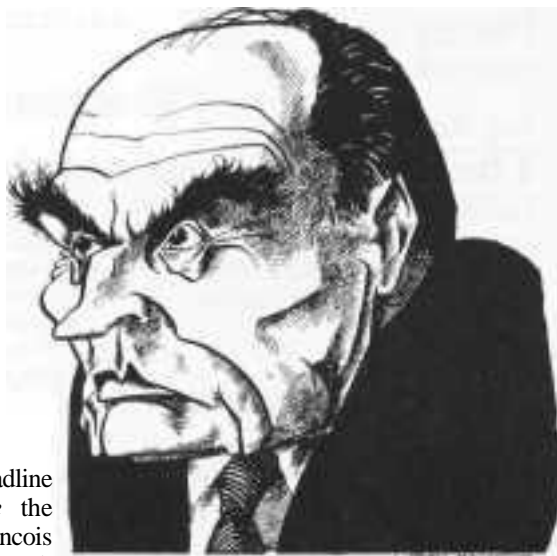


# FOCUS



## FRANCE TURNS LEFT

'Victory for hope' was the banner headline across the front page of *l'Humanite* the morning after the election of Francois Mitterrand as President of the French Republic. The same emotion was expressed by the tens of thousands — Socialists, Communists and many people simply celebrating the release from over two decades of paternalist and technocratic rule — who turned the Place de la Bastille over to a national carnival when the election result was announced on May 10.

Whether that date will go down as one of the great turning points in French history may be decided in what will surely be difficult weeks and months ahead, as the defeated Right attempts to undermine whatever gains the French working people make. For the present, the election of the Socialist Party leader, so unexpected only a few weeks before the dramatic event, has released energies on the Left, and across an even wider spectrum of opinion, that have been bottled up and frustrated for nearly a generation.

Nothing in French politics this month looks quite the same as it did before **May 10**. And that applies, too, to many of the positions taken by the parties of the Left. Strategies are having to be quickly revised as the Left parties face new exigencies in uncharted political territory.

Like Salvador Allende of Chile, a man he

admires, Francois Mitterrand has been elected to the Presidency at his third attempt — by 15,714,598 votes (51.75%) against 14,647,787 (48.24%) for the right wing Giscard d'Estaing. He could also be faced — as Allende was — with a hostile Parliament dedicated to obstructing his programme. In 1974, Mitterrand was narrowly defeated in his second attempt. He obtained then 49% of the votes against Giscard, compared with the 44% he had achieved in challenging General de Gaulle in 1965.

In both 1965 and 1974, Mitterrand stood as the single candidate of the main Left parties; in 1974, he was the banner carrier of the Common Programme for Government, drawn up by the Communist, Socialist and Left Radical Parties two years before. But in 1977, the Union of the Left broke up (or at least was put back in history's pending tray). In recent years, relations between the Socialist and Communist Parties have been acrimonious: the Communists accused the Socialists of renegeing on essential aspects of the Common Programme and the Socialists accused the Communists of sabotaging the alliance, as they found it was bringing too much electoral benefit to Mitterrand's revamped party.

In the recent election campaign, the credibility of the Left as a potential governing coalition cannot have been reinforced by these mutual recriminations. But, despite those recriminations, the Communist Party has never renounced the perspective of an eventual agreement with the Socialist Party as the necessary means of transforming French society. And a majority has remained in the Socialist Party (whatever increasing temptations some leading members may have felt to do a deal with the Right) for the principle of a united Left; albeit, in Mitterrand's eyes certainly, a Left in which the Socialists would be the dominant party.

Giscard d'Estaing's defeat must be seen primarily in terms of the rejection of his personal haughty rule and his blatant championing of the interests of big capital, rather than in terms of any recent demonstration by the Left of its ability to govern. In this respect, Giscard probably lost more votes as a result of the 100,000 extra people thrown out of work this year than he did because of his dubious relationship with ex-Emperor Bokassa, that well-known donor of diamonds to people in top places.

During the long pre-election campaign, the Communist Party vehemently criticised Mitterrand for what it described as the 'wooliness' (*le flou*) of his proposals and for his refusal to say he would have Communist Ministers in his Government. It is a fact that he has campaigned leaving a lot of options

open and that the comprehensive and itemised programme the Communists were pressing for when the Union of the Left broke down did not figure in the Mitterrand manifesto. It is true also that Mitterrand is not concerned, in the way the Communists are, to involve extra-parliamentary action in the process of changing society. Nevertheless, the Mitterrand proposals represent the most radical government programme since 1946 and, if implemented successfully, it could open the way to progressive changes in French society.

Notably, it involves the nationalisation of the remaining private banking sector and the public ownership of nine big companies, along with the steel industry and those parts of the nuclear, armaments and space sectors which are financed from public funds. The Peugeot group and water distribution are to be brought under a form of public control through minority shareholdings. Mitterrand also proposes to reflate the economy with a target of 3% growth in the current year. Finance is to be pumped into consumption via income tax reductions for the lower paid. Industry is to be stimulated by a programme of public and private investment, particularly in building and public works, and Mitterrand proposes to create 210,000 new jobs.

Much of the expenditure on the proposed growth programme is to be financed from borrowings, although there are plans to increase taxes on higher incomes and introduce a wealth tax (to the disgruntlement of an upper class that is perhaps more adept at tax evasion than any other in Western Europe).

Mitterrand has promised an increase in the minimum wage to £75 a week, increases in pensions and a reduction in the pensionable age to 60, and the opening of negotiations for the introduction of a 35 hour week. And he proposes a temporary price freeze. The 35 hour week (which the Communists say should be imposed by statute) is a crucial factor in the fight against unemployment. The main trade union confederations will press hard for it, while at the same time calling on trade union movements in other Common Market countries to pursue the same aim.

While the Constitution of the Fifth Republic (designed by General de Gaulle to keep the main powers within his own hands) allows the President to make important decisions by decree, Mitterrand could not implement his whole programme with a hostile National Assembly.

The parliamentary elections the new President is calling this month will be used by the Right — with the Reaganesque Jacques

Chirac presenting himself as its dominant leader, following the ignominious defeat of Giscard — to try to hold on to an important blocking mechanism. They will also be used by many, including leading Socialist Party politicians, to try to reduce the strength of the Communist Party.

The presidential election campaign and its aftermath faces the Communist Party with some serious questions. In the first round of the election, its candidate, Georges Marchais, obtained 15% of the votes — compared with the 20% achieved by it in recent national elections and the 21% obtained by Jacques Duclos when he was presidential candidate in 1969. The April 1981 percentage of the poll was the lowest for the French Communist Party in any national election since 1936.

The party leadership has argued that the quarter of the Communist electorate that was missing this spring does not indicate a falling away of support for the party's policies. What happened, the leadership said, was that many Communist voters decided to back Mitterrand in the first round, as they knew they would want to back him in the second; they were responding to the fear that, if the Left's votes were too dispersed, there could be no Left candidate to challenge Giscard in the run-off.

Certainly, the media presented the election — as Mitterrand and Giscard did themselves — as a contest between two gladiators, and the pressure on Left voters to 'vote usefully' was very great. But the decision of hundreds of thousands of hitherto Communist voters to choose Mitterrand in the first round, and then the Communist Party's decision to back him unconditionally in the second round, indicates a different appreciation of the Socialist Party's role from that made by Georges Marchais only last September ('If Mitterrand was in the Elysee Palace, he would implement the same policies as Giscard').

Francois Mitterrand would not be the President of France today if he had not obtained the four and a half million votes that went to the Communist candidate in the first round. And the Left will not have a majority in the National Assembly shortly to be elected if the Communists and Socialists do not have some electoral agreement. Attempts are being made to arrive at a 'contract of Government' between the parties of the new presidential majority. This will not be easy; there are important disagreements between the Socialist and Communist Parties, in foreign policy and with regard to the Common Market as well as in domestic affairs.

But the political realities of France in 1981 require left unity if real advances are to be made by the working people, and if the Socialist Party is not to be pulled back into the seductive arms of the Right. Many activists in the Communist Party have openly criticised their leadership in recent years for what they have seen as its sectarian approaches. Few of those critics would wish to see a weakened Communist Party, which remains the main political defender of working people's interests in France.

