

# The French Communist Party discusses its latest electoral debacle

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8 July 2002

At a national conference last month the French Communist Party (PCF) discussed its disastrous results in France's recent parliamentary and presidential elections.

On June 26 and 27, 650 party functionaries gathered at Gennevilliers on the outskirts of Paris, in order to draw conclusions from the worst electoral results suffered by the organisation in its 80-year history. In the presidential elections the PCF, the most powerful party in France at the end of the Second World War, received just 3.4 percent of votes cast. The party improved its fortunes only slightly in the parliamentary elections, receiving just 4.9 percent of the vote.

With 322 votes in favour, 80 votes against and 53 abstentions, the conference decided to call a congress for the spring of 2003 to decide on the future strategy and form of the party. According to the conference decision, literally every aspect of the party's policy and work is to be open for debate in the discussion leading up to the congress.

The resolution decided upon by the conference suggests a party on the brink of dissolution, giving a long catalogue of questions up for debate, including whether the organization should even continue to exist.

Questions posed include: "What do we mean by 'communism'?" "Does the expression 'the overcoming of capitalism' reflect our view of changing society?" "Based on the analysis of the changes in society, work and social classes that we still have to carry out, which forces can be mobilised for transforming society and the world?" "Should the Communist Party of France be 'continued'? If so, to what purpose?"

The PCF would not be the PCF, with its long Stalinist tradition, if there were not bitter factional struggles taking place behind the facade of self-criticism and demonstrative soul-searching. The party leadership of Chairman Robert Hue and National Secretary Marie-George Buffet is under considerable pressure. As the party's presidential candidate, Hue bears the main responsibility for its recent miserable showing. Even though Socialist and Green Party candidates stood down to give him a free run as the only "left" candidate, Hue lost his seat as deputy in the National Assembly to a Chirac supporter in the constituency of Argenteuil—a long-time stronghold of the Communist Party.

Hue, who in 1994 replaced Georges Marchais as party chairman, advocates, as he calls it, a "mutation" of the PCF into a "communist party for the twenty-first century"—by which he means an open break with everything even remotely connected to the revolutionary traditions of Marxism, which the party had verbally defended, but in practice ditched decades ago.

According to a paper drawn up by supporters of Hue and published a week before the conference in the party newspaper *L'Humanité*, the restoration of the party's credibility cannot be achieved merely by announcing its break with the Soviet model and declaring it to be an "aberration" of communism, as the party has argued since the 1980s. Rather, up for debate is the "'communism of the twentieth century' as it emerged out of the ferment of the Russian October Revolution, with its particular theoretical and practical traditions."

Hue and his supporters are pressing for a party that dispenses with any rhetoric about class struggle, so that it can seamlessly adapt itself to official bourgeois politics—in a similar fashion to the East German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) or the Left Democrats in Italy. According to the document's own vague terms, the task is to develop "a modern communist identity" that "measures up to the challenges of our epoch."

This line has been greeted with resistance from a number of sides. One faction vigorously opposed to such a shift consists of long-time Stalinists and supporters of Hue's predecessor, Marchais. Among the leading figures of this faction is 81-year-old Georges Hage, who, unlike Hue, was able to defend his parliamentary seat and, as the most senior member of the new parliament, has opened the proceedings of the new National Assembly.

Prior to the latest national conference, Hage's faction published a withering attack in *L'Humanité* against the "toothless party leadership", which it accuses of dissolving itself "into the predominant ideology under the cover of 'modernity'", and of feeling more at home "in the salons of Paris than at the factory gate". The faction is calling for an extraordinary congress to decide on the party's "withdrawal from the reformist 'mutation'."

Another faction are the so-called *Réfondateurs*, who are seeking to completely dissolve the party in its existing form in favour of a new left regroupment, a so-called "pole of radicalism". Summarising the standpoint of this faction, one of its leaders, the historian Roger Martelli, declared: "One has to construct an alternative with others and not demand that they join with the PCF."

Two years ago the *Réfondateurs* supported Chairman Hue at the congress of Martigues. Now they are in conflict with him and are the strongest of the many factions opposing Hue's course. In Gennevilliers the faction won 89 votes for a resolution rejecting the call for a PCF congress and calling instead for a "general assembly of communism" open to other political tendencies. An attempt by the *Réfondateurs* to implement their line by calling for a referendum of party members failed when the majority of delegates at the conference opposed such a move.

In particular, the *Réfondateurs* are eyeing the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), whose candidate, Olivier Besancenot, did considerably better than Hue in the presidential elections. The LCR has a made considerable effort for many years to effect a regroupment involving sections of the PCF. Other candidates for such a "pole of radicalism" include disillusioned Socialist Party supporters, dissident Greens and numerous civil rights, protest and anti-globalisation movements.

Leading representatives of the *Réfondateurs* have made clear that they are prepared to pursue their efforts to construct such a movement against the wishes of the party leadership, a move that could lead to their splitting with the PCF, should the latter manage to survive the coming months.

What became apparent in Gennevilliers is the advanced stage of decline of one of the most right-wing and corrupt workers parties in Europe. It would be a serious mistake to regard any of the various factions in the

PCF as a potentially progressive tendency. All those involved—the supporters of Hue and Buffet, the old-line Stalinists, and the *Réfondateurs*—are attempting to salvage whatever they can from a party that has been involved in countless political crimes over the past century.

For decades the PCF was regarded as the most hard-line Stalinist of all the Stalinist parties in Europe. Already in 1924, immediately after Lenin's death, the supporters of Trotsky were driven out of the ranks of the party. Boris Souvarine, Pierre Monatte and Alfred Rosmer were forced to leave the party when they refused to condemn Trotsky, the co-leader with Lenin of the October Revolution and the driving force behind the Marxist Opposition to the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy. In the years that followed, the most loyal supporters of Stalin rose to the top of the party and remained there until the 1960s—Maurice Thorez, Jacques Duclos, Marcel Cachin, etc.

They defended every twist and turn of Stalin and supported all of his crimes, from the Moscow Trials and blood purges of the 1930s to the Hitler-Stalin pact at the end of the decade. Outside of the Soviet Union itself, there was no other country where the cult of Stalin was encouraged to such an extent as in France. Even after the death of the dictator, Thorez declared that the description “Stalinist” was not an insult, but rather a “title of prestige and honour” of which one could be proud. “From the depths of our hearts we declare our burning love for Stalin and assure him of our unshakeable trust,” the French CP leader declared.

The Stalinised PCF became one of the most important props of bourgeois rule in France. On three separate occasions the party assured the survival of French capitalism in periods of immense crisis.

The first occasion was in 1936, when an offensive of the working class brought a People's Front government to power, headed by the Socialist Party leader Leon Blum and supported by the Stalinists. The government of Blum suppressed the workers' general strike and opened the way for the right wing to return to power. At the same time, Blum refused to support the Spanish Revolution in the struggle against Franco, thereby forfeiting the last opportunity to stem the advance of fascism across Europe.

In the name of the People's Front, the PCF wrapped itself in the French flag, prostrated itself before the institutions of the bourgeoisie and assumed the chauvinist tones that have characterised the party up to the present day. The party withdrew the demand for the nationalisation of basic industry from its programme, advocated the defence of the fatherland and the rearmament of the military and refrained from any criticism of French colonial policy. As Thorez declared in 1936: “We communists have reconciled the tricolour of our fathers with the red flag of our hopes.”

After the Second World War, the PCF used all of the authority it had won in the resistance to German occupation to secure the survival of bourgeois rule in France. After liberation, General De Gaulle feared an uprising by the Communists because, as he commented, “The leadership of all fighting elements are in the hands of the Communists.” His fears were unfounded. The PCF supported De Gaulle, took part in disarming popular militias and exhorted workers to work harder. In the ensuing years, the PCF delivered crucial votes supporting France's colonial wars in Algeria and Vietnam.

The PCF rushed to defend the ruling elite on a third occasion: in 1968, when student protests and a general strike rocked the foundations of the Fifth Republic. The hostility displayed by the party to the protesting students was only exceeded by the brutality employed by party stewards against those calling themselves Trotskyist. The PCF then used its influence over the CGT trade union to break the strike and allow De Gaulle to return to power.

The middle of the 1960s saw the beginning of close collaboration between the PCF and the Socialist Party. At various times from 1981 onwards Communist Party officials held government posts, first under the

Socialist president, François Mitterrand, then in the 1997-2002 government of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, under the Gaullist presidency of Jacques Chirac. During this period the PCF's nationalist orientation descended at times to open anti-immigrant chauvinism. In 1981 Hue himself, then mayor of the Paris suburb of Montigny, marched at the head of a racist mob to threaten a Moroccan family living in the town.

The PCF's participation in governments that promised social reforms and delivered the opposite stripped it of its last vestiges of popular credibility. The party's debacle in the recent elections, in particular, is the reward for its role in implementing the right-wing policies of the Jospin government.

The electoral debacle marks the collapse of the nationalist programme defended by the PCF for years, under the slogan “socialism in French colours”. The globalisation of production has completely undermined all programmes based on gradual reforms within the framework of the nation state. A genuine socialist perspective can be realised only on the basis of an international revolutionary programme.

The first round of the presidential elections on April 21 made clear the urgent need for such a programme. Radical candidates, who call themselves Trotskyist, won three times as many votes as the Stalinist candidate, Hue, shocking all of the various factions within the PCF and throwing them into turmoil. All of them, however, responded to the unmistakable crisis of bourgeois institutions reflected in the large vote for the National Front and the massive abstention by rallying behind the favoured candidate of French capital, the incumbent Gaullist president, Chirac, and campaigning for him in the second round.

On this issue there was no difference of opinion between the Hueites, the old-line Stalinists and the *Réfondateurs*. None of them even contemplated an independent political stance, such as that proposed by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International in the form of a working class boycott of the election. With its call for a vote for Chirac, the PCF did what it has always done in times of crisis: it sprung to the defence of France's bourgeois institutions. The result was that Chirac, who received less than a fifth of the votes on April 21, now enjoys a comfortable parliamentary majority.

The current conflict between the various PCF fractions revolves around the question of how they can recover some of their lost credibility. Hue proposes breaking with old traditions and adapting even more emphatically to bourgeois politics and public opinion. The old-line Stalinists (four of the signatories of the statement in *L'Humanité* are more than 90 years old and two are over 80!) long for a return to the old days. The *Réfondateurs* are on the prowl for allies to provide the political equivalent of a blood transfusion. From a union with the LCR, they hope for some influx from the younger generation of students.

The “pole of radicalism” which they are striving to establish is another political dead end. Their role model is the Italian party Rifondazione Comunista, which emerged from the Italian Communist Party and absorbed numerous other radical groupings, including the Italian sister organisation, led by Livio Maitan, of the French LCR.

Rifondazione tries to accommodate radical moods, but has repeatedly supported the centre-left coalition (which held power until 2001) in critical situations. The Italian centre-left, like its French equivalent, rapidly exhausted its initial popular support and opened the way for the right wing under Silvio Berlusconi to return to power. Playing the role of a left fig leaf for the centre-left government, Rifondazione bears a major responsibility for the return of the right.





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