French right reorganises in new party

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11 December 2002

On November 17 at a congress in Le Bourget near Paris, the traditional parties of the French bourgeoisie agreed to unite in a new organisation—the Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire [UMP]).

Taking part in the fusion were the Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), the real backbone of the new movement, and the liberal parties Démocratie Libérale (DL) and the Union Démocratie Française (UDF). The presidency of the new party went to Alain Juppé (RPR), who occupied the post of prime minister in 1995-97 and is a close ally of the current French president, Jacques Chirac.

The charter of the grouping states: "The founding of our union is a political turning point.... Our families—Gaullists, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Radicals, social and independents—have, for the first time, united into a single, great movement and, in the course of so doing, overcome old boundaries."

However, not all of the classic French right wing participated in the construction of the UMP: a part of the UDF under the leadership of François Bayrou refused to join the new organisation. Other Gaullist leaders, including Charles Pasqua of the RPF (Rassemblement pour la France) and Philippe Séguin, the ex-president of the RPR, who both represent anti-European tendencies, sharply criticised the founding of the UMP.

The aim of the Le Bourget congress was to give the impression that the UMP is a party enjoying mass support. According to the organisers of the event, the intention behind what they called this "historic event" was to create the appropriate framework for a huge gathering. To this end, a total of 15,000 people were brought together from all over France. The congress served as a platform for celebrating the policies of the new French government and its right-wing leaders. Jacques Chirac, the real head of the UMP, did not turn up for the congress. It is presumed he sought to avoid giving ammunition to his critics, who regard the UMP as nothing more than an electoral machine for the president and his protégé Juppé.

The new party claims that its membership includes all social layers, and it is especially interested in attracting young people, wage earners and intellectuals. In fact, the UMP is far removed from being a mass party. The publicly acknowledged membership of 164,500 is, even according to the party's leader, a wildly exaggerated figure. A more realistic figure is thought to be about 80,000. Only around 30,000 took part in the various votes conducted by the party on such issues as its name, emblem, the charter, statutes and agenda. Alain Juppé was elected president of the new organisation with 79.4 percent, corresponding to a total of 37,822 votes.

The new party, a fusion of functionaries from a number of parties rather than a mass movement, has declared its desire to locate itself on the moderate right, but its ideological borders are anything but clearly defined. With regard to orientation, vagueness predominates: apparently there is no real agreement over whether the party should fish in the moderate right or establish itself as an openly right-wing party.

Amongst other ambitions, the party seeks to compete with the Green movement and the Catholic lobby. To this end the UMP has its own ecological wing, "blue ecology," and Christine Boutin, the candidate in presidential elections for the anti-abortion lobby, has taken her party into the UMP. Room has also been made for a monarchist movement called "Debout la France" (Onwards France), which won 14.91 percent of the vote for positions in the new executive.

The UMP has distanced itself from politicians of the RPR and UDF who sought to work together with the ultra-right National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, and now sought to join the new party—figures such as Charles Millon and Jean-Pierre Soissons. At the same time it has been argued that the new movement should not seek to keep them out for ever. Just two days after the congress a number of leading members of the ultra-right Mouvement pour La France led by Philippe de Villiers joined the UMP.

The main role model for the UMP is the Spanish Partido Popular (Peoples Party [PP]). The chairman of the PP, Jose Maria Aznar, was one of the most prominent guests at the congress alongside Angela Merkel (of the German Christian Democratic Union [CDU]) and Jose Manuel Durao Barroso, a representative of the Portuguese right. Aznar used the congress to hold up his party as an example. Aznar has led the PP since 1989 and has turned it into a reservoir for Christian Democrats, liberals and supporters of the old Franco party, Allianza Popular, where Aznar began his political career. On a European level, the UMP is seeking to work together with the German CDU-CSU, the PP and the right-wing in Portugal.

The charter of the new organisation adopts a "politically correct" language and expresses its apparent concern for the "poorest and weakest among us", the sort of language regularly used by France's main employers association, Medef. Under the key headings "freedom," "responsibility" and "solidarity," the needs of the individual are prioritised above that of society as a whole. Under the heading "liberty" the charter states: "We believe in individualism more than social determinism."

Under "responsibility" the charter regards state authority as the basis of social life: "Social life demands respect for the law. The extent to which responsibility exists or disappears determines whether communal life is easy or unbearable. The authority of the state and the judiciary must ensure that each and everyone bear responsibility for their actions."

The "solidarity" extolled by the UMP has nothing to do with the social welfare net established in France since the Second World War. Solidarity must "respect the individual. It cannot be turned into a crutch, with a uniform distribution of assistance leading to a form of dependence."

With regard to immigration the charter is relatively ambivalent. It emphasises: "First and foremost we are French," but then acknowledges the "richness of diversity" and voluntary integration. "Those who decide to live in France must voluntarily accept the values of our Republic, without disowning their own, but opening themselves to French identity. The state must guarantee the right to the equality of opportunity." Evidently the UMP is keen to exploit the electoral potential of the numerous immigrants in France who work as small traders and often share conservative inclinations.

The politics of Gaullism, which has dominated French conservative political life since the war, is not mentioned in the entire charter.

The practical significance of the UMP programme is evident when one

looks more closely at the policies of the current government led by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The government is striving to create the conditions to enable the French capitalist class to adapt to international capitalism and become competitive on the world market. Under the key phrase “modernisation of the country,” the government has undertaken (with the approval of Medef) the destruction of the welfare state, decentralisation and reorganisation of the employment market, a tax reform in favour of the rich, the abolition of tax-financed, state-controlled welfare spending and preparations for war. In order to counter any possible opposition, the government is attacking democratic rights and preparing a new police state.

Over the past 15 years, there has often been discussion about a possible unification of French right-wing parties, but the project never really got off the ground. In 1988 the French prime minister, Edouard Balladur (RPR), first made a proposal along such lines and during the next three years the leadership of the RPR undertook a number of attempts at unification. In 2001 the organisation France Alternance was founded and in April of the same year the UEM (Union en mouvement), but none of these initiatives led to the formation of a new party. In the presidential elections held in the spring of this year the three main organisations of the right wing all put up their own independent candidates.

The construction of the UMP first became possible when Jacques Chirac used the opportunity which arose during the presidential elections of 2002. The systematic attack on the living and working conditions of the broad masses carried out by the previous government (“majority lefts”) led by Socialist Party head, Lionel Jospin, had undermined support for the component parties of the Jospin coalition—social democrats, Stalinists and Greens.

In the first round of voting, popular discontent was expressed in a fragmentation of the vote (including nearly three million votes for the “far left” candidates) and the emergence of Chirac as the leading vote-getter, with just 20 percent of the vote. The Socialist Jospin was unable to win enough votes to stay in the race. In second place behind Chirac, the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen was able to win 17 percent.

Chirac and his advisors quickly realised the extent of the collapse of the “majority lefts” and took the initiative to unite the right. On April 23, two days after the first round of voting in the presidential elections, Chirac supporters created a large political melting pot under the name Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (Union for a Presidential Majority [UMP])—basically the same constellation of parties which came together at Le Bourget and founded the new party with the same initials. In the parliamentary elections in June of this year the UMP won an absolute majority and has since formed the government.

Chirac was able in particular to use the political support garnered for him by the official left, incorporating the trade union bureaucracy and radical left parties. Using the argument that the only way to stop Le Pen was to support Chirac, these forces led an active campaign in support of the latter in the second round of voting. There was no need on Chirac’s part to lead any sort of substantial campaign and he was able to concentrate on constructing a new party of the right. With the support of the lefts, Chirac was confirmed in office with an overwhelming majority. He now had sufficient authority and political credibility to unite the right, win parliamentary elections held in June and consolidate the UMP.

There is, however, another reason why the bourgeois politicians have overcome their old rivalries and agreed to the foundation of the UMP: against a background of growing social tension at home and increasing imperialist conflicts abroad the bourgeoisie regarded a regrouping as necessary. The explosive social situation which made itself felt in the course of the presidential elections and during the strikes of the past weeks has forced the parties of the bourgeoisie to close ranks in order to be better able to take on the working class.

The realisation of a policy in the interests of an ultra-rich minority at the expense of the broad majority, which can only be achieved through the destruction of democratic rights, demands the merger of the entire spectrum of the right into a single party. The situation recalls that of 1958, when the bourgeois parties of the Fourth Republic lined up behind De Gaulle amidst fears that the brutal colonial war being carried out in Algeria could spill over into a civil war affecting France itself.

On a European level, the new party seeks to work more closely with layers of the European right for an offensive against the working class across the continent. This is why prominent figures of the European right wing played such a prominent role in the congress at Le Bourget. After the speeches of Juppé and Raffarin, three leaders of European conservative parties gave keynote speeches to the congress. In addition, 400 prominent international guests were in attendance. Raffarin, Juppé and Philippe Douste-Blazy all took part in the 15th Congress of the PPE (European Peoples Party) held recently in Portugal.

Given the circumstances surrounding its formation and the composition of forces involved, the new union of the French right is not of an inherently stable nature. In the weeks preceding the Le Bourget congress the French press was full of reports of internal conflicts within the movement. A debate emerged along the lines of finding some basis for regulating differences, even if it was not possible to overcome them.

The coexistence of various antagonistic groupings has not been resolved since the founding of the UMP. Questioned by the *Figaro* newspaper, a political analyst declared that, in his opinion, behind the scenes the various movements would continue their struggles. “On every rung of the great ladder game in which France finds itself today, pulled to and fro between regional, national, European and now the socio-economic consequences of globalisation, the struggles will continue between Jacobins and decentralists, monarchists and federalists, protectionists and supporters of the free market.”

Inside the UMP itself such problems are well known. Its Internet side emphasises that discipline has priority over the “ideological debate.” The German CDU and the Spanish PP are cited in this respect as good role models. According to a report in the newspaper *Le Monde*, a political advisor to Chirac, Jérôme Monod, thinks “the movements which inevitably led to the formation of (rival) presidential teams inside the new organisation are not welcome.”

The apparent strength and success of the UMP—in common with the Spanish PP or the Forza Italia of Silvio Berlusconi—is mainly a result of the collapse of social liberalism and the current modern left. In similar fashion the Republicans led by George W. Bush have only been able to dominate American politics because of the complete absence of any sort of opposition from the US Democrats.

Commentaries in the conservative press in France and by leaders of the UMP are dominated by their justified fear that the struggles between the various fractions, or conflicts between the political leaders, could re-emerge and ruin everything. On the evening prior to the congress Juppé admitted: “The most important steps remain before us: may the party grow, may it be modern and close to the people and embrace hundreds of thousands.”

The regrouping of the right has only been made possible because of a political armistice on the part of left parties. As soon as the latest strikes began, it became clear how little influence and trust was invested in the united right. The government of Raffarin immediately felt obliged to show its teeth.

The parties of the right have only been able to reorganise and carry out their attacks with the support of left parties and the trade unions, because of the lack of a independent perspective and political leadership in the working class.

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