

# France: Stalinist paper *l'Humanité* on verge of bankruptcy

Pierre Mabut  
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The French daily *l'Humanité*, historically linked to the politics of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), failed to publish on August 15 and 16 amidst a severe and potentially terminal financial crisis. In its August 14 edition, the paper explained that as “part of the plan to safeguard [the paper] confronted with difficulties which threaten its very existence, *l'Humanité* will not appear this Friday and Saturday.”

The paper's circulation has been in sharp decline over recent years, in parallel with the PCF's membership. The events surrounding the latest crisis were outlined by director of publication Patrick Le Hyaric in an appeal to readers “to get the newspaper out of the financial impasse in which it has been placed due to the non-realisation of the sale of its building in mid-July.”

In order to pay off its debts, estimated at €8 million, the paper put its headquarters up for sale last year for €15 million. The building, designed by the renowned Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in 1989 and standing in Saint Denis, a once-solid PCF bastion in the north Paris suburbs, found a buyer who promised to conclude the deal in July. Le Hyaric explains that the credit crunch caused by the world financial crisis led to the buyer's inability to pay. In the meantime, with 240 staff members having moved to a new location in June, the paper is now in urgent need of €2 million to stay afloat.

Le Hyaric made a broad appeal for funding: “Don't allow *l'Humanité* to be weakened or gagged, at the moment when our fellow citizens more than ever need plural sources of information.” Referring to President Sarkozy's discussion forum planned for next September to “help” the press, Le Hyaric pleaded, “We want this forum to lead to means which will defend the plurality of the press, defend the daily press, and create

the conditions so they can exist, and for a new reflection on aid for the press.”

Reflecting *l'Humanité*'s position as the leftmost pillar of the French journalistic establishment, an important target for the financial appeals of *l'Humanité*'s supporters is the bourgeois state. Patrick Kamenka, writing for the PCF-linked SNJ-CGT journalists' union, complained, “Neither the President, nor the ministry of Culture, nor the main media have taken a position. Once again *l'Humanité* is dying amid general indifference. Besides the mobilization of *l'Humanité*'s readers, it is total radio silence from official intellectuals and ideologues [...] who are trying to reinforce the big multimedia press empires allied with those in power.”

This appeal is particularly cynical, as *l'Humanité* already relies substantially on the main French media corporations for support, having long ago abandoned any attempt to rely financially on a working-class base. The TF1 private TV channel and Hachette group, owned by media and arms mogul Lagardère, took a 20 percent stake in the company through a joint subsidiary, Humanité Investissement Pluralisme. Another 40 percent of *l'Humanité*'s capital belongs to various associations of readers and friends of *l'Humanité*, and the remaining 40 percent to PCF members.

In an attempt to survive over the past period, it has turned to wider layers of the radical middle classes around the Greens, feminist, anti-genetically modified crops activist movements, left-talking sections of the Socialist Party and anyone adopting the “anti-liberal” (anti-free market) label, including elements attracted to the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire's (LCR) “anti-capitalism”. It officially dropped its claim to be the voice of the PCF in 1999, after the demise of the Soviet Union had made it fashionable in radical circles to talk

of the end of socialism.

*L'Humanité's* dependence today on bourgeois handouts and big business intervention is a far cry from the initial principles of the paper when launched on April 18, 1904 by the social democrat and pacifist Jean Jaurès, whose first editorial stipulated the necessity for its financial independence.

The paper followed the majority of the Socialist Party's members, who decided after the 1920 Congress of Tours to found the French section of the Communist International, later renamed the French Communist Party (PCF). Falling increasingly under the thumb of the Stalinists over the course of the 1920s, its fortunes have broadly reflected those of French Stalinism.

At the end of the Second World War, when the PCF had widespread popular prestige due to its role in coordinating armed resistance to the Nazi occupation, *l'Humanité* had a circulation of 400,000 and the PCF was the strongest political party in France. Substantially weakened by its treacherous policy after the war—notably its enforcement of a no-strike policy after the Liberation and its betrayal of the 1968 general strike—the party's support spiralled steadily downward with its participation in bourgeois governments and following the dissolution of the USSR.

Since its participation in the “plural left” governments with the PS under President François Mitterrand in 1981-84 and right-wing President Jacques Chirac 1997-2002, the PCF has lost 600,000 members and 15,000 elected representatives. *L'Humanité's* circulation is now below 50,000. The PCF's “pluralism” has meant co-habitation with the French bourgeoisie, costing the party and its press the support of workers, and especially the youth, as the PCF presided over mass unemployment and social deprivation in many of the towns and cities it has controlled over the last 30 years.

In the 2002 presidential election, Marie-George Buffet, the future PCF leader, declared in *l'Humanité* (21/2/2002) before the first round of voting: “Since 1997, in spite of important work, with a useful contribution from the Communists in the plural majority [government], men and women have remarked that in fact the policy [of the government] is not transforming their daily lives.” With this conclusion its candidate, Robert Hue, understandably received only 3.37 percent of the vote.

In the run-off in the second round of voting, where the choice was between the right-wing incumbent President Jacques Chirac of the ruling UMP and the extreme right-wing neo-fascist Jean Marie Le Pen (or abstention), the PCF gave a new twist to its concept of the “plural majority” by mobilising support for Chirac, plastering the walls of France with posters urging “Vote Chirac.” He finally won with 80 percent of the vote and a mandate to attack workers' living standards. The fruits of these betrayals were seen in the last presidential election in 2007, in which the PCF's candidate, general secretary Marie-George Buffet, saw her vote plummet to a record low of 1.93 percent.

The more the social and economic crisis brings the class struggle to the fore, the more the PCF and *l'Humanité* move to the right in defence of a “plural press” and a “plural left” to maintain the status quo and prevent the formation of an independent movement of the working class. Although this role is now extended to the LCR, a long-time ally of the PCF, in acting as a safety valve for French capital in crisis, the need of the French elite to keep alive the semblance of an opposition press means that we can expect that the days of *l'Humanité* are not entirely numbered.

While waiting for the generous intervention of businessmen to recapitalise the paper and state aid thanks to president Sarkozy, the paper hopes to keep afloat through donations and its receipts from the annual fair in September, which still enjoys a large following, especially among radicals of all stripes.



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