

French Socialist Party to elect new leadership

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12 November 2008

Eighteen months after their defeat in the 2007 presidential election, the French Socialist Party is still deeply divided. On November 14-16 the party will hold a congress in Reims to elect a new leadership. The current party chairman, François Hollande, is stepping down.

The selection of the new leadership and of the orientation of the party raise complex internal questions. Since the summer, six different draft programs have been circulating amongst the party membership, each draft identified with a contender for the leadership. After debates in the local and regional party organizations, the membership voted on these proposals on November 6. From this vote, four factions emerged with roughly equal support within the party.

Topping the list is Ségolène Royal, the party's presidential candidate in 2007, with 29 percent of the vote. Trailing her closely are the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, and the mayor of Lille, Martine Aubry, both with 25 percent. Forty-one-year-old Benoît Hamon, regarded as a spokesman for the party left, also had a relatively good showing, winning almost 20 percent of the vote. The turnout was relatively low, with only 128,000 out of 233,000 party members participating.

At the congress this coming weekend (a congress is held every three years) a final version of the program will be debated and adopted and new party officers elected. On November 20, the leadership changeover will be finalized with a poll of the party membership to select the next party chairman.

Behind the political debates about draft programs and formulations, whose differences are barely comprehensible to outsiders, is hidden a bitter power struggle between competing interest groups to gain personal influence and determine the future role of the party.

Ségolène Royal has advocated since the presidential election last year cooperation with the *Mouvement démocrate* (MoDem) of the center-right politician François Bayrou. She has declared that the old socialist model of the party is "outdated," and demands its "modernization." Her good result in the vote, which came as a surprise, is generally interpreted as an expression of a further rightward

turn of the Socialist Party. However, it was well below the 60 percent Royal had polled within the party when she was selected to be its presidential candidate.

Royal, for her part, has tried to downplay her right-wing image, but this is more superficial than substantial. She now dresses in loose garments instead of the tight business suits she wore during the presidential campaign.

Bertrand Delanoë has long been the favorite for party leader. He had the support of outgoing party chairman François Hollande, as well as former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who announced at the last moment that he would not vote in the party leadership contest.

The mayor of Paris is usually labeled a traditionalist—meaning he represents a right-wing, social democratic brand of politics. But in contrast to Royal, Delanoë is not supporting a coalition with the MoDem, but instead prefers a new version of the old coalition with the Communist Party and the Greens. The vote in the party has shown that the influence of Delanoë, who has been supported by the media, does not go beyond the city limits of Paris.

Martine Aubry's base lies in the North of the country, a traditional stronghold for the Socialists. The daughter of a former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, she has two opposed groupings within her camp. On the one side, she has wooed the backers of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a former finance minister and current director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a vehement supporter of the European Union. On the other side, she has the backing of Laurent Fabius, a former prime minister, who campaigned against the European Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty. Like Delanoë, Aubry is also considered to be a right-social democrat.

Benoît Hamon is seen as the party's rising star. In the debates before the party congress, he mouthed much anti-capitalist rhetoric, winning support as the international finance crisis worsened. But Hamon also implied that he could reach an accommodation with Ségolène Royal in the name of party modernization. His only condition is that Royal drops her plans for a coalition with MoDem.

At the Reims congress there will be intense haggling

between the various party factions, groupings and cliques over who will support whom, and at what price. The official debates and party votes on draft programs and amendments are just the formal ratifications of back-room deals already signed and sealed.

The social and political problems which mark everyday life—unemployment, loss of purchasing power, recession, the attacks of a right-wing regime—will not enter into the debates of the congress. The Socialist Party has already irreversibly isolated itself from the concerns and interests of workers. The in-fighting on the eve of the congress is an expression of their inability to identify politically with the social outrage that repeatedly manifests itself in protests and strike waves.

The Socialist Party reached its zenith in 1981 with the election of François Mitterrand to the French presidency on the basis of a reformist program. He was supported by the Communist Party. However, illusions in the "Common Program" lasted only a year, after which Mitterrand carried out an abrupt u-turn under the pressure of international financial markets and charted a right-wing, business-friendly course. At the end of his 14-year presidency, the Socialists were so discredited that the Gaullists under Jacques Chirac won both the presidency and a majority in both houses of parliament.

But Chirac had not reckoned with the working class. In 1995, the rail workers' strike crippled the country for weeks and Chirac was forced to dissolve the parliament and call new elections. The Socialists won and Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin cohabited as prime minister with Gaullist President Chirac for the remaining five years, supporting Chirac's right-wing policies at every turn. In 2002, the bill came due. Jospin had become so unpopular by that point that he polled lower than extreme-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election. The Socialists have never recovered from this blow.

Among the country's political elite, the fear is growing that social opposition could take a radical path if the Socialist Party continues to lose influence. This is even more the case as the Communist Party, once the most important left prop of Socialist-led governments, is itself only a shadow of its former self and has shattered into many shards. Hence the efforts to create a new political safety valve to the left of the Socialist Party.

It is in this context that the decision of a group to leave the Socialist Party and found a new movement in the mold of the German Left Party must be seen. Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marc Dolez, after the November 6 membership poll, declared that the rightward movement of the Socialist Party was unstoppable, and promised to found a new party "without concessions to the right."

Mélenchon, born in 1951, has his political origins in the

Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), led by Pierre Lambert. He joined the Socialist Party in the mid-1970s and was minister of education from 2000 to 2002 under Jospin. At present he represents the Socialist Party in the Senate.

Mélenchon and Dolez have called upon the Communist Party and Olivier Besancenot's New Anticapitalist Party (*Nouveau parti anticapitaliste*, NPA) to form a joint "Front of Left Forces" for the European election in June 2009. Both spokesmen for the NPA, Olivier Besancenot and Alain Krivine, responded cautiously, but with interest.

Besancenot said that the NPA is "for a coalition of European anti-capitalist forces," but that it should not follow the same model as the German Left Party which Mélenchon supports. "We do not want to recreate Die Linke in France, we want an anti-capitalist left that does not play any coalition games with the Socialist Party," he said.

Alain Krivine also showed interest in Mélenchon's offer. The NPA is "open for discussion" about the European elections, he said. This had to be done "on a clear basis." It was necessary to clarify "common demands and [the issue of] participation in a coalition government with the social democrats." The NPA rejects the latter.

The NPA will be officially founded in January 2009. It will replace the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR), the French section of the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Krivine and Besancenot want an organisation that will collect the remnants of the shattered "left" bureaucratic apparatuses while at the same time attracting politically inexperienced youth. Given the rightward trajectory of the Socialist Party, they find it advisable to reject a coalition with the Socialists for the time being. However, the reaction of the NPA leaders to the advances of Mélenchon, a leading member of the Socialist Party for three decades and a former minister, shows that this stance is of a purely tactical character.



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