

Interview with French Communist Party deputy Maxime Gremetz

David Walsh
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Maxime Gremetz is the French Communist Party (PCF) deputy from North Amiens. He spoke to the WSWs outside the Whirlpool factory in Amiens, an industrial city north of Paris. He was campaigning for votes at the plant, between rounds of the parliamentary elections. On June 16 he won reelection with 54.8 percent of the vote over a candidate from the right-wing Union for French Democracy (UDF).

Gremetz, first elected in 1978, has made a name for himself as something of a flamboyant politician, or more precisely, as something of a Stalinist demagogue. In April 1998 he drove an automobile into the midst of an official ceremony in which Charles Baur, the regional president who had just been reelected with the help of the neo-fascist National Front, was participating. For this stunt, Gremetz was deprived of “civic and civil rights” for two years, which would have meant his ineligibility for this June’s parliamentary elections. President Jacques Chirac intervened, however, pardoning Gremetz in May. Former right-wing Prime Minister Alain Juppé had argued on his behalf, calling the sentence “disproportionate and unjust.”

Gremetz has been an opponent of PCF General Secretary Robert Hue for some time. He is one of the “*refondateurs*,” (refounders) a group of French Stalinists opposed to Hue’s leadership and the general direction of the party. The differences between the factions are not principled. The *refondateurs* believe that the PCF, or their faction, can best survive by following in the footsteps of the Italian *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Refoundation). This is the sort of tendency loosely described in the bourgeois press as “old-style communist,” but such terminology is meaningless.

The PCF as a political entity irrevocably broke with Marxism nearly three-quarters of a century ago. The French Stalinists betrayed revolutionary opportunities in 1936, 1945 and 1968. They supported and defended the genocide carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR against socialist opponents in the late 1930s. In the postwar period, the PCF was one of the mainstays of French bourgeois rule. The factional differences today are divisions within a discredited and collapsing political tendency.

The real concern of the French Stalinist refounders is that the discrediting and disintegration of the PCF will create a dangerous political vacuum on the left. The refounders are responding, in the manner they think most effective, to the crisis of the French bourgeois political setup. They were no doubt particularly alarmed by the votes cast by three million people in the April 21 first round of the presidential election for three so-called “Trotskyist” parties.

The PCF is holding a national conference this week at which a bitter factional squabble, and perhaps a split, is a distinct possibility. A group of refounders published a statement in *l’Humanité* June 18, signed by a number of party leaders in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, calling for a special congress to organize the party’s “exit from its reformist transformation [*mutation*].” The last is a derisive reference to Hue’s project of “mutating” the Communist Party. The document continued:

“Today the mutating PCF is threatened with pure and simple extinction.” The refounders call for “a total strategic renovation,” and reject the “unity at the top” with the “Maastrichtian leadership of the PS”—a nationalist reference to the European Union.

In the interview posted below Gremetz criticizes the PCF for “abandoning” the working class, but fails to mention that he supported the party’s participation in the Jospin government, which presided over the privatization of industries, the destruction of jobs, the closure of factories and the growth in social inequality. In July 1998, at a moment of considerable crisis for the social democratic-led coalition, Gremetz assured Hue of his continuing support for PCF participation in the government. *L’Humanité*, the Stalinist daily newspaper, commented approvingly that Gremetz, despite various criticisms, “did not, in the end, wish the departure of the Communists from the government.”

Today the PCF deputy has his finger in the wind. The vote for the “extremes,” left and right, in the first round of the French presidential election in April has clearly encouraged him to take a “militant” stand against Hue and the rest of the party leadership, whose policies and tactics are threatening to run the Stalinist organization into the ground. But Gremetz’s “left” posturing, as well as his references to “Communist principles” and “Communist ideas,” will not fool anyone familiar with the history of the PCF. This is a counterrevolutionary organization, with a long history of gangsterism and thuggery against any and all left-wing political opponents.

For decades Stalinist officials in the CGT trade union answered militant workers, as well as Trotskyist and other leftist critics, not with political arguments, but with iron bars, clubs and fists. The French opportunist left organizations, such as Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, who extol the “militants” of the PCF, choose to forget and suppress this history of violence. In June 1967, for example, 300 Stalinists set upon a group of LO members outside the Berliet truck plant near Lyon with stones, kicking and beating them.

Indeed Gremetz could not help himself when we asked his view of Trotsky. His face clouded over: “Who ?” he asked. We repeated the name. “Trotsky? He’s dead. May he rest in peace,” he said, smirking cynically, as he disappeared into his automobile.

WSWS: What do you think of the political situation in France?

Maxime Gremetz: It’s a rare situation, what with the political trauma of April 21, we’ve never seen anything like it in France. To find ourselves in the second round of the presidential elections with the choice of either the far right or of casting a vote for Chirac, that is to say the right, to block the far right, along with a very strong reprimand given to the left government, Socialist Party and the Communist Party and partners ... I think it’s a political earthquake. We’ve never experienced that in France before.

It’s all linked with the crisis, to the fact that the political leaders are responsible, whether on the left or the right as, in fact, now it’s the right, then it’s the left, and people can’t see any change in their lives, except the increase in inequality and the rich on one side forever richer and the poor

always poorer. Well, that raises some real questions and you have some people, including from here, I know some, who say to me, “Why vote in the legislative elections if the leaders don’t give a damn about us, they never listen to us? We’ll let them know by voting National Front.” This is a serious situation with serious issues which are raised, economically and socially.

But with the Europe and the globalization which we’ve got today, people talk, in fact, of ideas on capitalist globalization, but what is Whirlpool with this relocation to Slovakia other than capitalist globalization? Whirlpool is a big company, the top American company, which has decided to restructure to get even more profits for the shareholders, and so what are the immediate consequences? People are looking for theories on globalization and we are experiencing it here, and there they are telling us they are going to relocate, there’s 12 percent profitability for the shareholders and they want 16 percent.

Where are they going to get them? They are going to relocate in Slovakia where the salaries are even lower, where the legislation is very flexible for the bosses and where Slovakia is, as it happens, the prime candidate for joining the European Union, that is for free competition, for ultra-liberalism, etc. They’re going to go over there, they’re going to get more profits, they’re going to attack the market here, they’re going to wipe out even more jobs over here because there will be unfair competition and then if we let the washing machine production line go, afterwards it’ll be the dryers and the site will be shut down.

Well, faced with that, the powerlessness, or the supposed powerlessness which the right and left governments display saying, “There’s nothing we can do,” or [President Jacques Chirac and former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin] going to Barcelona to sign to put up the age of retirement, that’s a very big issue; how can you expect that there be any prospects for the left people? They are completely disillusioned and that is expressed by two main things: one, a massive abstention among the working class who don’t go and vote, and it’s not negligence, it’s a political statement, and the other the rise of the National Front. That’s the political situation today and it’s a very worrying situation indeed.

WSWS: How do you view the collapse of the Communist Party?

MG: The left has got its just deserts and, as more is expected of the Communist Party, everything is expected, the working class expects everything from the Communist Party, and they are right to do so because it’s our vocation to act and to fight, etc., as the Communist Party had its hands completely tied in government saying nothing—we do not fight as we should. That’s what I’ve been saying since 1990. Maybe that explains why I get good results in my constituency. Because I haven’t given up the fight, I’m there every day, with the workers. That is what the Communist Party has given up on, that’s it in my opinion. So no political perspective planned and at the same time the jettisoning of the fundamentals of the Communist Party which is the intransigent defense of the interests of people, the struggle with them to achieve something, putting down motions at the National Assembly and opening up a political perspective. To my way of thinking, that’s the question.

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WSWS: Are there former voters and members of the CP who now vote National Front?

MG: Yes, there are from all the parties. People disillusioned with socialism, disillusioned with the left. They are showing their disillusionment. That’s what I would call, as we Picardy people say, a cuckold’s reaction. Once you’ve been two-timed, as you well know, people react badly. Well, it’s the same. The worst thing is that it’s more serious, a lot more serious. I don’t say that it’s OK to be made a cuckold, but in the event to be two-timed three times in a row, once by the left, then once by the right—the wealth gap—and then once again by the left, by dint of being two-timed you start to ... so therefore some National Front voters

who are not permanently necessarily racists, fascists, etc., it’s exasperation from being ignored, not listened to and betrayed.

WSWS: How do you see the future of the Communist Party?

MG: The future of the Communist Party? The Communist Party has to be refounded. It has to be rebuilt on its foundations. We have abandoned the working class, we’ve abandoned the workers. We’ve even dropped the word because it frightened us. Listen, I’m a worker, I’m with the workers, with the employees, the white collar workers. The working class has changed, of course, but it exists. And look at what we’ve got: casual labor, all those young people you see here who tell you they’re temporary workers because they are working for nothing and paid peanuts and they’ve no prospects, not even the prospect of starting a family because they don’t know if they’ll be hired on a permanent basis or whether they’ll be laid off tomorrow. They have to be given some hope, some prospects, but not with words, with concrete, precise measures, you see. The Communist Party must rediscover the communist idea which is still valid. There are people who tell me “we like the communism you practice”; indeed it was a journalist who told me that. Yes indeed, communism at the grassroots, communism which gives hope, which fights, which gives perspectives but not staying in plushy offices, gilt panels, but close to people, willing to listen to them and discuss with them.

WSWS: How do you see the experience of the Soviet Union?

MG: That was an historic experience which played a great part in the world, including the capitalist countries. We would not have what we have today in the capitalist countries if there had not been the Soviet Union. Historically speaking. But the great mistake, from having known those countries, having discussed a great deal with the leaders, is when you don’t place confidence in the people, when you de-politicize the people, when you don’t allow democracy, the participation of the people, you can’t transform a society. You can’t have leaders who on one side say “we’ll decide what will make you happy.” No way! It can’t be conceived like that. Building a new society must mean a call for freedom, people’s creativity, their full development. That’s what they didn’t understand. It was bureaucratic.

WSWS: What do you think of Trotsky?

MG: Who?

WSWS: Trotsky.

MG: Trotsky? He’s dead. May he rest in peace.



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