Amid mounting defections, French Socialist Party veers to the right

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13 September 2007

The defeat of the French Socialist Party (SP) in the presidential and legislative elections in May and June of this year has left the party in profound disarray. Facing a deep internal crisis, the SP has reacted with a sharp move further to the right.

One section of the party is deserting headlong into the camp of President Nicolas Sarkozy, leader of the right-wing Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement). This is not limited to leading SP figures who have accepted appointments in Sarkozy's government and posts on government commissions, but goes straight down to the lower echelons of the party.

The entire SP group on the city council of Mulhouse (eastern France), apart from one member, will be on the UMP's list in the 2008 council election. The SP has had to disband its Mulhouse section and present another list, headed by its one remaining councillor. The sitting SP mayor, Jean-Marie Bockel, is among those who have joined Sarkozy's cabinet, as minister of cooperation. Bockel has declared that he "has many more points of agreement with the present government" than with the Socialist Party.

Another section of the SP, led by presidential candidate Ségolène Royal and the so-called *Rénovateurs* (reformers), is trying to turn the SP into another conservative bourgeois party, in alliance with François Bayrou and his centre-right MoDem (Democratic Movement). This faction proposes to change to party's name, dropping all references to socialism.

Finally, there are those around the first secretary, François Hollande, who, while having no major political disagreements with Royal or those deserting to the Sarkozy camp, think the "socialist" label should not be abandoned.

The party's annual Summer University, a three-day discussion held from August 31 to September 2 in La Rochelle, which brought together over 1,000 party members, provided a public display of the party's disintegration.

There was no serious debate or discussion on the wave of high-ranking defections to the Sarkozy camp. Many heavyweights in the party—such as Laurent Fabius (a former prime minister), Martine Aubry and Dominique Strauss-Kahn (nominated by Sarkozy to lead the International Monetary Fund)—did not even bother to attend.

Michel Rocard, the latest defector to Sarkozy, who had just accepted a place on a government commission on education policy, attended the summer university and, with the exception some boos from the audience, received a generally warm welcome. This came at a time when the administration is accelerating its attacks on social and democratic rights in general, and on the educational sector in particular.

Libération reports that when Rocard rose to speak at a workshop, "half of the room booed, the other applauded." The article continued: "André, about 60 year old, a member from the Rhône, grasped the microphone and asked for an accounting: 'What are we going to do to clear out the traitors amongst us?' But all those on the platform let it go without reacting."

In his closing remarks, the nominal leader of the SP, Hollande, summed up the state of the party: "I know all our faults, artificial differences, policy rivalries, lack of discipline, selfishness, lack of rigour... We suffer perpetually from a guilty conscience, engaged in a balancing act, unable to take a clear course and mouthing incantatory formulas..."

An SP member of the European parliament, Vincent Peillon, spoke of "the left in the state we find it in today—divided, weakened, turned in on itself, mistrustful, and lacking any really innovative or inspiring perspective."

Le Monde's editorial of August 27 said, "[T]he Socialist Party is in a deep depression... suffering from a triple breakdown—of leadership, strategy and programme." The editorial continued: "Its internal groupings, which have long enlivened internal debates, are sclerotic and atomised. Its historical allies, the Communists and the Greens, are plunged into even deeper morbid introspection."

The editorialist feared for the stability of parliamentary democracy, writing, "There is no proper democracy without alternation. This requires a dynamic and credible opposition."

Le Monde's expresses the fear that the virtual collapse of the Socialist Party could create a vacuum that might be filled by a movement of the working class outside of traditional political channels that could assume a revolutionary trajectory.

Since it was formed in 1969 by bringing together several social-democratic tendencies, and was taken over by François Mitterrand in 1971, the SP has served as a critical prop for the maintenance of capitalist rule in France, which had been deeply shaken by the 1968 student revolt and workers' general strike. Mitterrand created the conditions whereby the Stalinist Communist Party, which had abandoned a revolutionary perspective long ago but still enjoyed considerable support in the working class, could be integrated into government.

But the ability of this official "left" to control and disorientate the working class in close collaboration with the trade unions has been undermined.

As Henri Emmanuelli, a leader of the "left wing" of the party, pointed out in an angry exchange at La Rochelle, the SP officially embraced the capitalist market as far back as 1983, shortly after Mitterrand had been elected president for the first time.

Le Monde reports: "The Socialists say that they are fed up with the eternal accusations levelled at them concerning their acceptance of the market economy. 'They accepted it—let our detractors take note—on Friday, March 23, 1983 at 11 AM,' said an irritated Henri Emmannuelli... 'by agreeing, after a lively debate, to stay in the European Monetary System, the forerunner of the euro, and by imposing a harsh austerity plan.'"

The right-wing policies of successive Socialist Party-led governments have steadily undermined the influence of the SP and its Communist Party and trade unions allies. In 2002, after leading the government as prime minister for five years, its candidate, Lionel Jospin, suffered a humiliating defeat in the first round of the presidential elections, coming in third after the incumbent Gaullist president, Jacques Chirac, and National Front

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candidate Jean Marie Le Pen.

This year, SP presidential candidate Ségolène Royal ran on a programme that was to a large extent indistinguishable from that of Sarkozy. It was anti-immigrant, nationalist, militaristic and insistent that France maintain its nuclear arsenal. Royal proposed to place delinquent youth under the control of the army and insisted that there should be "no rights without duties," a call for the unemployed to be obliged to accept the jobs they are offered on pain of losing their benefits, long a favourite slogan of Sarkozy.

At the SP's summer university, Royal and her supporters not only defended her right-wing election campaign, but spent a great deal of time lauding Sarkozy's socially repressive and politically reactionary programme.

Manuel Valls, a leader of the *rénovateurs*, said: "We can go some way with the majority as long as they give us a hearing on subjects we agree on. I'm thinking of the means we should give to the judiciary, the struggle against crime, and, again, the immigration issue." Echoing Sarkozy and Royal, he said that the Socialists should "definitively admit" the fact of being in a market economy and express their opposition to "a society of state hand-outs."

Royal concurs with Valls, as a speech she gave a few days earlier in Melle demonstrates. She urged supporters not to "exaggerate about the government," and declared, "There is in this new government a sincere will to reform... which today the majority of our compatriots recognise."

Royal went on to criticise the government from the right for not going far enough: "But to announce a reform is not to accomplish it." She complained that the 110 pro-business proposals drawn up by former International Monetary Fund general director Michel Camdessus, which Sarkozy described as his "bedside reading" during the election campaign, have been superseded by others.

Not enough finance was going into law-and-order and prison building, Royal complained. She defended Sarkozy's minimum service law, an attack on the right to strike, while accusing Sarkozy of "policies which, for the moment, are not preparing France and the French to take up the challenge of growth and globalisation," as well as national indebtedness.

Claiming that "our country is falling behind," she complained that "there is a risk of inertia," and urged that "Nicolas Sarkozy and his government, beyond announcements and laws without means provided, must now act responsibly and make deep reforms in order to bring back growth. The role of the left is to push for action in the right direction without delay." This is the meaning of her statement that "We should act as if we were in government."

In La Rochelle, Royal expressed her support for US imperialism in Iraq by praising the "remarkable" James Baker report and the "firm and courageous" positions taken up by the Democratic speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who has, in fact, consistently supported the financing of the neo-colonial occupation of Iraq.

Jean-Marc Ayrault, a Royal supporter and chairman of the SP group of deputies in the National Assembly, attacked—very much in the style of Sarkozy—egalitarianism, and targeted the most deprived sectors of society. He declared, "Where working class people ask for the recognition of their efforts, of their merit and their aspiration to rise socially, we have too often mixed up social policy with the fight against exclusion." He called for an increase in the number of years a worker must work before becoming eligible for a pension and blamed the "ever increasing cost of social security" for "our sluggish economy."

Royal's opponents, led by her former partner Hollande, largely agree with her political perspective. Hollande explicitly supported her Melle speech, quoted above. He said: "Her speech was completely in line with what I think." He joined in Sarkozy's offensive against the 35-hour week and pension rights, declaring, "France generally should work more... This is no longer the time for a uniform shortening of work time."

The substance of political dissension within the SP, apart from personal recriminations and back-stabbing, is of a tactical nature. The group around Royal is for dumping all reference to socialism and for an alliance with the right-centrist MoDem (Democratic Movement) of François Bayrou, whereas several of the rump of the remaining leadership favour the retention of the socialist reference and a continuing alliance with the old coalition partners—the Communist Party, the Greens and the PRG (Left Republican Party), all of which obtained votes of only one or two percent in the recent elections.

Hollande defended the nominal adherence to socialism and retention of the present name of the party with the argument that somebody else could step into the void. According to *Nouvel Observateur*,"He referred to a remark of François Mitterrand as 'full of wisdom': 'Think carefully, we have been trying to push our brand recognition for a hundred years. If we drop it, there'll surely be someone to pick it up,' he quoted the former president as saying."

However, maintaining "brand recognition" is made virtually impossible by the obsessive need of the SP leaders to deny that they oppose the capitalist market, to constantly exorcise the spectre which haunts them of a planned economy and authentic socialism.

Like Emmanuelli, Hollande felt it necessary to complain that "For the past twenty-five years we've been explaining that the party must change its policy on the market... So I can't accept incantations about capitalism... We are not going to tell stories, say that in five or ten years we are going to put an end to capitalism... We must explain that the Great Revolution is old hat...."

Rocard, without contradiction from the assembled "Socialists," put it more succinctly: "Politically, we are free-marketeers (*libéraux*)."

The problem of which alliances to make, and of how to be popular while proposing policies which do not fundamentally differ from those of the UMP and Sarkozy, is felt most acutely by those facing the electorate in the municipal elections in March 2008. It was an important factor in the SP gathering's debates.

Many SP members are government or local government officials and are concerned as to what local deals will enable them to get elected to the lucrative posts on offer in France's over 36,000 *communes*, or municipalities.

Present at the SP's summer university was also a representative of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR), which has announced its intention to transform itself into a broad "anti-capitalist" party. Jean-Marie Benaben, a close collaborator of LCR spokesman Olivier Besancenot, participated in a round table discussion organised by the MJS, the Movement of Socialist Youth. *Libération* reported: "[H]e received applause when he declared that 'we fought together on the street' against the New Job Contract."

Benaben's presence confirms that, facelift notwithstanding, the LCR will continue to present the SP as an integral part of the left and will continue to work to provide the SP with a left cover and credibility by participating alongside it in single-issue protests.

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