

# Sharp conflicts at the French Socialist Party congress

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Sharp factional fights marked the recent congress of the French Socialist Party. At the gathering, held on November 25-26 in Grenoble, the majority grouping around Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was opposed by two minority tendencies that criticised the government's business-friendly social policies.

The party congress, held on the eve of the European Union (EU) conference in Nice and in the run-up to a long campaign for the 2002 parliamentary and presidential elections, should have demonstrated agreement and unanimity. But when party chief François Hollande proposed the main resolution, the minority tendencies refused to support it and instead tabled their own motions, which received the backing of some 27 percent of the delegates.

The minority tendencies are headed by former party chief and treasurer Henri Emmanuelli and Jean Luc Mélenchon, who represents the internal party current *Gauche (Left)* and has been an Education Minister since the resignation of Claude Allègre in April.

Henri Emmanuelli proposed an alternative resolution entitled "Democracy and Equality". In his speech he attacked the political course being taken by Jospin and his British and German counter-parts Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder. The "boundary between economic liberalism and social democracy", he explained, runs "not only between the right and left, but ever more frequently directly through European social democracy". It is obvious, he said, "that opportunism in government is stronger than the defence of egalitarian values, which are inseparably bound up with socialism." Liberalism can advance in Europe, Emmanuelli continued, "because social democracy gives way. Therefore the fight must be conducted within social democracy."

Emmanuelli then spoke about the pushing down of wages in the public sector and the attack on the unemployment insurance scheme, *Unedic*. Wage earners were being played off against the unemployed, he said. The accusation that the demand for higher wages stands in the way of creating jobs was the "same old liberal story", he said, "whose purpose

consists of making those in work feel guilty for choosing between the alleged alternative of wage increases or jobs." ... "Do we need this old manoeuvre to divide the workers in order to avoid the question of the redistribution between wages and capital? No, comrades, it is not the size of the pay slip that is the enemy of jobs, and it does not suit the Socialist Party to play off the unemployed and those in work against each other."

Emmanuelli rejected the transformation of the *Unedic* unemployment insurance scheme already agreed by Jospin. He claimed it only represented the first step in what the employers' association *Medef* and the rightwing trade unions call *refondation sociale* ("social re-establishment"), an all-out attack on France's post-war social structures.

The leader of the second minority tendency, Jean Luc Mélenchon, began his political career in the 1970s in the *Organisation Communiste Internationaliste*, then headed by Pierre Lambert, which claimed at that time to be Trotskyist. Mélenchon joined the Socialist Party in 1977, under François Mitterrand, where together with Julien Dray, the initiator of *SOS Racisme*, they established the *Gauche Socialiste (Left Socialist)* faction and its bulletin *A gauche (Keep Left)*.

Mélenchon has called on the party to break with the "logic of globalisation" and turn to the recent protest movements, from Seattle to Millau. At the same time, he defends France as an "indivisible republic" regarding the status of Corsica. The *Gauche Socialiste* resolution was in the form of a letter from a young party member to the party chief, culminating with the vague demand that the Socialist Party "propose radical reforms, which break with the logic of the system".

Jospin rejected the criticisms and called on the party not to cause "the march we have begun to falter by ignoring economic realities. We should not slow our regained momentum by a relapse into orthodoxy. We do not have any reason to modify our policies."

He justified changes to the unemployment benefit system on the grounds that continued government refusal would have meant an end to bi-partite administration of the social

insurance scheme by employers and the trade unions, since *Medef* had threatened to withdraw from France's whole social welfare system.

Jospin defended the EU as the implementation of his "vision", against Mélenchon who had praised "France's uniqueness". The "French model", stated Jospin, must serve as an example for the EU. He defended the euro as a stabilising force throughout Europe and as "a strategic choice that promoted growth, instead of restricting economic expansion by monetary measures".

The "left" behaviour of the representatives of the minority tendencies can hardly be taken seriously. Both Emmanuelli and Mélenchon began their party careers under Mitterrand, whose 14-year presidency leaves no doubt that the French Socialist Party is firmly on the side of bourgeois order. Mitterrand and his Prime Minister at that time, Laurent Fabius, had already carried out the turn to liberalism in 1983/84. Emmanuelli's party career only suffered an interruption because he became the focal point of a scandal about donations to the party, and for which he was convicted. Otherwise he would probably be head of the government today instead of Jospin.

The conflict that broke out at this stage-managed meeting of hardened bureaucrats shows the tensions that exist in French society. The so-called "lefts" fear that the government's claim to be limiting the operation of the free-market economy to "economics", as opposed to "politics and society", will be exposed.

The Socialist Party's practice has never corresponded with this façade. Amongst other things, this is confirmed by an OECD report about the financial markets in Europe, in which the Jospin government's privatisation program receives special mention: Since 1997 it has resulted in proceeds averaging \$10bn per year.

The government's recent agreement to undermine the unemployment insurance scheme has further exposed Jospin's claims.

In July this year, the Minister for Social Affairs Martine Aubry and Economics Minister Laurent Fabius rejected the *Unedic* project for the second time and branded it as antisocial. Since then Aubry has withdrawn to Lille, where she is standing as a candidate for city mayor, and is saving herself for a higher calling, possibly as Jospin's successor.

On October 15, Jospin personally took the initiative and called the employers' president Baron Ernest-Antoine Seillière to indicate the government's agreement. Afterwards, Seillière praised Jospin to the press for behaving as a true "modern socialist" like Blair and Schroeder. The employers' leader demanded further concessions, saying a question must be placed over the 35-hour-week.

The support that Jospin enjoyed from the working class

when he first came to office has now dissipated. The September 24 referendum to reduce the President's term of office from seven years to coincide with that of parliament did not even attract a 30 percent turnout—demonstrating the extent to which politicians as a whole have lost the confidence of the population. The recent scandal over BSE-infected cattle has further intensified this distrust.

The minority tendencies sense the danger that Jospin is losing ground. Fearful that his government—comprising the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Radicals, the Citizens Movement and the Greens—could suffer a shipwreck, they are striving to protect the "left wing" of this coalition. This became clear when Emmanuelli said: "the left in the majority of trade unions, which has mounted a courageous opposition, are looking to us. It is not acceptable that we antagonise them. We cannot permit ourselves any errors here." It was clear he meant the CGT and FO union bureaucracy, who did not sign up to the new *Unedic* contract.

On the one hand, the inner-party "opposition" speaks for trade union and socialist party officials at all levels, and on the other hand for those radicalised layers of the middle class, who express their interests in different protest initiatives against the globalisation from Seattle to Millau. They regard Jospin as their point of contact and guarantor of their social position, but feel betrayed by his commitment to the EU.

In the final analysis, Jospin's opponents share his main aim: to remain in power. This was spelt at the conclusion of the congress, when both minority tendencies uniformly confirmed the leadership in office. Emmanuelli said bombastically of Jospin: "he knows that he can count on our support and devotion, today as yesterday, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, in a future that will perhaps be sometimes less calm than the past. But we will be there, Lionel, you know that. Because what counts is the victory of our ideas, social transformation, moving forward. And we know that we have a good locomotive in this regard."



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