

At Paris meeting on eve of vote

French Socialist Party leaders slander “no” voters in referendum on EU constitution

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PARIS—To experience just one of the 450 meetings organised by the French Socialist Party to drum up support for the European Union (EU) constitution confirms one’s conviction that the referendum will most likely fail on Sunday.

Organised May 25 by the Socialist Party (PS) in Paris at the Mutualité in the Latin Quarter, the meeting brimmed with self-satisfaction, cynicism and arrogance. About 150 people turned up—primarily loyal party members. The atmosphere was informal. Everyone knew one another and addressed each other in familiar terms. The speeches were interspersed with little jokes and anecdotes.

The realities of everyday life were left behind as soon as one entered the meeting. None of the speakers referred to unemployment, welfare cuts, poverty and all the other ills that plague the lives of millions of people in France and throughout Europe. Instead, speakers painted an illusory picture of a democratic and harmonious continent.

The meeting began in a subdued fashion. A representative of the Radical Party, a relic of the major bourgeois pillar of the Third and Fourth Republics, justified his support for the constitution. It stands for a democratic Europe, he claimed bluntly. His proof? Its prohibition of the death penalty. In China thousands were executed annually, and dozens in America. Most listeners failed to follow the logic of the argument; after all, no one has suggested introducing the death penalty in Europe in the event of the constitution being rejected.

The next speaker was Anne Hidalgo, deputy mayor of Paris. In her mid-forties, her résumé includes a spell as an executive at the water company Vivendi. Hidalgo kept to the official party line: “For a strong France in a strong Europe” and “the export of the French social model.” Throughout the whole world, she argued, for example, “South America and Asia,” one hears the call, “We need a strong Europe.” Occasionally, Hidalgo spat out invective against opponents of the constitution. She advised Laurent Fabius, a leading

spokesman of the “no” camp within the Socialist Party, to take a trip to a psychiatrist.

Then the proceedings gradually became noisier. Francois Rebsamen, number three in the PS and the member of the party’s executive committee in charge of the “yes” campaign, resorted to all sorts of demagoguery.

He conjured up the ghosts of former leading French Socialist figures, Jean Jaurès and Léon Blum. One of the most fundamental values of socialists—internationalism—was at risk, he maintained. Rebsamen forgets that socialist internationalism aims to unite workers against the bourgeoisie and its governments, while the essential purpose of the proposed EU constitution consists in uniting European governments and big business against the population.

Nevertheless, Rebsamen went on to justify the fact that “free and genuine competition” has been enshrined in the constitution by pointing out that this stipulation had already been included in the Treaty of Rome of 1957. It was a conclusion drawn from the experience with Hitler’s national socialism, he argued; after all, as is well known, national socialism had relied on the large monopolies and trusts. Rebsamen ignores the fact that the “free market” economic regulations stipulated in the constitution favor precisely the most powerful European financial interests.

Rebsamen praised “the responsible decision” that the Socialists had made on the constitution. In a revealing comment, he noted that if the Socialist Party did not call for a “yes” vote, then 70 percent of the French voters would vote “no.” It is no doubt true that the ruling class in France has many reasons to be grateful to the Socialists. Whether their efforts are enough, however, to ensure passage of the constitution, remains highly uncertain.

This possibility was sufficient to enrage Rebsamen, who concluded his contribution by accusing opponents of the constitution of irresponsibility. They refrain, he blustered, from posing the question, “What happens afterward?”

The main speaker at the meeting was Pierre Moscovici, the

former European affairs minister under Lionel Jospin. A graduate of the National School of Public Administration (ENA), a principal training school for the French political elite, Moscovici was a member of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) led by Alain Krivine, before switching to the Socialist Party in 1984. A participant in the drawing up of the constitution as a member of the constitutional convention, he now let loose a barrage of abuse against its opponents.

His entire contribution revolved around the key word “rage,” and he was not afraid of hitting below the belt. The representatives of the “no” camp, he claimed, were anti-socialist, anti-internationalist and simply stupid. They were misrepresenting the constitution and spreading illusions. They wanted to restore the “Iron Curtain”—something that he, as the son of a Romanian father and a Polish mother, emphatically rejected. He praised the economic progress of eastern Europe in the strongest terms, saying nothing about the devastating social conditions prevailing in that region. He then dealt in detail with the suggestion that Laurent Fabius visit a psychiatrist.

Gradually the mood in the hall warmed up.

The applause increased when Moscovici accused President Jacques Chirac of lacking commitment to the constitution. Every time the president had intervened publicly to encourage support for the constitution, he noted, opinion polls recorded a decline in support for the measure.

On this point Moscovici spoke directly to the hearts of the frustrated party faithful assembled at the Mutualité. In 2002, PS members led the campaign for Chirac, after their own candidate, Jospin, was beaten out in the first round of the presidential balloting by the neo-fascist Jean Marie Le Pen of the National Front. At that time, Chirac patched together his UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) and prepared for the parliamentary election, which he promptly won with a large majority (due in large measure to the perfidy of the French left). And now, the PS was once again obliged to do Chirac’s dirty work, with the latter only making matters worse through his thoughtless and unpopular interventions.

Moscovici reserved the rest of his “rage” for those voting “no” on Sunday. He did not want to put the left-wing and right-wing opponents of the constitution into the same pot, but a success of the “no” camp would be a triumph for Le Pen. Polls have shown, he asserted, that more than 50 percent of the opposition to the constitution emanated from the camp of right-wing extremism.

This is nothing less than slander. Moscovici seeks to intimidate opponents of the constitution, by implying they are helping right-wing demagogues to “their first big victory.”

The Socialists have learned nothing from the events of

2002. At that time, Le Pen finished ahead of their presidential candidate, after many voters rejected Jospin’s anti-working class policies. The PS leadership then fled into the arms of Chirac and declared that this right-wing politician, who had been involved in a series of corruption scandals, was the saviour of the Republic. Now they once again spearhead an election campaign for Chirac, and denounce anyone who opposes them as accomplices of the fascists.

The meeting ended with comments from the public. Party stalwarts made agitational speeches in a desperate attempt to revive receding hopes. But there were also some more thoughtful contributions to be heard.

A young black mother said she had attended several election meetings so far and still did not know how she should vote. She did not understand what the constitution meant for her—regarding the minimum wage, care and education for her children. Her contribution was mostly greeted with astonished looks from the podium and the audience.

An older, somewhat shy participant dared to remark that the campaign would perhaps be more successful if some positive messages were introduced instead of just flaying one’s opponents. However, he himself was only able to suggest a few advertising slogans such as “A Europe of the heart instead of a Europe of fear” (which rhymes in French).

What is one to make of such a meeting?

It shows the enormous divide that has opened up between the Socialist Party and the population at large. Not only is the party unable to articulate the problems and concerns of ordinary people, it is indifferent to them. Insulated and insensitive, the party leadership feels provoked and offended by signs of opposition from inside or outside its ranks. It took quite some time before a campaign mood developed inside the hall, but this sentiment was less an expression of any genuine enthusiasm than a cover for the party hierarchy’s own despair.

The PS feels pressured, not by the powers that be, but by the opposition coming from below. This lies behind the hysterical denunciation of “no” voters as conscious or unconscious abettors of the extreme right. The Socialist Party will undoubtedly react to every new challenge from working people with a further shift to the right.



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