the French Communist Party (PCF), Socialist Party (PS) and Left Radicals, the Socialist leader Francois Mitterrand remarked to his Second International colleagues in Vienna that in time the PCF vote in the French electorate would be reduced to 15 percent of the electorate with equivalent gains transferring to the socialists.1 At the time those claims may have seemed outrageous and extravagant but, today, with a communist vote of just over 15 percent in the presidential elections of May 1981 and the parliamentary elections of the following month, and substantial socialist victories in those elections, they seem positively prophetic.

The victory of Mitterrand in the presidential elections, and the left in the French parliamentary elections, marks a significant advance for the left in France. It compels us to look at some aspects of the history of the French left and its strategy for electoral victory as a way of understanding the situation of the socialist movement in France.

Here, I am examining the period of agreement between the left parties around the Common Programme of the French Left and looking at key aspects of the Programme itself and the events of the years 1972-78. What were the reasons for this temporary programmatic consolidation of the "Union of the Left"? How did the major parties, the PS and PCF, hope to benefit? What were the main points of agreement and difference? Why did the Common Programme fail and recede into history after the March 1978

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elections? What does the period tell us about the PCF and PS? These are the sorts of questions I seek to answer.

In many ways the logic of the recent socialist electoral victory and the communist setback was set up during the Common Programme years, particularly the time of its demise in late 1977 and early 1978. Then, the socialists, having made gains over the previous year, decided to seize the opportunity and move out alone, looking for electoral victory while the communists stepped back.

The Common Programme

The Common Programme was signed by Georges Marchais, PCF Secretary-General, and Francois Mitterrand on the night of June 26-27, 1972. A few days later the Programme was endorsed by the Left Radicals. Immediately the PCF went out and publicised the Programme, publishing it in paperback. It was, as Feenberg remarks, "the sort of book that nobody reads" but its symbolic importance as a concrete showing of unity was paramount. Soon after publication by the PCF, the socialists and radicals put out their own editions.

The Common Programme was a plan of major, progressive reform for French society in the economy, in democracy, in welfare and social spheres; and in foreign policy. The economic proposals of the Programme were basic. Major nationalisations in key industrial and financial areas of the economy were called for. In this enlarged public sector the workers would wield a greater influence through a system of "democratic management" which would put workers' representatives, probably from the trade unions, on the boards of management. The Common Programme also paid some attention to questions of quality of work, guaranteeing shorter hours, limited night shifts, regulation of work speed, increased job training, some access to study leave and technology and pollution controls.

In the social sphere a wide range of liberalisations and new freedoms were proposed, ranging from recognition of tenants' unions through increased cultural funding and new student allowances to extended maternity leave and free legalised abortion. In international affairs the Common Programme proposed to abolish the French nuclear strike force, stop arms sales to colonial regimes, recognise the independence of the remaining French colonies, work for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and NATO, and continue cooperation with the Common Market.

From the beginning there were problems in the campaign to promote the Common Programme. The PS leader openly announced his aim of taking votes from the communists and the PCF showed its distrust of the PS. Marchais reported to the PCF Central Committee two days after the signing of the Common Programme that: "At the bottom, the ideology animating the Socialist Party is and remains absolutely reformist." The PS was quick to distance itself from the PCF when necessary. They also wished to push the PCF on the issues of its Soviet link and internal party democracy. This sort of tension and pressure was to be maintained throughout the period of the Common Programme, often peaking, then being resolved before important election times.

Despite these sorts of problems, the Union of the Left was maintained, moving from one electoral gain to another until it seemed certain to succeed in 1978. However, the tensions of electoral balance, theoretical differences and campaign difficulties proved too strong.

The Common Programme ended with the narrow defeat of the Union of the Left in the March 1978 National Assembly elections. The final disharmony that led to this defeat began in 1977 with the renegotiation of the details of the Common Programme. In September, the negotiations which had floundered over differences in interpretation of the Programme, and revisions to it, came to a standstill. Francois Mitterrand had this to say:
What is happening in the Communist Party? What's wrong here? Isn't it because the Socialist Party has become the first party of France, of the left, because we have carried off so many victories? As for our partners, they have stayed at the level where they were.5

Mitterrand laid the blame at the feet of the PCF, as a party that was not willing to take part in government, even a government of the left, if it was not dominant. In the run-up to the 1978 elections the PCF had to face the fact that its strategy to "strengthen the left", strengthen the PCF within the left" had failed. This was emphasised by the strong socialist and the only mediocre communist showing in the 1977 municipal elections. The mid-1977 opinion polls showed 30 percent support for the PS and 21 percent for the PCF.6

This prospect of a secondary position in the left worried the communists, hence Marchais' announcement that "21 percent is not enough, 25 percent would be good".7 Given the votes of the Left Radicals, this was tantamount to suggesting that the Socialist Party step back to being the junior partner, clearly an unreal demand and one unacceptable to the PS.

Tactical manoeuvring

But these splits were not simply a question of tactical electoral manoeuvring. There were, as observers at the time noted, "differing interpretations of the 1972 version of the Common Programme" — differences over how a left government would behave in France. There were problems over updating, interpretation and extensions to the Programme. Nationalisation, wealth tax measures, the concept of self-management and the cost of the Programme seem to have been the main problems.

After the 1977 failure in the negotiations, each party went on the offensive. The PCF publicly claimed that the PS had "moved to the right" and merely wished to "manage the social crisis in the interests of big capital and continue to impose austerity upon the workers."9 The socialists published their own version of an updated Common Programme.

The head-on position between the parties was maintained until after the first round of voting in March 1978. After a disappointing showing for the left, a peace meeting was convened and a patch-up agreement signed. The final result showed that this rapprochement was seen as too shallow and had come too late. The left parties gained seats (the PS 9 and the PCF 12) but the gains were insufficient to win government.

The defeat of the left unleashed recriminations from both sides. The PCF Political Bureau stated firmly that: "The direct cause of the failure of the left to come to power lies in the disastrous and suicidal strategy of the PS and nowhere else."10 The Executive Bureau of the Socialist Party called upon workers to judge the ".... strategy of failure of the Communist Party, which had deprived them of their victory and of the changes which would have come to each of them."11

Of far more interest was the outburst of criticism that arose within the PCF, an outburst that was spearheaded by intellectuals but seems to have had a substantial basis among rank-and-file militants as well. The debate that followed raised most of the key issues of the Common Programme.

The meaning of the Programme

What did the signing of the Common Programme mean for the PS and PCF? What did they hope to achieve with it? The answers reveal important tensions in the Union of the Left.

Both the PS and PCF wished to participate in a left government. There is no real reason to doubt this, despite the PCF's late 1977 and early 1978 behaviour. The socialists saw themselves as an almost purely electoral party; in fact without parliamentary representation they had little power whatsoever. So it was clear for them. On the PCF, Georges Lavau noted that "for the moment, one thing is certain, that it wants to be in power. That is all we can say for sure."12 But neither party wanted the power of
government just for its own sake.

Of course both the socialists and the communists had made it clear right from the beginning that they wanted power and hegemony of the left. But they are political organisations of *conviction* and theory, both of them. They wanted government to put their vision into practice. Problems arose, however, when it became clear that the respective PS and PCF "visions" of the Common Programme were markedly different.

For the socialists, the Common Programme was a real programme of reform. It was exactly the kind of thing that a reforming social-democratic party and government should put into practice. The Programme amounted to the party's ends. The commitment of the Socialist Party to the sort of reform programme outlined in the Common Programme is made clear by its early 1972 pre-signing platform. It spelt out a series of progressive moves such as nationalisation of the banks and finance companies and some major industry, the setting up of a proportional representation electoral system, a ban on television advertising, legislation for free abortion and divorce by mutual consent, the repeal of the death sentence, nuclear dissolution and a move to wind down both NATO and the Warsaw Pact agreement.

Similarly the late 1977 pre-election update of the Common Programme suggested by the socialists shows them sticking to reform. Among the proposals agreed to by both sides in the updated Programme were: an increase in unemployment benefits to two-thirds of the minimum wage, reduction of the working week to 35 hours, the setting up of low-cost housing schemes, a consumer-level price freeze, new checks on multinational ownership, an extension of the proportional system in municipal elections and increased funding for welfare.

In addition, the socialists made concessions to the communists, agreeing to a new wealth tax, an increased number of nationalisations and an increased minimum wage. Mitterrand was quite correct when he pointed out in January 1978 that the socialists had not abandoned the Common Programme and "were continuing to use it as their charter". That was true. What the communists failed to see properly was that the socialist vision was inherently limited and *reformist*.

The PCF vision

The PCF, on the other hand, had a different view of things. The Common Programme was not the end of things at all; it was the beginning, opening up a stage of "advanced democracy" which set up the possibility for a move to socialism. Socialism itself was something different. Early in the Common Programme period Georges Marchais pointed this out in a report to the PCF Political Bureau. He said:

> The Political Bureau considers that, even if the enterprise is difficult and nothing is won in advance, the conditions and the means exist which will permit the experiment to have a positive outcome, and that the common programme constitutes a step forward in the general struggle of the working class and of our people for social progress, democracy and socialism.

The PCF had a concept, however limited it may have been in theoretical scope, of a process, of transition to a new kind of French society.

This view of the Common Programme as part of a strategy for socialism arose from the PCF's adherence, as late as 1977, to the thesis of "state monopoly capitalism". This thesis tends to see the state in the phase of late or monopoly capitalism as being "fused" with monopoly capital. It is "a state with no autonomy that is purely at the service of the monopolies".

Arising from this view are two important strategic aspects. Firstly, a broad, democratic alliance has to be built, encompassing all those who are in opposition to the monopolies. This alliance is to be built so as to encourage broadness and such as to approach "men (and women) as they are, not as they
should be. The PCF used the metaphor of the "bolted door" to illustrate the state in this phase. Only a huge and broad alliance could effectively confront the "bolted door" of the state and the monopolies. The Common Programme was an attempt to construct this alliance. Secondly, because the state is seen as a simple tool in the service of monopoly the winning of government power is crucial in taking this tool out of the hands of the monopolies and putting it at the service of the people. The achieving of government, through the Union of the Left, therefore assumes great importance.

While it is true that this view of late capitalism, and of the transition to socialism, was subject to major criticism, mainly from the left of the PCF, this need not concern us overly much here. The critics claimed that the state monopoly capitalism thesis did not embody an understanding of contradiction within the state apparatus and the relative autonomy of the state. Socialist transition, therefore, was a much more complex thing involving an interaction of various economic, ideological and political levels and complicated class alliances than just the simple anti-monopoly alliance. But these were all differences over the nature of the transition. That the PCF was talking about the transition to socialism was never in doubt.

With the bulk of the PS not seeing things this way, conflict was inevitable. Mitterrand, the real strategist for the Socialist Party, as well as its political leader, foretold the future that he planned for the communists. The Communist Party is our natural ally .... I am not obliged to extend it any privilege; I am not obliged to give it preference. I observe simply that the unification of the Left involves the Communist Party .... And from this stems the importance which I attach to the formation of a political movement able first to achieve parity with and then dominate the Communist Party; and, finally, to obtain by itself a majority role .... One may doubt the sincerity of communist intentions, but to found a political strategy on the intentions one imputes to others makes no sense. What is important is to create the conditions which make these others act as if they were sincere.

When Mitterrand speaks of "sincerity" here he means keeping the communists within the bounds of the mainstream Socialist Party aims, that is, within the bounds of reform.

Austerity and capitalist crisis

Related to the question of what the Common Programme actually meant for the Socialist and Communist parties is the problem of how or whether a left government in France would cope with the capitalist crisis of the 1970s. For the Common Programme was formulated during a time of relative prosperity for the capitalist world. 1977-78 was a different matter entirely. The now familiar problems of inflation, unemployment, flagging production and lower consumer demand were very apparent to the parties of the left.

The socialists responded by stepping back. Their programme of reform, mentioned above, was maintained but restricted. Their commitment to wage increases, social welfare betterment, taxes on wealth and the like were tempered by the fear of exacerbating inflation and further dampening production. In the socialist sense and in the social-democratic sense, they wanted to retreat.

In Marchais' words, the Socialist Party's position would have meant giving up our position on the minimum wage; giving up the immediate increase of purchasing power; the full extent of measures to reduce unemployment; the immediate reduction of hours of work and the introduction of a fifth week of paid holidays; giving up effective nationalisation of banking and finance and of the nine industrial groupings put forward in 1971; giving up the tax on capital and wealth. It would also have meant giving up the democratic content of the common programme ....

He may have been a little off-beam with the claims about "giving up" nationalisation and any form of wealth tax but essentially the
PCF Secretary General was correct. In the PCF’s eyes this was nothing more than capitulation which would force “austerity” upon the people of France as a way to revive the economy. The PCF was not interested “in managing the capitalist crisis”.

For the PCF, as a responsible party of the left, is this really the response? Indeed, were they asking the right questions? Need the battle for left government be one of managing the crisis or nothing? That was how the PCF seemed to respond.

Did the PCF condemnation of the PS mean that it actually thought the socialists had changed their spots? The suggestion that the PS had “turned to the right” as the Communist Party claimed seems to indicate this to be the case. But how consistent is this view of a change with the view expressed at the same time that the socialists were always interested in managing the system and no more? Marchais, in a later section of the same report quoted above, claimed that the Socialist Party had not changed its nature since the signing of the Common Programme.

Six years of experience have shown that the Socialist Party did not undergo any real change .... Under the cover of a leftist and pro-unity phraseology, which allowed them to win over people who were sincerely in favour of unity and change, it remained a social-democratic party, which does not aim to bring about democratic change.

The confusion of the communist leader’s position comes through. The real situation was that the PCF could no longer keep a basically social-democratic party from making the concessions any party of that kind would make in the face of capitalist crisis. The Socialist Party had strengthened its position in the Union to that extent. Now the problem for the communists was whether to take the measure of progressive reforms they could get (and remember that the socialists’ concessions were still quite “left” by comparison to most social-democratic policies to be found around the world at the time) or reject the alliance altogether.

Were the communists really sure that even their optimal version of the Common Programme would benefit France’s working people under the sort of conditions prevailing in 1978? After all, the Common Programme, even when including the new nationalisations wanted by the PCF, was still only a programme of advanced democratic reform — it was not socialism. Surely the very logic of the PCF’s Common Programme transition strategy would bestow the same status (if less favourably) upon the Socialist Party’s watered down version? It would still “open up” the possibility for change while substantially improving the lot of French workers and their allies.

None of the areas of concession mentioned by Marchais, not even the possibility of austerity measures, take from the Common Programme its strategic emphasis, its concept of change as a process rather than an event or a government decree, it seems that really the PCF had lost faith in its strategy, or didn’t understand that strategy when it came close to really putting it into practice. Rather than confront this the Communist Party almost seemed to prefer staying in a more comfortable but less responsible opposition.

The result was unsatisfactory for the left as a whole and for the Communist Party. The left was to remain out of government, meaning that no reforms, no matter how minimal, of the left programme could be put into practice. Within the left, the Socialist Party gave the appearance of being the responsible partner in the union, the one that was at least willing to make a go of governing even under difficulty. The Communist Party was seen, correctly, as the abstentionist party content to remain “within the fortress” with its solid 20 percent vote and make few advances. That this could in time weaken even that 20 percent support was a possibility not lost to critics within the party.

These same critics also took the view that many of the battles, including those over austerity and nationalisation, could have been fought out within a Union of the Left government rather than within a left fighting for electoral victory — an argument that makes perfect electoral sense, especially in
terms of the sort of socialists strategy mapped out by the Common Programme.\textsuperscript{21} The PCF would then have shown a proper willingness as a communist party to take on the responsibility of government even in difficult circumstances, as a part of the struggle for advanced democracy and socialism.

This is a position that was, in my view, more honest with both the electorate and communist militants, an honesty which the PCF failed to deliver.

**Ownership and control of industry**

The actual "break" on the left occurred over nationalisations. The immediate tension was over the interpretation of the 1972 version of the Programme. The issue was whether subsidiaries with less than 100 percent ownership by a major firm listed in the "group" for nationalisation would be similarly treated, a move which added over one thousand firms to the original group of nine; whether six more industrial giants, including all of the steel industry, would be added to the list, and whether a left government would nationalise a particular company in the event of its workers expressing a wish for the company to be taken into public ownership.\textsuperscript{22}

There were two crucial theoretical questions involved with nationalisation which, apart from the electoral and immediate economic concern of the cost of compensation, illustrated further differences. One involved the economic role of nationalisation. The other involved the question of self-management.

The socialists did not see widespread nationalisation as being all that important, while the communists obviously did. Holland cites a number of French sources to suggest that on interpretation of the 1972 Programme "it is possible to give the PCF a good deal of benefit on the overall doubt".\textsuperscript{23} He points out that, given that most large corporations are themselves composed of subsidiaries with varying shares of percentage ownership, it is not really clear that nationalisation would be meaningful had subsidiaries with a 51 percent or more holding by the major corporation not been included. Certainly it would have made government influence over the economy more difficult, something the socialists were less concerned about, certainly in the short term.

Many socialists were not firm on major nationalisation at all. For some of them, including economic adviser Jacques Attali, and former United Socialist Party leader Michel Rocard, the question of control was more central to both influencing the economy and improving the lives of workers. They took up the slogan first raised in 1968 — "autogestion" or self-management. It was not clear whether the official PS version of self-management was a form of participation in running industry or something more. In any case, they argued that the key to socialism was a change in the "social relations" of production and control rather than ownership and that therefore to demand major nationalisation alone was to bark up the wrong tree.

The communists disagreed, arguing that ownership remained crucial. Their model of "democratic management" was no real solution to the problem of control though. At best it offered another bureaucratic layer on the participation thesis. Under the PCF's proposal, industry would be run by a board with government and union representatives participating. Any active role would be removed from the rank-and-file worker and put in the hands of his/her union official. Not coincidentally, the French union movement was under the major influence of the communist-dominated Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). The PCF proposal would give the party itself major influence when the government and union representatives were combined. This is hardly a fully "democratic" alternative.

The formulation of the Common Programme which read that "on the basis of a large public and nationalised sector, the government will favour, in law and in reality, the development of democratic forms of management"\textsuperscript{24}, masked both the differences the parties had on this question and the fact that neither of them understood exactly what
it meant when they appropriated the term autogestion. During the 1978 election campaign the PCF did an about-face and began using the term “autogestion”, a term which they had previously derided. This did not seem to alter their view of the role of workers in management but is an indication of the influence and importance of the concept in France.

The left and the new social movements

An important feature of the May/June events in 1968 was the spotlighting of an emerging, articulate “middle strata” of salaried workers and professionals. The Common Programme was in some ways a response to this and represented a shift of these strata, or a portion of them, to the consolidated left. Both the PS and the PCF recognised the importance of this.

The Common Programme therefore had a strong flavour of developing new freedoms in the personal and private spheres of life and towards understanding the new “quality of life” movements that had their basis in the cultural shifts of the 1960s. A decisive nod was made in the direction of the ecology movement, the movement for women’s rights and liberation, self-management as we have noted, the homosexual movement (to a small extent), the student movement and others.

The Union of the Left as a whole was successful in raising the hopes of these groups and these middle strata. The problem of party competition arose here again, however, the Socialist Party being much more successful than the communists in gaining voter support. As George Ross points out, the PCF was aware of the problem and engaged in a number of publicity-type operations stressing its devotion to democracy and freedom and the issues it knew appealed. But it was not believed. Why? Principally because of the party’s past and the time needed to prove itself different. In any case, the party needed time to understand the issues itself. Ross observed that

While things were changing in the PCF, the party was unable to convince intermediary social groups that they had changed enough. Beyond this the PCF demonstrated an almost perverse reluctance to broach issues which were obviously salient to new middle class groups in ways which would be favourably received. In the 1970’s autogestion, feminism and ecology (including the nuclear power issue) all caused great concern in new middle groups. On all of these issues the PCF scorned the arguments which were put forward by the protest groups which raised these issues.25

The Socialist Party which had brought together some of the elements involved in the 68 events managed to gather this support. This was probably the most important area which confirmed the socialist advances through the period of the Common Programme while the communist position stagnated. The communists, quite simply, could not break out of their old logic. This was essential if it was to move beyond its position of the formal, staid French left opposition. Althusser, and others such as theorist Jean Ellenstein, saw this opportunity in the practice of the Common Programme. There was a need, he said, to abandon fortress-like withdrawal and (begin) resolutely involving the Party in the mass movement, extending its zone of influence through struggle, and finding in that mass oriented struggle, the real reasons for transforming the Party, by giving it the life that comes from the masses.26

Strategy and alliance

When analysing the relationship between the PCF and the PS around the Common Programme, the communist leadership used to like talking about “the struggle for the common programme”. I have emphasised a number of times already the competitive nature of the Union of the Left. Usually this competition is seen just in terms of votes but we now know it was more than that. Programmatic points, attitudes to social change and the allegiance of the working class and middle strata were involved too.

This raises the question of the nature of alliances. How do parties of the social-
democratic and communist left engage in electoral agreements and strategic alliances?

The socialists were clear on this. Mitterrand’s many statements show that they hoped to win votes, limit the scope of communist influence and put their reform programme into practice. The communists were not so clear. At times it seemed that the communists were involved in the union merely to come to power and gain dominance over the Socialist Party on the left. But is that a sufficient view for a party concerned with socialist transition?

It is not enough to see an alliance of this sort in terms of votes alone. Of course, votes are important as a measure of support and as a way to gain office, thereby allowing policies to be put into practice. But Marchais’ dictum of “21 percent is not enough, 25 percent would be good” goes no further than that at all. It is simply a statement of the desire to dominate the PS.

There are problems with Marchais’ formula. Firstly, consider the trade union movement. With the Communist Party holding sway in the huge trade union federation, the CGT, need it worry about being an “auxiliary force” to the socialists in the wider political sphere? But more important than evening up the political balance, the communist role in the trade union movement gives it a strategic lever in the heartland of socialist politics, in the key organisations of workers’ defence. The alliance can then be built and fought for at another political level. Democratic and socialist change can be struggled for in the workplace and in the union movement. That is, if the Communist Party understood and worked for other aspects of the alliance than the purely electoral.

The second problem with Marchais’ approach was precisely that it did see the alliance as purely electoral. Hence the ease with which it could be sacrificed when it became clear that electoral advantage was not accruing to the PCF. But alliances for democratic and socialist transition must work at more than the electoral level. They must extend to involve classes and class fractions, seeking to win them over to more advanced positions. In communist jargon, alliances must be forged and won amongst the masses. The PCF made the mistake of leaving the agreements and battles at the level of formal agreement between parties rather than agreement and struggle between ideas amongst the people.

For example, the Programme was signed, it was printed and distributed but there was only a limited attempt to have it discussed and acted upon. Propaganda and slogans do not replace the taking up of issues in the mass way suggested earlier. That would be the sort of thing that would help to build the alliance on two fronts — one of formal party agreement, the other a transitional or “counter-hegemonic” approach to alliances. This was very much the “left” criticism within the PCF expressed forcefully by Althusser and Balibar. Ellenstein, representing the “right” dissidents was no less firm on the need to broaden the struggle for the Programme. At the time, left and right differences over the strategy seemed minimal, most of them having related to the earlier issue of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Democracy and stalinism

These were the issues which party activists were discussing in the period leading up to, and especially after, the defeat of the left in the 1978 elections. We have dealt mainly with the questions raised in the PCF and by communist intellectuals because it was in that party where the most discussion took place, at least as far as we can tell, and where the discussion reached a theoretical depth. The socialists certainly had their splits and dissensions after March 1978, but these seem to have been in the more traditional mould of leadership challenges and factional squabbles than major theoretical and strategic debates.27

For the Communist Party and its internal critics, there was one overriding concern — the question of democracy within the party and the break with stalinism. It was the
strength or weakness of the party as an open and democratic organisation which would determine whether the whole range of tactical and strategic questions regarding the Union of the Left would be asked and answered at all. **Party democracy was paramount — a problem to be solved before others could be properly approached.**

Hence the stress all post-election comments placed on the need for discussion, self-criticism and openness. No matter whether the criticism came from the "right" or the "left" of the party, this emphasis was consistent. For example, Jean Ellenstein said:

> It has become clearer now that the PCF will have to carry out the initiatives symbolised by the 22nd congress to their conclusion in every field .... Whatever the issue .... many communists have asked questions about the methods used .... and have criticised them ....

> Let it not be said that these are intellectual problems for intellectuals. They are relevant questions hundreds of thousands of communists are asking themselves today. The party's refusal to discuss them in public appears to be more tragic than it really is. What would be tragic however is if it continued to reject the public discussion that so many communists are looking forward to.

Ellenstein and Louis Althusser:

> The defeat of the Union of the Left has seriously confused the popular masses and filled many communists with profound disquiet. A 'workerist' — or more precisely sectarian — faction is openly rejoicing at the break with the Socialist Party, presenting it as a victory over the social-democratic danger.... While they wait for an explanation from the Party leadership, the militants are themselves beginning to analyse the process that led to the defeat: namely, the line actually followed by the Party, with all its somersaults, and the vagaries of its practice ....

Ellenstein and Althusser joined forces to the extent that they, along with over 100 other party members, banded together to publish an open letter to the party leadership in the May 17 edition of *Le Monde*. Although there was a certain naivety in the expectations of the critics, in that at times they seemed to suggest that merely by opening up debate and by making some structural changes to encourage that debate, the problems of French communism would be solved, their criticisms seem justified and pointed.

**The PCF and the Comintern**

The PCF had had a long history of enclosed behaviour. It was the perverse "model" of Leninism that developed in the stalinist period of the Third International. In the period of the Union of the Left, in all its stages from the PCF’s first suggestions in the 1960s to the break in 1978, there had been pressure on the Communist Party to break with its stalinist past. This would, on one hand, sweeten the pill for the socialists, hesitant about an alliance with the PCF and, on the other hand, take the party further towards establishing the independence and democracy demanded by the need to distance itself from the Soviet Union and find a place among the Eurocommunists.

*Both these needs were mutually advantageous and, for a period, the PCF seemed to be responding in concrete ways. One of the great promises of the Common Programme for the communist movement in France and elsewhere was that it showed new, less sectarian, more open and co-operative ways forward, and showed the ability of communist parties to change. There were lapses of course. Even one of the PCF’s most symbolic "breaks" with the past — the abandonment of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” formulation — was done in the old undemocratic way. Georges Marchais announced the fact on television one week before the 22nd congress decision and without adequate or reasonable debate. For democrats in the party, even those that agreed with the move, this was considered outrageous. But, overall, a hopeful process was occurring.*
The events of 1977-78, the twists of the party line, the break with the PS followed by its hasty patching up between rounds of voting and the defeat of the Union must have brought unpleasant memories to the minds of many. These events amounted to a setback for the process of real democratisation in the PCF. The stifling of debate and the isolating of critics (and the later expulsions) after the election marked the defeat for this process.

The Union of the Left became impossible to restore after the 1978 election defeat. The Socialist Party regrouped and prepared to battle on as the major force on the left. The PCF retreated behind its traditional "buffer zone" of the 20 percent vote. Within the party itself the sectarian anti-Eurocommunist faction gained support while the critics mentioned above continued to be vocal.

Despite the conventional analysis which solely blames the Marchais leadership for the shift back to the methods of old, a more refined view sees the general secretary and his supporters playing a balancing act at the head of a very divided party.30

The party has remained in that divided state to this day. Despite the presence of four communist ministers in the government and despite continued hopes for socialist change in France, the PCF has not consolidated or gained from the left victory in 1981. Reports suggest that party activism is at its lowest ebb since the 1930s; membership is down and party-sponsored surveys suggest its popular vote is now as low as 10 percent, well below the old "buffer zone".31

Clearly, there is a need for a reassessment and overhaul of the PCF’s current strategy. The recently concluded 24th congress seems not to have succeeded in that regard. All reports suggest that the party’s course has been maintained with the leadership group being re-elected, the anti-Socialist Party and pro-Soviet sentiments confirmed, and the re-examination of the Common Programme concluding that it was all a mistake.

Beneath the veneer of unity, which seems to have been designed mainly to restore inner-party spirit, there are developments which foreshadow changes that may come.

The socialist government is now facing criticism from the left, particularly for its decision to cut workers’ pay in return for shorter working hours.32 Many will look to the PCF and the communist-dominated trade unions for a response on the left. There is a suggestion that respected communist Transport Minister, Charles Fiterman, may head a push for liberalisation within the party, and a dissident group led by former Paris city councillor, Henri Fizbin, publishes a eurocommunist-leaning weekly with growing support. This group, the Rencontres Communistes recently published the Italian communists’ condemnation of Polish martial law in full, a direct challenge to the official PCF line.33 Even at the 24th congress there was official recognition that the party failed to properly “draw the right conclusions” from the Soviet de-stalinisation of 1956.34 A reassessment of that period is essential to any overhaul of the PCF’s general strategy.

All indications suggest that those who hoped for the demise of the French Communist Party in the period of the socialist government will be disappointed. The PCF will be around for some time, during which it will face the responsibility of government along with its reluctant socialist partners. Several years of left government may give the PCF the chance to learn the lessons of the past and begin again the process of democratic and socialist transition.

NOTES
1. At the 14th Congress of the Socialist International on June 25, 1972.
3. Later abandoned by both the PCF and the PS.


17. In the context of the Common Programme, see Louis Althusser "What Must Change in the Party", *New Left Review* (*NLR*), 109, p.36.


23. *ibid*, p.221.


26. Althusser, *op cit*, p.44.


33. *New York Times*, *op cit*.


35. *ibid*.

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