

French Socialist Party considers alliances to the left and to the right

Kumaran Ira, Alex Lantier
29 May 2009

The poor performance of the Socialist Party (PS), France's main bourgeois left party, in the European election campaign is provoking widespread concern in the French political and media establishment. Stunned by the PS' inability to benefit from the economic crisis and outpoll the conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) of unpopular President Nicolas Sarkozy, journalists and politicians are floating various proposals to the PS on how it can ally with other parties to form a potentially victorious electoral coalition.

The slump in the PS's electoral base is the result of the broad masses' alienation from it. The alliance of the PS and the Communist Party (PCF) from 1971 led to the election of PS President François Mitterrand and a PS-PCF government in 1981 which soon betrayed the expectations of the working class. It implemented austerity policies from 1982 and, in and out of government, continued to foist these on the workers. The five years of the PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's Plural Left (PS, PCF, Greens) government (1997-2002) and its pro-capitalist policies so alienated the working class that Jospin was relegated to third place in the presidential elections of 2002, outpolled by the neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen.

This lack of an electorally viable alternative troubles the French political establishment. A wave of strikes and factory occupations testify to rising popular anger with the economic crisis and the French government's multi-billion-euro bank bailout. However, it is difficult to see, with current electoral conditions and traditional political alliances, how a government could come to power in which the UMP did not play the dominant role.

The PS' response has been to try to adapt itself to the bourgeois right. Prominent journalists and PS politicians are calling for the PS to consider alliances with either the right-wing MoDem (Democratic Movement) of François Bayrou or a broader coalition of parties.

A centrist politician who has repeatedly held the position of Minister of Education in right-wing governments, Bayrou recently published a book bitterly denouncing Sarkozy and his policies, titled *Abuse of power*. In *Abuse of power*, Bayrou criticizes Sarkozy's reliance on the media, his "ideology of money," the concentration of power in an "egocracy" consisting only of Sarkozy, and his disregard for legal rights and procedures. This is couched in at times hysterical language, describing Sarkozy as a "barbarian child" guilty of "rape" against "Republican France."

According to an April poll, if the 2012 presidential election were held today, Bayrou would receive 19.5 percent of the vote, versus 20 percent for Royal and 28 percent for Sarkozy. The conservative daily *Le Figaro* wrote that he had stolen from the PS the title of "number one opposition figure in France." Polls show some two-thirds of PS

sympathisers are in favor of a PS-MoDem alliance.

A PS-MoDem alliance proposal was first publicly broached this year in an April 16 interview with former PS secretary François Hollande that appeared in *L'Express* magazine. He asked Bayrou "to clarify his convergences and his divergences with the PS, and then to draw the necessary conclusions."

This proposal is not exactly new: it was highly controversial when made after the second round of the 2007 presidential elections by PS candidate Ségolène Royal. However, the economic crisis and the PS's electoral difficulties have swung large sections of the PS behind the idea of an alliance with Bayrou.

On May 4 the PS mayor of Dijon, François Rebsamen—who, like PS First Secretary Martine Aubry, the mayor of Lille, won his municipal campaign thanks to a local MoDem alliance—said, "Many Socialists have allied with the MoDem, based on their political projects. The same will happen the next time with the [2010] regional elections, before the first round or at the second round. We will therefore have to begin discussion with François Bayrou after the European elections.... If convergences are confirmed, we will have to elaborate a real contract for entering into government."

Though somewhat less enthusiastic, ex-PS Prime Minister Laurent Fabius left the door open to an alliance with Bayrou. Asked if he thought Bayrou could eventually become an ally of the PS, he answered, "Every military man starts out as a civilian."

In his May 4 editorial in *Le Figaro*, Paul-Henri du Limbert praised Bayrou as a possible future leader of the PS, comparing him to the PS's François Mitterrand. Mitterrand, who was president of France from 1981 to 1995, also began as a man of the right: active in right-wing Catholic youth groups in the 1930s, he served in the collaborationist Vichy régime during the war. One should add that he was minister of the interior and then justice minister in the Fourth Republic (1946 -1958), during the Algerian war. In these posts he participated in French imperialism's bloody repression of the Algerian people's national liberation struggle.

He ultimately became leader of the PS in 1971.

In a not-so-subtle reference to Sarkozy's immigrant background, Limbert wrote, "One would only need to put a hat on Bayrou's head to see the resemblance [to Mitterrand]. The one was from the Charentes [region], the other from Béarn. Both are French down to their fingertips, and treasure this 'dear land of my childhood,' as Mitterrand called France."

The daily *Libération's* lead political editorialist, Laurent Joffrin, also supported the Bayrou-PS alliance in his May 4 editorial, titled "How to beat Nicolas Sarkozy?" He noted that the "Union of the Left" alliance between the PS and the French Communist Party (PCF) no

longer can provide a reliable majority: “The Union of the Left, then the Plural Left [in 1997-2002, a PS-PCF-Green alliance] was above all a PCF-PS alliance. But now there is no more PCF, and the PS is weaker—where does one find a majority? The Last of the Mohicans at [PCF headquarters on] Colonel-Fabien Square only gather 2 percent of the vote under their moth-eaten banner.”

He therefore called for a broad alliance—a “grand post-Sarkozy coalition, gathered not through an amalgamation of bureaucracies, but by a platform of rupture with free-market ideology, ecological forces, old-school socialists like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the PS, the partisans of François Bayrou, and even social and Republican Gaullists tempted by [conservative ex-Prime Minister] Dominique de Villepin.”

Gauche Avenir (Left Future)—a club of PS members including former Defense Minister Paul Quilès, European Deputy Marie-Noëlle Lienemann, and PS spokesman Benoît Hamon—is proposing an alliance of the PS with parties on its left, calling it a “New Popular Front.”

This refers to the 1936-1938 Popular Front government that included the Socialist Party and the bourgeois Radical Party and had the support of the PCF. Following the victory of the Popular Front in the elections in May 1936, the working class launched a wave of strikes, factory occupations that developed into a revolutionary general strike. The revolutionary upsurge was ultimately betrayed by the Popular Front with the crucial support of the PCF.

From the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, the Popular Front’s main significance was that it took revolutionary struggle off the agenda in France and Europe, leaving the masses in the fascist countries under the rule of dictators and paving the way to war. In order to quell the general strike, however, the Popular Front government was obliged to grant significant social concessions to workers, which were revoked in the following years.

It is these concessions that Lienemann, Quilès, and Hamon have in mind, when they call for a “New Popular Front.” This, however, is a fraud aimed at creating illusions that a coalition including the PS, PCF, the Left Party, and the NPA could implement progressive social reforms and shelter the population from the world economic crisis.

Such politicians never ask: what happened to the original Popular Front? It collapsed in 1938 amid bitter strikes and an ever harsher political climate that saw the outlawing of the PCF, the declaration of World War II, and the French bourgeoisie’s capitulation to the Nazis. The French bourgeoisie was able to grant the Popular Front’s reforms again after the Nazi occupation only thanks to massive financial assistance from American capitalism through the Marshall Plan, and the post-war restabilisation of capitalism. However, the present global economic crisis signifies precisely the final breakdown of what was left of these historic conditions.

The political role of a “New Popular Front” in France today would be broadly similar to that of the Italian 2006-2008 “l’Unione” government, which regrouped the Democratic party of Romano Prodi, Rifondazione Comunista, and a number of smaller petty-bourgeois protest and Christian-democratic parties: namely, social austerity and support for war. The main difference is that the “New Popular Front” would base its policies on economic foundations devastated by the outbreak of the global crisis.

There is, one might add, another modern precedent for such an alliance. In the French presidential election in 2002, when Jacques Chirac and neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen advanced to the second round, none of the left parties called for a boycott. Instead, the PS, the PCF, the Greens, and the LCR (the forerunner of today’s New Anti-

Capitalist Party) all united to call for a Chirac vote. As a result, Chirac was elected with overwhelming electoral support, which he used to pass a number of social cuts before growing popular opposition limited his freedom of political maneuver.

In a report published in the PCF-affiliated *Humanité* newspaper, jointly signed by Marie-Noëlle Lienemann and Paul Quilès, the two advocate a New Popular Front based on a “global agreement respecting everyone,” involving “the immediate organization of a ‘convergence of the lefts,’ (political, trade union, associations, and popular organisations) to make the government step back, impose fairer measures, and present a different logic from that of N. Sarkozy.”

Calling such a Popular Front the “only serious path to organizing the victory of the left in 2012,” they propose the formation after the European elections of a committee for a New Popular Front. This committee would define a political program allowing “a single candidate of the left in the presidential election, and a legislative accord guaranteeing the representation of the diverse components” of the coalition.

Ségolène Royal has emerged as a prominent supporter of pursuing both an alliance with Bayrou and more “left” alliances simultaneously. On May 12, she participated in a symposium on “the future of the Left in Europe,” organized by Spanish daily *El País* and the Greek daily *To Vima*. She shared the platform with prominent right-wing exponents of European Social Democracy: The President of Pasok (the Socialist Party of Greece) George Papandreou, former Italian Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema, and former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González.

In her keynote address, Royal said, “Everything should be going well for the European left. The bankruptcy of Wall Street and the world financial crisis have condemned free-marketism and created space for demands the left has always defended: the need for the state, the demand for social protection, real financial regulation, the need to put finance at the service of the economy, and the economy at the service of human progress.”

Royal added, “We must also reconcile the left with the radicalism that is developing everywhere in Europe.”

The record, however, is clear: the response of the PS and its media friends to the crisis has been to call for collaboration with figures from a wide variety of parties—ranging from the UMP to the PCF—united only by their record of implementing social austerity policies against the working class.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact