

FOCUS



UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

A distinguished (and uncontroversial) member of the French Communist Party, who has attended party congresses for 40 years, said during a break in the proceedings at St Ouen last month: 'This is the first one I have attended that is not like a high mass.' And indeed, there were some remarkable new elements in the 25th Congress of the PCF, the summation of a debate that had been taking place throughout a much chastened party during the previous six months.

In the French Communist Party pre-congress debate takes place in chronological stages, in cells (branches), sections (borough committees) and federations (district conferences). At each stage the majority view normally becomes the total view to be carried forward to the next meeting up the line. In this way, minorities are almost entirely filtered out before delegates arrive at the triennial congress, which itself has the main function of approving and affirming policies that have been clearly stated by the leadership at the beginning of the process.

The 25th Congress of the PCF was held following the party's most serious electoral reverse for half a century (it gained 11 % of the votes in the 1984 European elections as compared with 15% in the 1981 legislative elections and over 20% during the 1970s). And it took place in the wake of the withdrawal of the four communist ministers from the Socialist dominated government last July.

The 1,700 congress delegates were called upon to consider a monumental 20,000-word draft resolution, together with some 1,000 amendments that had been proposed from the federations. The draft resolution, like the report to congress from General Secretary Georges Marchais, put the accent on the present misdeeds of the Socialist government. The resolution and the Marchais report said that the Communist Party had been disadvantaged and the country disillusioned by the abortive Common Programme strategy of the now defunct Union of the Left. And they called for a new PCF-led movement - a *Rassemblement Populaire Majoritaire* - a vast gathering of all those suffering from the austerity policies of the Government and of the right wing parties (which are expected to win next year's

legislative elections).

What was innovatory at the 25th Congress was that the voices of critics of the party's recent policies and tactics, from the period of the breakup of the Union of the Left to the withdrawal of the communist ministers, were heard in the congress hall. Not only heard, but even applauded by a substantial minority of the delegates, thereby giving expression to a widespread malaise among party membership in the country.

This malaise has grown with frequent zigzags in policy over recent years: the warm public embrace of the Socialist Party leadership during the years of the Common Programme, followed by a fierce denunciation of all the works of the same erstwhile partners, and then the over-complacent renewal of the marital knot under Francois Mitterrand's Presidency, ending last year with another acrimonious divorce. This is not, of course, to exculpate the Socialist Party and its leaders from heavy responsibility in the failure of the Union of the Left. But many PCF members have expressed the view that their party leadership could have been a little more self-critical about its own assessments and statements over the past seven years.

The loss of large numbers of intellectuals from the party has had as one of its contributory factors the leadership's violent switches in attitude to the socialist countries - from a vehement and even declamatory denunciation of their shortcomings in the mid-1970s, to the ready approval of the invasion of Afghanistan and of martial law in Poland just a few years later.

The congress debates did not spell out these criticisms in any detail, but they formed the background to much that was said and to what is undoubtedly felt by many communists in France.

Pierre Juquin, Political Bureau member and until recently the spokesperson and chief propagandist for the party, was one of a dozen or more *renovateurs* (those arguing for a renewal process in the party) who spoke during the debates, which largely crystallised around their arguments.

Juquin said he wished to see the party 'renewed but not disrupted' and he undertook to abide by majority decisions in line with the practice of democratic centralism. But he asked that divergent views in the party should not be labelled by the leadership as indications of 'incomprehension'. He also called for an independent and more stable attitude to the socialist countries, arguing against an 'infantile rejection' of the achievements of the socialist countries, but equally criticising an attitude of support of unaccept-

able aspects, including support implied through failure to criticise. Juquin said the party was paying dearly today for having been deaf to the questions posed in 1956, 1961 and 1968, the same sort of questions that were being posed today: 'What vital forces we have lost in losing most of those who posed the questions.'

In an ensuing debate, 17 delegates from the floor attacked Juquin's arguments, or his presumption in challenging leadership positions, and three delegates supported him.

The draft resolution was amended in a number of respects, including adding stress to the party's aim of extending democracy in the direction of *autogestion* (self-management). But the amendments from critical federations - notably the Haute-Vienne, Meurthe et Moselle and Corse du Sud - were rejected. Paul Laurent, speaking for the leadership, made it clear that it did not feel it necessary to extend the criticism of democracy in the socialist countries or to re-examine the decision-making process within the PCF.

The resolution was adopted by the 1,700 delegates, with no votes against and 55 abstentions, including those of Pierre Juquin and two prominent central committee members, Felix Damette and the recently much-lauded minister Marcel Rigout. In the elections for the new central committee, these three were all returned with reduced votes, though Juquin was subsequently dropped from the Political Bureau. Georges Marchais, himself re-elected with great acclaim as General Secretary, said that the election of people who had expressed differences with the party's policies should not be taken as a precedent, but that it showed the PCF was not a 'chopper off of heads'.

Nevertheless, a dozen or more members of the previous central committee who had likewise identified themselves as *renovateurs* have all been dropped from the new 142-member central committee, which is less likely in the immediate future to pose internal problems for the secretariat.

But debate will have to go on, in a proud party that has taken severe blows to its power and credibility in recent years and now has to find ways of reintegrating itself in a society which bears little resemblance to that out of which it was born, and whose characteristics it still strongly reflects.

For the moment, the party's post-congress slogan is 'We are a party of the future', replacing that of 'We are a party of Government'. Slogans always leave a lot of questions unanswered.

Peter Avis