

French Communist Party Chairman Hue loses his parliamentary seat

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On February 2, the chairman of the French Communist Party (PCF), Robert Hue, for a second time lost his parliamentary seat in Argenteuil, the fifth electoral district in Val-d'Oise.

In elections for the French national parliament in June 2002 Hue was beaten by just 244 votes by the conservative candidate Georges Mothron (Union for a Presidential Majority—UMP). Hue disputed the outcome of the vote and, in autumn of last year, France's constitutional court ruled the election should be re-held because of a violation of rules by the UMP candidate. In the new vote Mothron was able to increase his advantage over Hue to 969 votes, or just over 3 percent of the votes cast.

As a result, a former stronghold of the Communist Party is now firmly in the hands of the conservatives. In communal elections in 2001, Mothron had already managed to push the FCP out of the city hall of Argenteuil—a town dominated by the PCF for the last 67 years.

This latest defeat for Hue means the end of his political career. Before the latest elections he had already declared that he would not stand for re-election as party chairman at the upcoming party congress in April. Now there appears to be no longer any possibility of him playing any sort of leading role in the party.

Hue was trained as a nurse. In 1994, shortly before the end of the political reign of Francois Mitterrand (Socialist Party), he replaced veteran leader Georges Marchais at the head of the PCF. At the end of the Second World War the French Communist Party was the single biggest party in French politics, supported by a quarter of the electorate. But by 1994 the party had already undergone a massive decline in its influence. After Hue's takeover as chairman, the precipitous

decline of the FCP continued to accelerate.

In presidential elections in 1995 the party gained just 8.7 percent of the vote, and 9.9 percent in the parliamentary elections in 1997. Two years later the party registered just 6.8 percent in the European elections of 1999 and 3.4 percent in presidential elections in 2002—with Hue as presidential candidate. In local elections in 2001, in addition to the loss of Argenteuil, the party lost its seats in numerous city halls the party had controlled for decades. Hue's renewed defeat therefore has a significance above and beyond his own person.

Hue's inner-party proponents have barely concealed their pleasure at his fate. They regard Hue's policy of "mutation"—demarcating the party from its old Communist phraseology in favour of snuggling up to the Socialist Party—as the cause of this latest debacle. "It is the result of a failed strategy," was the comment by deputy André Gerin, while his colleague Maxime Gremetz declared, "It is the symbolic collapse of subordination to the Socialist Party." Both deputies are members of the "orthodox" wing of the party.

There can be no doubt that Hue bears personal and political responsibility for the decline of the once powerful PCF. But it would be mistaken to make the somewhat insignificant political figure of Hue the only, or even the main, reason for the party's misfortunes. There are much more profound processes at work. In the final analysis the decline of the FCP is the inevitable consequence of the Stalinist politics it defended over decades.

Founded at the congress of Tours in 1920 from a fraction which had split with the Socialist Party, the PCF expelled from its ranks supporters of the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky and, in the process, became a bastion of Stalinism. Verbally the party clung

to the aims of the Communist movement, but in practice it functioned as a reliable prop of bourgeois rule in France.

Repeatedly the party came to the rescue of the bourgeoisie in periods of crisis—e.g., in the '30s, when the Popular Front government suppressed a mass movement of the working class and isolated the progressive forces in the Spanish Revolution; then again after the Second World War, when the party entered the government of Charles de Gaulle; and most recently in 1968, when the party bitterly opposed the student protests and then sold out the subsequent general strike. The party only acted in opposition to the French government when differences of opinion emerged between Moscow and Paris, for example in 1939, when the party supported the Stalin-Hitler pact.

In the '70s and '80s the party led by Marchais began to tentatively free itself from Moscow in order to close ranks with the Elysée, the seat of the French presidency. Mitterrand was always able to count on the party's support for the implementation of unpopular measures or the defence of French imperial interests abroad.

The collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s broke the back of the party. Hue sought to cuddle up, and eventually amalgamate, with the Socialists. To this end he demonstrated unyielding loyalty to the head of the Socialists, Lionel Jospin. Others inside the party nurtured hopes of a return to past Stalinist glories or some form of militant syndicalism.

At last count no less than five separate factions are to be found inside the party: supporters of Hue; supporters of the national secretary Marie-George Buffet, who criticise and seek to moderate Hue's path of "mutation"; supporters of Marchais, who seek a party which is "neither social democrat nor ultra left"; the "orthodox" faction who yearn for the return of the Stalinist past; and "renewers", who are seeking to dissolve the party into a new left movement with the Pabloite revisionist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire.

Above the clamour of heated factional struggle one thing is clear: not one of these factions has any progressive perspective to offer. They are without exception waste products of the collapse of Stalinism.



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