

Jack Lang and the continuing disintegration of the French Socialist Party

Pierre Mabut, Stefan Steinberg
23 July 2007

Jack Lang, one of the last remaining ‘Elephants’ (old guard) within the French Socialist Party leadership, is the latest to turn his back on the party and take up the offer of a ‘mission’ by newly-elected President Nicolas Sarkozy. The latter offered Lang a role on the government’s commission to renovate state institutions.

The Socialist Party (PS) is reeling from a series of desertions from its ranks to join the Sarkozy bandwagon. The party’s defeat in the recent presidential and legislative elections created a crisis of confidence among its leaders, along with dealing blows to their hopes of holding ministerial or government positions.

On July 10 the PS leadership, led by its general secretary François Hollande, threatened Lang with exclusion from the party if he accepted Sarkozy’s offer to participate in the commission’s work. Two days later, Lang resigned from all the Socialist Party’s leading bodies, denouncing Hollande and the leadership for “disloyalty.” He then went on to call for the entire leadership to resign and put their fate in the hands of the party members. Lang told *Libération*, “They [PS leaders] have helped me by allowing me to make a decision I should have made long ago. Long live liberty! Long live life.” It should be noted that “liberty” and “life” here are identified with joining the most right-wing government in modern French history.

At the time of Lang’s announcement, the Hollande leadership had not yet recovered from the loss of other leading Socialist Party grandees. The former PS champion of human rights, Bernard Kouchner, is now Sarkozy’s foreign minister; prominent ex-cabinet minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn has accepted Sarkozy’s nomination as director of the International Monetary Fund; and Jean-Pierre Jouyet has been appointed minister for European affairs.

Another high-profile “left” figure to have accepted a job from Sarkozy is Hubert Védrine, who was an adviser to former Socialist Party leader and president François Mitterrand and was once French foreign minister. Védrine has accepted a post in a think-tank on the effects of globalization, along with the economist and writer Jacques Attali, 63, who was also a Mitterrand adviser. Another prominent PS defection is the erstwhile feminist Fadela Amara, who is now secretary of state for urban policy under Sarkozy.

The party’s recent National Committee meeting decided to delay any consideration of its 2007 electoral defeats until next March. There are no elements within the leadership calling into question the right-wing character of presidential candidate Ségolène Royal’s election campaign and the inability of the PS to challenge the reactionary policies of the sitting UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) government or Sarkozy’s election bid.

On the contrary, a discussion about the recent electoral failure might very well have brought into the open the extent to which significant portions of the PS hierarchy *share* Sarkozy’s perspective. The collapse of the ‘left-right alternation,’ the exposure of the Socialist Party as an open defender of French capitalism, has significant and dangerous implications for political life in France. By putting off an internal discussion, Hollande and the PS stalwarts were attempting to keep alive the illusion that their party represents a “difference.” By their actions, Strauss-Kahn, Védrine, Lang and company have blown apart the consensus resolution adopted by the National Committee meeting.

In reality, the program and policy of the PS has much in common with that of Sarkozy’s UMP. Now a number of leading figures in the PS have decided that rescuing their political careers and maintaining their lucrative privileges are only possible as part of a Sarkozy administration.

In switching camps, Lang ignored his own role in the party’s debacle. After the election defeat the PS is “experiencing a serious crisis,” Lang said. “We would have expected an analysis, some self-criticism from the leaders.” Again, in this context, “analysis” and “self-criticism” mean providing arguments for a further shift to the right by the Socialist Party.

In an interview in *Libération* (July 12) Lang complained that the party was self-destructing and “launching a *fatwa* [religious edict] against me.” He accused Hollande of “clipping the wings of personalities” like Strauss-Kahn, Kouchner and others, all of whom have either resigned their positions in the leadership or defected to Sarkozy’s government.

Lang, however, is hardly a political novice and his resignation has nothing to do with differences with the PS program. In fact, it was Lang together with Strauss-Kahn and Martine Aubry who were the architects of the Socialist Party’s

2007 election policy. He was also 'special consultant' to candidate Royal.

In many respects, Lang is the biggest fish to be caught so far by the Sarkozy government. During a long political career, Lang has occupied ministerial posts on more occasions than any other leading Socialist Party leader. Having studied political science and then law, Lang went on to practise as a lawyer, taught law at university and in 1977 was elected to his first political post as a Paris councillor.

Lang played no real role in the student and worker mass movement of 1968 and has always been regarded as a man who avoided taking on unnecessary "ideological ballast." He likes to describe himself as a "revolutionary realist," but any serious examination of his political evolution makes clear that such "realism" is merely a synonym for utter opportunism. When Lang recalled the 1960s, it was to praise the "anti-establishment culture" and "alternative life styles," rather than the political significance of the revolutionary upheaval of workers and students which rocked the French establishment.

Lang's emergence into the political limelight came though the mentorship of Mitterrand, a career politician with a right-wing political background who in 1971 took over the leadership of the nearly moribund French social democracy and provided the French bourgeoisie with an electoral alternative to Gaullism. During his lengthy functioning as head of the Socialist Party, Mitterrand demonstrated his expertise at enticing rival organizations into collaboration—in particular, the French Communist Party—to provide a political cover for his essentially right-wing, business-friendly policies. As an intellectual lightweight, Lang was an ideal choice for Mitterrand and in 1981 the latter made Lang his Minister of Culture.

During a 12-year tenure under Mitterrand and then, Lionel Jospin, Socialist Party premier from 1997 to 2002, Lang occupied no less than six ministerial positions, including education minister. Lang's greatest 'achievement' as Culture Minister was to create the National Music Day Festival—a move which cost the government nothing. As culture minister he also raised eyebrows by presenting his ministry's highest award to the dreadful and inconsequential American actor Sylvester Stallone.

Confined to the ranks of the parliamentary opposition following the defeat of the Jospin government in 2002, Lang continued to support the increasingly right-wing line of the Socialist Party. In 2005 he supported the campaign for a yes vote in the French referendum on the neo-liberal European constitution and has recently made clear that he has no real political differences with Sarkozy.

In one of his last interviews before quitting the Socialist Party, given to the Charlie Rose show on US television, Lang gushed about the election campaign run by Sarkozy. Regarding Sarkozy's policies, Lang said, "He's a conservative. He has an economic vision not very far from the vision of Bush and

Reagan."

When asked what he thought about Sarkozy's policy of adapting to the policies of the neo-fascist National Front, Lang responded positively: "It's not completely wrong. Mitterrand had succeeded in integrating the people who voted Communist in the past. And it's the same now for Sarkozy, in relation to the people who voted *Front National* in the past."

The defections by Lang and a number of leading PS "elephants" are often presented in the press as a concession by Sarkozy to the political policies of the PS, aimed at broadening his base, while undermining the Socialist Party at the same time. There is no doubt that Sarkozy is well aware of the damage his recruitment policy has done to the PS, but the right-wing lurch of the latter should not be underestimated.

The well-heeled social layers represented by Lang and his ilk, the "bourgeois bohemians" or "bobos," who made their fortunes in the last two decades, share the same fundamental political aims as the Sarkozy government. They are lining up to collaborate with his plans for "reforming" France, i.e. carrying out sharp attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of working class backed by increasingly authoritarian measures.

One of the keystones of Sarkozy's election campaign was his campaign against the values embodied by the "class of '68." "In this election," Sarkozy proclaimed, "we're going to find out if the heritage of May '68 is going to be perpetuated or if it will be liquidated once and for all."

When Sarkozy speaks about the "class of '68" he refers to the revolutionary upheaval of workers and youth, which was betrayed by the French Communist Party, but at the same time wrested a series of social and welfare reforms from the French government in the following decade. As Sarkozy undertakes his "rupture" against what is left of these reforms and seeks to "liquidate the heritage of May 68" he is now able to draw upon the services of leading members of the Socialist Party, including not a few with close associations to the "class of '68."



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact