

French Socialist Party congress backs government repression

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At an emergency congress of the French Socialist Party held in Le Mans November 18-20 the party's various factions united in order to defend the French state.

The party had previously lent its support to the Gaullist government of President Jacques Chirac in the government's efforts to repress the anti-police protests by youth that swept through France's impoverished suburban ghettos. Only when Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy extended a state of emergency until February 21 did the Socialist Party make a show of opposition.

The state of emergency grants the police and the government extraordinary powers to curtail democratic rights. These powers are directed not only at the youth disturbances, but more fundamentally against all sections of the working class, which is broadly opposed to the right-wing "free market" policies of the government. The state of emergency was extended by three months on November 15, when the unrest and arson attacks by largely immigrant youth were already waning.

At the Le Mans conference, the Socialist Party formally declared itself opposed to the extended state of emergency, but underlined its backing for repressive police measures. The re-elected party leader, François Hollande declared in his closing speech: "We must show that the left is more credible for public order and tranquillity than the right."

The congress saw the three main factions—the majority, led by First Secretary François Hollande; the New Socialist Party (NSP) faction, led by Arnaud Montebourg, Vincent Peillon and Henri Emmanuelli; and the faction led by ex-prime minister Laurent Fabius—unite on a common programme seeking to project a left face to the electorate. The aim of all concerned was to reverse the party's ailing fortunes and provide the French ruling elite with a vehicle through which mounting social and political unrest could be brought under control, in the form of a party combining a commitment to law and order with minimal social reforms.

The congress, attended by 4,500 people, of which 614 were delegates, was called in the wake of the devastating defeat of the Socialist Party's joint campaign with Chirac and then-Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin in support of the European Union constitution. The decisive "no" vote in May's referendum in France, followed by a similar result in the Netherlands, expressed popular opposition to the constitution's neo-liberal economic policies aimed at eliminating welfare services.

In the intervening months, the situation facing the Socialist Party

and the whole of France's ruling elite has only worsened, with a series of militant strikes against job losses and the planned privatisation of state services followed by the elemental explosion of anger against social deprivation, discrimination and police abuse that began in the suburbs of Paris.

The week following the Le Mans congress witnessed an indefinite strike of railway workers, followed by a strike by Paris bus and metro workers and a national teachers strike.

The delegates gathered under conditions where democratic rights have been curtailed by the government under special regulations provided for in a 1955 law drafted to repress resistance to colonial rule in Algeria.

The Socialist Party refused to call for the paramilitary CRS and the police to be withdrawn from the immigrant suburbs. It gave support to the government's initial state of emergency, declared for a twelve-day period. Vincent Peillon, who advances himself as a "left" within the party, declared at the time: "If we want the republican state to be respected, whatever I think of Nicolas Sarkozy... the minister of the interior does not have to resign because people who are burning cars are demanding that he do so..."

The Communist Party and the petty-bourgeois radicals of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Lutte Ouvrière also refused to call for the removal of the riot police from the immigrant ghettos.

This closing of ranks in defence of the "republic" is the key to understanding the unity the Socialist Party was able to establish at Le Mans. The essential nature of the Socialist Party as a bourgeois party of order is to be found in the special motion, supported by all tendencies, entitled, "Respond to the Social and Urban Crisis." Rather than demand the state of emergency be lifted, it proclaimed, "This violence [not that of the riot police, but of the youth] is unacceptable and inexcusable."

The resolution went on to state: "The Socialists pay tribute to the courage of the local elected councillors and mayors, the police officers, the firemen, the social workers who have protected the population, brought succour to the victims and enabled calm to be reestablished."

However, the Socialist Party understands that police repression by itself cannot maintain order, and can instead serve to fuel social opposition. In order to make an appeal for support in the working class, the statement registered opposition to "the social crisis and the damage done by free market policies" and the government's

withdrawal of finance from social services and associations on the working class housing estates. It pledged a programme to emancipate the inhabitants of the estates from their impoverished conditions and “to reaffirm... that the youth in the working class neighbourhoods, so often stigmatised or rejected because of their diverse origins, have the same rights and duties as all citizens.”

Criticism of the state of emergency occupied two lines in the four-page document (“The Right is trying politically to exploit the violence to justify the continuation of a policy which has failed. It is resorting to the laws of exception and a state of emergency, which we oppose.”) The real attitude of the party was made clear in its paraphrasing of Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair. The motion stated, “We must be tough on violence and tough on the causes of violence.”

The first proposition of the special motion’s programme of reforms for the estates is, “The setting up of a new community policing, with proper police stations, staffed by experienced officers so as to deploy a coordinated strategy to fight crime, especially the black economy.”

Notwithstanding the congress’ call for certain minimal reform measures, the Socialist Party has long since abandoned any commitment to social reforms. When François Mitterrand was elected president in 1981 he announced reforms, including a program of nationalizations, but within 18 months he was brought into line by the international financial markets. He then launched an austerity programme that has become the hallmark of Socialist Party-led governments ever since. The Hollande leadership defended this legacy when it campaigned for a “yes” vote in the referendum on the European Constitution.

The party was split, with a minority faction, led by Laurent Fabius, calling for a “no” vote and claiming to oppose plans to privatise the state sector and eliminate welfare provisions. But as Mitterrand’s finance minister and later as prime minister, Fabius had presided over the destruction of millions of jobs and a freeze on wages.

More recently, Fabius, as finance minister, and Hollande, as leader of the Socialist Party, worked hand in hand with Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the Socialist Party-led government of the Plural Left, which “cohabited” with President Chirac and imposed “free market” policies virtually indistinguishable from Chirac’s previous government, led by Alain Juppé. The electorate paid Jospin back for his five years of neo-liberal policies by relegating him to third place in the French presidential elections of 2002. He came in behind not only Jacques Chirac, but also the neo-fascist National Front candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Under Hollande, the Socialist Party responded by rallying behind Chirac and claiming that he represented a democratic bulwark against the National Front threat to the “republic.” The Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire campaigned for a vote for Chirac, with the result that he was re-elected with an 82 percent margin in the run-off against Le Pen. All these factions bear political responsibility for the Chirac/De Villepin regime and its attacks on the working class.

At the Socialist Party congress in Le Mans the various factions buried the hatchet and united in order to conceal this record and refurbish the reputation of the Hollande leadership. After the “no”

vote in the EU constitution referendum, the majority faction had expelled Fabius from the party’s leading bodies.

Prior to the congress, the three factions submitted resolutions to be voted on by members of the party. Those put forward by the Hollande leadership won a narrow majority of just over 53 percent, with the resolutions of the New Socialist Party faction and Fabius faction dividing the remainder of the vote roughly equally.

That the Hollande leadership has retained the support of a majority of members, despite the explicit rejection of its programme by its own electorate, is a measure of the party’s right-wing character. But a majority within the party does not translate into popular support in the country.

In an attempt to reverse the party’s fortunes, all leadership challenges were shelved and Hollande was left as the only candidate for first secretary. In return, Fabius was readmitted to the party’s leading bodies along with other opposition figures grouped around Arnaud Montebourg.

The nominal opposition did the party leadership another favour by providing it with a left-sounding programme with which to make an appeal to working people. The minimal reforms proposed in the final composite motion are largely borrowed from those proposed by Fabius: a minimum wage of 1,500 euros, the repeal of the government’s most socially destructive legislation on pensions, support for the 35-hour week, penalties for firms which sack workers just to be more profitable, and maintaining public ownership of the EDF electrical utility. This is combined with advocacy of nationalist and protectionist economic measures, such as external tariffs to safeguard European industry, a reinforced Eurozone with a new stability pact, and “political democratic control” of the European central bank to boost jobs and growth.

Such measures are considered necessary if the Socialist Party is to present itself as an alternative to the Gaullists in the presidential and legislative elections in 2007. However, the Socialist Party has no intention of doing anything that contradicts the demands of the major corporations for further anti-social measures, which they declare necessary to make France globally competitive. Should it come to power, the Socialist Party’s de facto support for the repressive measures of the Gaullists would be accompanied by new attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people.



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