

PCF CONGRESS

If there are different roads to socialism, there are also different ways of holding a Communist Party Congress. In France, the party congress is traditionally an affirmation and refinement of a political statement drawn up by the party leadership, a warm display of comradeship and a grand republican ritual.

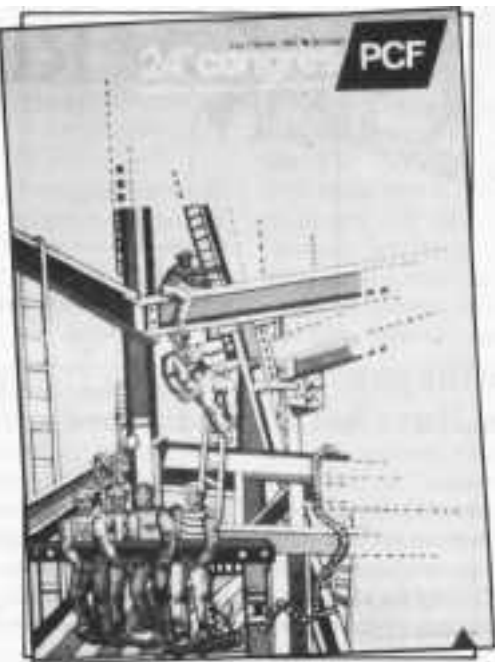
The 24th PCF Congress, held last month in the vast hall of the Sports Palace of St. Ouen, was all of these things. But there were innovations. Once or twice the chair invited delegates to have their spontaneous say through a mobile microphone. And, on one occasion, a known critic of a crucial aspect of current party policy was invited to the platform to put his minority point of view. The secretary general led the polite clapping after the critic had had his say, and the television cameras all moved into action.

The Congress was held at a time when the PCF faces perplexing problems. Deserted by more than a million of its voters in last year's presidential and parliamentary elections, it finds itself as the junior partner in a left government which owes its existence to the 4,500,000 Communist votes which were enthusiastically given to Francois Mitterand in the second round of the presidential poll.

The resolution before the Congress (which was passed with minor amendments by 2,000-odd votes to none, with two or three abstentions set the party the task of

rebuilding its influence after last year's serious reverse.

During the five days of debate, the two interlocking strands of present party activity — as an energetic and loyal partner in the government, and as a campaigning force for



the full implementation of its programme of reform — were explained and discussed. The measured speech of Charles Fiterman, the senior Communist minister (and by all accounts an impressively able minister) was one of the most interesting in developing this theme.

The long period of exclusion from power had had a dual effect on party members, Fiterman said. 'If it developed their qualities as Communists, it can also have anchored them in certain reflexes, certain habits.' They had often appeared to be opposed to everything, but now they had to take on the task of construction.

Fiterman, like other party leaders, emphasised that change in France had to be brought about at the pace accepted by the majority, although that was a slower pace than the Communists had themselves proposed to the electorate.

What the Congress did *not* do was to attempt any real analysis of the complex governmental experience — unique in Western Europe in the alliance of Socialists and Communists — now taking place in France. In a remarkable display of Marxist self-denial, the question was kept at the level of the simplest generalisation. In his closing speech, secretary general Georges Marchais said that since the formation of the government, 'positive measures have been taken. Important reforms have been implemented

or begun. Of course, we have not solved all the problems. But I can say, I think, that the Government and the majority are on the right lines. They haven't worked badly.'

While the Government 'hadn't worked badly', the PCF was at the same time giving it and the employers notice that the party would support industrial action (like that for the imposition of the shorter working week without loss of pay) to help the Government work better.

An issue which has led to the departure (or the demoralisation) of many active party members over the past four or five years has been the PCF's policy from 1977-81, from the period of the break-up of the Union of the Left to the eve of the last presidential election.

The congress resolution argued, in rejecting criticism, that this period had not been a 'sectarian parenthesis' in the history of the party. Instead, the reasons for the dramatic loss of votes had to be sought in the PCF's slowness to develop a theory of 'Socialism in the colours of France' after 1956, and in the Common Programme strategy which had blurred differences between Communists and Socialists to the advantage of the Socialist Party.

However, the fundamental criticism of party policy in the period preceding the 1981 presidential election was heard at the Congress from a lone delegate, Daniel Garipuy, who had exceptionally been chosen as a delegate by his district conference although he was a known exponent of the minority point of view.

Garipuy argued that it had been a 'grave political error' in the pre-election period to have moved from denouncing the 'turn to the right' in the Socialist Party to presenting that party as a bourgeois party.

'Worried by the stagnation of our influence and the progress of the Socialist Party' said Garipuy, 'we behaved as if we did not wish to win the Socialist Party to the policy of change, but on the contrary to place it definitively on the right.'

And Garipuy pointed out that the Socialist Party programme now being implemented with the participation of Communist ministers was more or less the same programme that had been denounced by the PCF up to the eve of the first round of the presidential election as right-inspired and in many respects worse than Giscard's programme.

No doubt experience will require a return to the discussion of this issue at some time in the future.

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