

The French Left

Long-run trends

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From the social, internationalist and anti-colonial ideals of the Resistance, seemingly all-powerful in August, 1944, to the repeated post-war relapses into right-wing reaction or *immobilisme*—such has been the dismal course of French politics. This has not been due to the political capacity of the French ruling class—for seldom has a ruling class been so blind not only to the national interests but even to its own, as that which squandered French men and resources in Viet Nam. No, the dismal condition of current French political life is due above all to the wrong orientation and stupendous errors of the two major left-wing parties—the Socialists and the Communists. Explanation is therefore in large measure a critical examination of their records since 1944.

Despite its tremendous character, the Resistance movement was unable to crystallise a new left-wing Party. The Socialist Party (S.F.I.O.) was the only alternative open to those politically active Resistance fighters who would join neither the Communists nor the Christian Democrats (M.R.P.). Consequently, although the S.F.I.O. leadership had not been very active in the Resistance, the Party was nevertheless able to emerge as one of the three major parties in post-Liberation France. The leadership, however, did not renew itself from the ranks of those members who had been active in the Resistance—with only a few exceptions the pre-war leaders remained in charge between 1944 and 1947. As his successor as Party leader and as the first Socialist Prime Minister, Leon Blum supported Felix Gouin, a Marseillais, deeply implicated in the corrupt management of the city, whose only "act" in the Resistance . . . had been to board the plane which carried him away from France to Algeria. It was for reasons such as these that the Socialists failed to gain support of the great majority of democratic-minded people which might well have been theirs in the

period following the Liberation. Moreover, frightened as always by the greater militancy and vigour of the French Communists, the S.F.I.O. leaders moved ever closer to the third party of the post-war administrations, the M.R.P. This led to increasing involvement with the M.R.P.'s colonial interests and, ultimately, to socialist support for the Indo-Chinese War and refusal of the repeated Viet Minh offers of peace negotiation. Afraid of "going it alone" with the Communists, they rejoiced when, in May 1947, the Communists (unable to continue support for the government's policy in Indo-China, and moving to the rhythm of the tougher line now set by the Kremlin) left the government. With the creation of the Marshall Plan, and later the building of the Atlantic Alliance, this hostility to the Communists became, as it were, a permanent system. American aid was conditional upon the permanent exclusion of the Communists from Western governments. The Socialists knew that to use even the threat of the Communist alliance against the French Right would mean to renounce that American aid which they believed was indispensable. The French Right—which had not replaced the C.P. in all government coalitions—was thus armed with a permanent instrument of blackmail against the Socialist Party. The policies of the S.F.I.O. between 1947 and 1951—their support for the Indo Chinese war, for reactionary policies in France and in North Africa, their continual submission to American pressure, finally the support for German rearmament—were the inevitable outcome of this weak and exposed position.

Defeat of the left

Of the many painful effects this had upon the Party, perhaps the most permanent was the change in the nature of the Party itself. The Socialist Youth movement, a powerful and radical sub-organisation within the Party, was crushed in

1947 following its opposition to the war in Indo China. Its disbandment increased the Party's tendency to have an ageing membership. Further, with many disillusioned radicals leaving the Party, the leadership relied increasingly on people who joined the Party for reasons of personal ambition and status considerations—for example the higher ranges of municipal employees, teachers, civil servants. It was upon these people—to whom socialism meant little more than political support or safeguard for their careers—that the Party leaders leaned in crushing the genuinely socialist opposition within the Party.

The Socialist sell-out

In opposition between 1951 and 1952—except for the Mendes-France period—the Socialists gained a certain amount of prestige through the failure of successive Right Wing governments. But the Party leadership, dominated by the fear of moving nearer to the Communists, failed to offer an alternative policy for France. Instead, Guy Mollet tried to make positive internal French reform attendant upon "European Unity"—that is the construction of a "little Europe", consisting of France, West Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries—a policy which, by binding them still closer to the M.R.P. and by its implicit and inherent support for German rearmament, still further alienated the Party's supporters. Significantly it was Mendes-France, a Radical, and not a Socialist who carried through the necessary reversal of French South East Asian policy when it had produced its greatest catastrophe, Dien Bien Phu.

Since the 1956 elections the Socialist-led government has betrayed the hopes which inspired the left swing in the electorate and has pursued policies which show that the leadership, at least, has learnt nothing from the sad record butlined above. Mollet's government has submitted to Right Wing pres-

asures in precisely the manner of its predecessors in 1947. The motives, too, have been similar. In fact to secure "Peace in Algeria"—one of the slogans which helped to pull French voters to the Left—meant accepting a coalition with the *Mendesistes*, the Communists and a few splinter groups of the centre political groupings. It meant a decisive break with the other political groups in the Assembly. Many people—I was among them—urged the Socialists to act with the utmost vigour in this direction. We believed that this policy was not only essential to French national interests, it was also the best one upon which the S.F.I.O. could recapture its lost mass support. The Communists, so we argued, isolated as they were, would have to follow this policy without making any demands for themselves (as a matter of fact the Communists, in supporting the proposal for this coalition, did not ask for participation in the government). But Mollet and his affinity could not endure the idea of being supported, even though indirectly, by the C.P., of being called in consequence, a "traitor" by ruling class politicians and organs of opinion. The attitude of the Mollet group was summed up by Max Lejeune, Defence Secretary in the Mollet government, at last year's S.F.I.O. Congress where he said: "If my socialist and my patriotic principles come into conflict with each other, I will have to follow the patriotic ones"—an extraordinary remark for a Socialist, with its implications that socialism is non-essential to the solution of national problems and probably not the best thing for the country on many occasions.

This has led the Party to the worst situation in its history: not only has it voluntarily isolated itself completely from the Communists, but also from the "non-Party" Left, and from the Mendes-France Radicals, who despite their bourgeois origin, are now attacking Mollet from the Left. The S.F.L.O. (*Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*) has also isolated itself from the Socialist International and from the Americans.

Inside the Party, the manipulators of the Party machine are able to stifle the opposition to Mollet's policy. At Congress the leadership can afford to grin while the opposition make the best speeches—the voting machine can be relied upon

in every case. Many Socialists have in consequence left the Party, the latest being Andre Vienot with the entire Party Federation in the Ardennes Department. The opposition within the Party still fights bravely, with people like Marceau Pivert, Andre Philipp, Oreste Rosenfeld and others. But Mollet refuses them space in the Party press, forbids them to publish in the non-Party press. One of the Left Socialist leaders, Lucien Weitz, was expelled from the Party because of his criticisms of Mollet's policy published in the *Bevanite Tribune*. The prospects for the internal opposition to Mollet do not, at present, look bright.

The Communist dilemma

After the Liberation the French Communist Party hesitated between three different policies. A small left wing group, of which Marty and, to a certain extent Tillon, were the most prominent figures, believed, that regardless of the possible international consequences a revolution was possible in France. Although the majority of the Party, or at least of the leadership, believed this policy to be madness, the majority group was itself divided into two groups. One believed that war between Russia and the West was more or less imminent, and that therefore the Party should be kept under quasi-military control: no questioning of the line, expulsion for inquisitive *raisonneurs*, alliances only with the most obedient fellow travellers, the Party membership to be free and prepared to take over control once the Red Army came. People like Etienne Fajon, Laurent Casanova and probably Maurice Thorez himself—the so-called *durs*—more or less supported this kind of outlook. The other group believed that the political perspective was one of lasting "peaceful co-existence", and that the Party should therefore make the most of the Parliamentary system, makes alliances with other sections of the French Left, even if this meant creating links between Party members and other trends in the left wing movement—links which it would be difficult to break in the event of a sudden change in Russian policy. Neither of these groups was in favour of independence *vis a vis* Russia—the division was on the estimation of the international situation.

As in all Communist Parties the balance of power between the different groups teetered to the seasawing of Kremlin policies. For example, with Zhdanovism triumphing in Moscow, Andre Marty, although disliked by many Party leaders for the independent quality of his extremism, was put in charge of the wave of violent strikes which swept France: Benoit Frachon, the regular leader of the C.G.T. and a moderate, was dropped. An independent Communist Party would have held a wide discussion of these differing political estimations and would have adopted one or other of the political "lines" put forward for discussion. But independent thinking had ceased in the leadership, and since the Kremlin could not make up its mind about which line should be adopted, the French C.P. had no definite policy: trying to keep all avenues open, it succeeded in closing them all. Already immediately following the Liberation distrust of the C.P. had spread through the French Left with rumours that a Communist "coup" was being prepared. Although not in fact making such preparations the leaders were unwilling to acknowledge to its own membership the impossibility of making a Revolution, and so when Maurice Thorez ordered the Communist militia to hand over the arms accumulated in the Resistance other left wingers were not reassured. Again, the violent attack unleashed by the Communists upon the more right wing elements in the Resistance movement was seen by many Socialists as an attempt to isolate them which presaged a future attack on the non-Communist Left.

Changes of line

The Communist line over the entire post-Liberation decade was marked by this same and continuing lack of clear policy. And yet, due to the great number of workers, especially manual workers inside the Party, it never ceased to be active, both in the Unions and in Parliament, for the day-to-day interests of the working class, and so was able to maintain its leadership of the industrial workers. Being outside the government it was able to react sanely on colonial issues, and as the retrograde effect of French colonialism on the standard of life of the average Frenchman became

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clearer, there was no option for the majority of workers, and for many middle class liberals but to vote Communist.

But it needs more than comparative agreement to have active Party members. More and more militants who continued to vote Communist distrusted the Party for its lack of independence and violent changes of line: after 1945, support of "patriotic production" in 1947 the strikes which split the C.G.T. (Communist thugs clubbing Socialist workers to make them join the strike, and other such "tactics"); absolute support for the Zhdanovist "coups" in Eastern Europe; the slander campaigning against Tito and all left wingers who supported him; the approval and defence of the legal murders in Eastern Europe. The ties with the non-fellow-travelling left wing were thus gradually severed. And the harm could not be undone when, faced with the menace of German rearmament, the French C.P. fawned on the very people it had vilified only a few months before.

Opposition prospects

The de-Stalinisation process in Russia did not shift the C.P. leaders from their old positions. Anti-Gomulka and pro-Rakosi from the start, disgusted with both the Polish and the Hungarian revolutions, they rejoiced when the latter was crushed. Andre Stil, editor of *VHumanite*, reported from Budapest after the second Russian intervention in an article entitled *Budapest smiling among the ruins*. It will not be forgotten for a long time.

The behaviour of the C.P. leadership is due not only to the permanent inability to think for themselves, but also to the cold realisation that a "Gomulka spirit" inside the French Party would mean, as it did in Poland, the displacement of the leadership. A curious consequence of the Party's refusal to democratise itself was the attempt to support Guy Mollet's scandalous Algerian policy—Communist deputies going so far as to vote for the Bill of Special Powers last summer under the protection of which much of the mass slaughter, concentration camps and tortures (mostly of nationalists but sometimes too of Communist militants) in Algeria has been carried on. The vote was the *wrong* answer to a problem *correctly posed*.

The Communists had at last understood that they must keep in touch with the rest of the French Left. But since they refused and still refuse to make the Party democratic (although this would mean a gigantic flow of sympathy to them, and the possibility of alliances with the mass of the French Left) they attempted, uselessly, to placate the reactionary leadership of the Socialist Party by following its policies as long as they are able.

Yet the prospects for an opposition are possibly better inside the C.P. than in the S.F.I.O. Of course, the leadership is even more ruthless against any possible internal revolt than Guy Mollet. But the Communist Party differs crucially from the French Socialist Party in that there are still thousands and thousands of militants and working class members. And these members are gradually understanding that their leadership has to a large extent ruined the chances of the French Left wing movement; that Communism must be freed from Stalinist totalitarianism, that a policy independent of Moscow does not mean "capitulation to Capitalism". The Polish experiment arouses enormous interest among the Party rank-and-file. A number of distinguished intellectuals headed by Picasso, refused to endorse the leadership's claims about Hungary and Poland. An anonymous, unofficial Communist journal *YEtincelle* (*The Spark*) is widely circulated among the membership. A few years ago this ferment would have been met by a wave of expulsions. To-day, the leadership has in general not dared to expel the oppositionists. It even tries to turn the new trend to its profit, by travelling to Poland to see Gomulka, and by bringing Tillon from, the disgrace into which his expulsion from the Political Bureau placed him & few years back. Many Frenchmen think the opposition in the C.P. will not be outmanouvered or stifled, and that in years to come an entirely new, revolutionary and democratic Communist Party is possible.

Decline of Mendesisme

What groups other than the oppositionists in the C.P. and the S.F.I.O. are capable of reorientating the French left? In 1954 many people

believed that Mendes-France might provide the answer. His courageous stand against the Indo-Chinese war brought him the enthusiastic support of thousands of socialist and Communist voters. After Geneva, Mendesisme had enormous potentialities. Mendes-France sacrificed them. He left undone the job he had started in Tunisia; he put off an attempted solution of the Moroccan problem; he ignored Algeria; finally, and most disastrously, he squandered all his accumulated prestige on his support of German rearmament—many people believe it could not have passed the Assembly without him. Whatever his excuses for his—he made the doubtful claim that French opposition to German rearmament would smash the Atlantic Alliance—the real reasons seems to have been that he had not the courage to face the tidal wave of scum—he was labelled "unpatriotic", "foreign Jew", "Communist agent" — unleashed against him. He had not the courage to cut himself off from his own class and become the leader of the masses eagerly awaiting his leadership. Again, though quickly disgusted with Mollet's Algerian policy, he did not dare until quite recently to break with the Socialist government—meantime alienating many of the young people who had joined the Radical Party between 1954 and 1956. Rumours are that Mendes-France has at last decided to break with the pro-Mollet Right wingers in his own Party and to start afresh—how ever small his group of parliamentary supporters. But we are very far from the possibilities of 1954, or even 1956, and I am afraid that he can never altogether cut adrift from his middle-class moorings.

The new left

This article would not be complete if I did not mention a new phenomenon: the appearance of a *third* socialist current, the New Left. It is a general designation covering three groups. Firstly the *Nouvelle Gauche*, most of whose members are former Communists and socialists, many being former members of the disbanded *Socialist Youth* referred to earlier in this article. Second, there is *Jeune Republique*, a traditional left-wing party of Christian-socialist origin, heir to the traditional leftist and anti-clerical thinking of French Catholic intel-

lectuals. Thirdly there is the *Movement de Liberation du Peuple*, an organisation which evolved from a section of the Catholic Workers Youth into a non-denominational political movement and which now actually opposes the Catholic Church's political influence. It is strongly socialist and 90% working class—more so even than the French Communist Party. These three organisations generally act together, and there are suggestions for unifying them into a single Party. The membership of all three amount to something over 10,000—less than one tenth of the nominal membership of the S.F.I.O. But the "new left" has much more militant roots than the S.F.I.O., and the meetings of the three organisations, held now in every part of France, regularly attract a greater attendance than the somewhat rare meetings of the S.F.I.O. I must, of course, mention to readers of U. & L.R. that I am a leader of one of these groups, *Nouvelle Gauche*, but I don't think that my estimates here are biased.

The policy of the three movements is anti-colonialist, in favour of an independent (but not a "little") Europe. Anti-Stalinist, they severely criticise the French C.P. for its lack of independence, but they do not object to joint action with Communists against colonialism and other reactionary policies. Consequently, they are subject to the cross-fire attack of the Communist press, for their criticisms, and from the Right, as being "pro-Communist".

The gradual increase in member-

ship of these three organisations, and their prospects of unity, may in the near future build the nucleus of a "Nenni" party in France and offer some alternative to those Communist and Socialist "dissidents" who are reluctant to enter an organisation they fear is too small to be effective. If M. Pivert of the Socialist minority, or Picasso and those around him were to join the "new left", they would be followed by many members of the major working class parties. The same applies to the young Radical M.P.'s who are trying to push Mendes-France leftwards. These possibilities force the reactionary leaderships of both the Communist and the socialist parties to allow a limited freedom to their minorities. So that even now at its present size, the "new left" has a definitely positive effect inside the Communist, Socialist and even the Radical parties.

The rehabilitation of the French left, then, depends upon a converging action of the Socialist Left still fighting in the Socialist Party, the democratic Communist opposition fighting inside the Communist Party, the left wing Mendesiste Radicals, along with the "new left". Under this four-fold influence the distant prospect is the reconstruction—or rather the construction, for it has never quite existed in France—of a strong united workers' Party, mingling Christian and traditional liberal influences with a dominant Marxist one. This goal is, of course, still distant. But even a few steps in that direction, such as are possible in the near future, may change enormously the French political scene.

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