

An interview with Robert Hue, general secretary of the French Communist Party

Ulrich Rippert
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PCF leader Robert Hue in Argenteuil On June 7, two days before the first round of parliamentary elections, WSWs reporters spoke with Robert Hue, the general secretary and 2002 presidential candidate of the French Communist Party (PCF), in his constituency of Argenteuil, north of Paris.

The WSWs met Hue in the Quartier des Musiciens, a housing area, where he was campaigning for his re-election as the local deputy. Despite the fact that Hue's final appearance before the vote was advertised throughout the area on large posters, the lack of interest was evident. By the time the candidate arrived, not a soul was to be seen apart from his own entourage.

There were no delegations of party members or factory workers to welcome the head of a party that was once the most powerful in France. Even the local television station failed to turn up. Hue ended up speaking to some housewives and pensioners who happened by after leaving the local supermarket.

Argenteuil, the fifth constituency in the Val d'Oise, is one of the Paris *banlieues* (suburbs), notorious for high levels of unemployment and poverty. Unemployment stands at 18 percent, double the national average, and the area, dominated by high-rise blocks, is plagued by social problems.

The period is long past when this area, with its idyllic location on the bank of the Seine, exerted a powerful attraction on artists and was a source of inspiration for impressionist painters. Certain works, such as "The Bridge at Argenteuil" (1874), one of the finest paintings of the artist Claude Monet, recall this former period.

Today the area is marked by ruined factories. Amidst the high-rise flats one finds closed shops, abandoned youth clubs and run-down taverns. The windows of the supermarkets are protected by metal security gates. Groups of youth, bored and listless, hang out on street corners. A large proportion of the local population is of immigrant extraction, mainly from North Africa.

The local council of Argenteuil has been controlled by the Communist Party for the past sixty years. The influence of the party even extends to street names, such as the Boulevard de Résistance, the Place P. [Pierre] Sénard and the rue Marcel Cachin, named after two of France's most prominent Stalinists.

The result of the first round of the presidential election last April sent shock waves through the central offices of the Communist Party. From 30.4 percent in the 1997 parliamentary election, the vote for Hue in his own district plummeted to 9.8 percent. Jean-Marie Le Pen, the candidate of the neo-fascist National Front, came in first with 18.7 percent.

The response of the PCF to the April 21 first round repudiation of the "Plural Left," including its own role as an accomplice of the Jospin government, was to rally votes for incumbent Jacques Chirac. As the Stalinists editorialized on May 1: "For this [the defeat of Le Pen] one must be clear. It is necessary not only to beat him [Le Pen] decisively at the ballot box, but everything must be done to reduce his vote total by using the only ballot that will accomplish this, the one bearing the name Jacques Chirac."

In the parliamentary elections, to assist Hue in his effort to hold on to his seat in the National Assembly and help the Communist Party avert a humiliating disaster in its former stronghold, the Socialist Party (SP) decided not to stand a candidate of its own in Argenteuil.

Two days after his interview with the WSWs, Hue won 38.6 percent as the joint candidate of the left. Georges Mothron of President Jacques Chirac's Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) won 35.5 percent. Hue's result was 9 percent below the combined vote for the SP and PCF candidates in legislative elections five years ago, and the abstention rate, at 39.2 percent, was an all-time high.

As a result of the dramatic decline in the PCF's electoral fortunes in recent years, divisions and intrigues within the party have intensified. At a PCF conference last autumn, 15 regional party organisations (federations), including important party centres such as Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne and Somme, voted against Hue's proposal for a change in party statutes. Press reports have speculated about an imminent split in the party.

In private discussion, Hue creates the impression of a local trade union secretary, rather than a leading political figure. He appears to view all matters from a very limited standpoint. He seems incapable of grasping, and appears largely indifferent to the historic significance of the current political upheavals in France and the implications of his own actions.

As is often the case in history, the decline of a party is expressed in its choice of leading personnel. This is not to say that PCF leaders of the past, who carried out the most criminal betrayals of the French and international working class, were political giants. Nevertheless, they were individuals endowed with certain political skills, and with the ability to make an appeal, no matter how limited or demagogic, to the oppressed.

Hue, who by profession is a trained nurse, joined the Communist youth organization in 1962, when he was just 15. In 1977 he was elected local mayor of Montigny-les-Cormeilles, a distant suburb of Paris with 17,000 inhabitants. Ten years later he was elevated to the party's Central Committee and in 1990 joined its Politburo. In 1994 he was made chairman of the party. Up to that time Hue was largely unknown in political circles and was a focus of national interest and headlines on just

one occasion.

In February of 1981, Hue, calling for an “offensive against drugs,” marched at the head of a racist mob to the home of a Moroccan family in Montigny. The occupants, fearing for their lives, barricaded themselves inside their house. Prior to the march and without any proof, the Communist youth organization had distributed leaflets accusing the family of dealing in drugs. As it later became clear, the accusation was false.

Hue’s action was part of a chauvinist, pseudo-populist campaign launched by the PCF in an attempt to regain its influence following the collapse of its “Union of the Left” coalition with François Mitterrand’s Socialist Party. Two months before the events in Montigny, another PCF mayor permitted bulldozers to flatten immigrant living quarters in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine.

In the face of protests, leading PCF members appeared on television to defend these acts of racist vandalism. Ultimately, the main beneficiary of the PCF’s turn to anti-immigrant chauvinism was the National Front, which began to gain influence in PCF strongholds.

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WSWS : How do you see the present election campaign? What will the outcome be?

Hue: It’s a rather curious campaign because the result of the presidential elections, the previous election campaign, really upset the apple cart. First of all, there was a very big shock in the presidential election with the presence of the far-right candidate Le Pen in the runoff, and the absence of the left. There was a very big reaction that brought everybody except the far right to vote for Jacques Chirac.

I myself voted for Jacques Chirac, but not for Chirac, but rather to block the right so as to safeguard the values of the Republic. And, if I tell you this, it’s because the campaign today is somewhat truncated by the fact that Jacques Chirac is the elected representative of those who defended republican principles, but he is pulling the campaign to the right in a partisan fashion.

WSWS : What can explain the sharp drop in the Communist Party vote?

Hue : There has been a large drop in the Communist Party vote, which is fairly commensurate to the Socialist Party’s. We were in the government with Lionel Jospin and there was the collapse of Lionel Jospin, because in the working class the policies of the left were not understood and not recognised. And we, inside the government, we wanted to be more active to make the Socialist Party adopt other policies and we failed in that. And that’s why there has been a collapse. But look today in the opinion polls, now, two days from the elections, the Communist Party has climbed back to 6 percent.

WSWS : There are news reports indicating that considerable numbers of former PCF voters are now voting for the National Front. How do you explain this?

Hue : No, no! That is not true. There was a very large abstention in the Communist electorate. There was in all layers of the population—Socialist, Communist, Greens—a section of the electorate that protested either by voting Le Pen, or with a vote for the far left, but there has been no poll which shows to any significant extent that there is a movement of the Communist Party towards Le Pen. That is not true.

Our difficulty is something else. The weakening of the Communist Party: the Communist Party could count on 6 percent in that election, but 1 to 1.5 percent voted for Jospin because they feared the rise of the far right. Then there was another part that went to abstention. That is the truth of the matter.

WSWS : We saw that one of your election slogans was “France, That’s You.” What is your attitude toward nationalism?

Hue: We are fundamentally anti-nationalist. When we say “France, That’s You” this means that the French people feel that the problem is not one concerning immigrants, but a problem of civic and social responsibility. The French rejected the elite in this election and they

didn’t want France to mean the top people, the leaders; so our slogan was to say that for us, France is not those who run things, the technocrats, it’s you, the ordinary men and women citizens.

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

Hue : The Soviet Union collapsed. For me, what happened in the Soviet Union after the 1970s was not communism, and I was, I am, extremely hostile to what Stalinism was. Since I’ve been in the leadership of the Communist Party I’ve fought for us to reject Stalinism. We consider Stalinism to be not only a plague on the peoples concerned, but on communism itself. It was in the name of communism that people did things that had nothing to do with communism. Communism is something else. It’s a movement; it’s an action with the view to sharing. It’s not the bureaucracy, it’s not statism, it’s not the crimes of Stalin.

WSWS : What is your attitude toward Trotsky?

Hue : You know, I was not raised in a Trotskyist culture. I don’t have an opinion. Trotsky played a role in the Russian Revolution. Today, those who claim to be Trotskyists in France are often, how shall I put it, groups which are deeply characterised by being on the margins, extreme, who don’t want to take part in the institutions. Trotskyism does not have much significance in France today. There are groups that call themselves followers of Trotsky, but they don’t put Trotsky on their posters.

WSWS : We have one more question: In the early 1980s, 20 years ago, the Communist Party took an anti-immigrant line, calling for the end to all new immigration.

Hue : No, no.

WSWS : For instance, the mayor of Vitry-sur-Seine, a PCF mayor, demolished immigrant housing with a bulldozer and you, as mayor of Montigny-les-Cormeilles, denounced a North African family as drug dealers. Do you defend these actions, or do you recognize now that they contributed to the growth of anti-immigrant chauvinism?

Hue : No, no! That was an orchestration by those who said it was an action against the immigrants. In fact, the Communist Party in that period said: “You can’t stick all the immigrants in the same place.”

It was a fight against the ghettos and it was transformed; the right and even a section of the social democracy turned the campaign against the Communist Party, saying, “It’s against immigration.” But never has there been a party like ours, so open to immigration, and it’s been in the towns with a Communist Party administration that there has been a strong immigrant presence, and we have an internationalist stance.

We have been a very anti-colonialist party, against the colonial wars, and so our relationship to immigration is a positive relationship. So those were campaigns carried out, but they had no significance in reality. I can assure you of that.

WSWS : How do you view the future of the Communist Party in France?

Hue : I think this party has a future in a deep-going transformation, which I have initiated and which I call the “mutation of the Communist Party”—a policy of openness, of a modern communism in a social project that attacks the financial logic of our time, that is to say, which opposes capitalist globalisation.

I think that this party has a big future, because no other party, apart from the populist and far-right parties, can be present in the difficult areas and housing estates. It’s our vocation to be in a new way very close to these people in difficulty, and to carry through these transformations with them. It’s hard, but I see the future of the Communist Party in that struggle.

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