

French Communist Party congress reveals advanced crisis

By Francis Dubois and Pierre Mabut
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The French Communist Party (PCF) held its 34th congress in the Paris suburb of La Défense December 11-14. The main official business of the 873 delegates was the election of its leadership for the next three years and the voting of a majority programme. However, in the present political context in France and the state of extreme crisis in which the party finds itself, what the congress clearly had on its mind was its future and very existence.

The PCF is on the verge of breaking up. In the 2007 French presidential election, the party's candidate Marie-George Buffet registered a historically low vote of 1.93 percent. At the end of the Second World War, the PCF was France's largest political party; in 1969, the Stalinists' candidate Jacques Duclos obtained 21.3 percent of the vote. In the last local elections, the PCF was only able to retain about 3 percent of the vote because of common slates with the Socialist Party.

Another clear sign of the PCF's crisis is the state of its daily newspaper, *l'Humanité*. The paper stopped publication for several days in August as it faced financial bankruptcy, despite its strong reliance on capitalist donors and the French state for funding.

The PCF parliamentary group has functioned since the last election as the "Group of the democratic and republican left," together with deputies from the ecology camp.

At the conclusion of the PCF congress, Buffet was re-elected to a fourth term in office as national secretary. A majority of the delegates decided to carry on with the present leadership, seeing it as the best and only way of keeping the party a quasi-unified organisation. Buffet obtained 67.7 per cent of the 873 delegates' votes, down from 91 percent two years ago. Her nearest rival, Marie-Pierre Vieu, supported by the "unitary communist" tendency, obtained 16.4 percent. André Gérin received 10.2 percent and Nicolas Marchand 5.6 percent; both are considered "orthodox" Stalinists. Some 7 percent of the delegates abstained.

Buffet stays in office as a caretaker after expressing her intention to give up the position in two years. A new "collegiate" leadership consisting of six to eight members will be appointed to facilitate a transition. This collective will be led by Buffet's presumed successor, Pierre Laurent, the present editor of *l'Humanité*.

The main resolution adopted by the congress is a document primarily designed to keep all the tendencies together, if possible. Vaguely entitled "To want a new world, To build it daily," it raises the need for "change" and the setting up of a broader, rejuvenated organisation, but, under pressure from the defenders of the party's Stalinist identity, it dropped the call for a "metamorphosis" of the

organisation.

Prominent formulations used at the congress included "To open wide the doors of the PCF, rejuvenate the PCF at all levels" and "The priority is to open the PCF to all those who want a militant party against Sarkozy and a party that unites on the left in order to create a [parliamentary] majority." Buffet proposed to "initiate profound transformations" of the party, but rejected the idea of "constituting another party with blurred limits."

The resolution, a typical Stalinist document, contains amorphous criticisms of capitalism, but does not even consider a socialist reorganisation of society. The introduction states: "We communists, who base our commitment on the ambition to go beyond the capitalist system and all the alienation of today's world, are at a key juncture.... We engage then with this congress in an important work of refounding our analyses, of our project, of the future of our party." All of this alleged "refounding" was left to a commission to be set up to "initiate a work of reflection."

The resolution retains the nationalist rhetoric of French Stalinism. It accuses President Nicolas Sarkozy of "damaging our country and its assets, damaging its influence. The future of France is at stake." The party's participation in government with the Socialist Party up to 2002 and its own complicity in the present situation are, of course, nowhere examined.

The French Stalinist party, torn by conflicting currents and tendencies, has been declining and decaying for decades. More immediate signs of a PCF break-up appeared before the recent congress. Robert Hue, national secretary until 2002 and its presidential candidate that year, decided to leave the National Council of the party because "it can no longer be reformed."

In the pre-congress voting on motions by PCF members in October, Buffet's motion, "To want a new world, To build it daily," received only 55.3 per cent of members' support. (At the congress, it received 68.7 percent of the delegates' votes.) Of the 79,000 paid-up members, only half voted on the three documents presented, 9.2 percent of whom cast a blank or spoiled vote.

Some 24 percent voted for André Gérin's text, "Make the PCF live and reinforce it, a need for our times." Gérin, the parliamentary deputy of Venissieux, an industrial suburb of Lyons, combines orthodox Stalinism with right-wing French chauvinism. His tendency has grown directly out of the nationalist soil of French Stalinism.

In 2006, Gérin called for unity with President Sarkozy's right-wing UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) party to combat

"incivility" among youth who ridiculed the singing of the French national anthem at football matches. In a letter to the Paris football club PSG, Gérin argued, "These fundamental questions of insecurity and the questioning of the foundations of the Republic" call for "republican resistance to show our people that the political forces of left and right are determined to share the same diagnosis. There should be no room for electoral or political polemics on these issues."

An unprecedented 15 percent of the delegates voted for the resolution "Reinforce the PCF, reconnect with Marxism," put forward by the La Riposte group (whose origins lie with the opportunist Ted Grant group in Britain), which loosely and falsely claims to be Trotskyist. La Riposte vehemently denied wanting to remove Buffet from office. It called for the rebuilding of the PCF under the pretext that there is some "Marxist" potential left in the party. Despite this opportunist loyalty, it was not rewarded by the Buffet leadership with seats on the new National Council. All other factions were granted a few seats in proportion to their support at the congress.

The "Refondateurs" tendency, known as the "Communistes unitaires" group, behind ex-*l'Humanité* editor Pierre Zarka—which advocates a union (possibly outside the existing PCF) with the new Left Party of social democrat Jean-Luc Mélenchon—did not present any text to the pre-congress vote. Instead it organised a fringe meeting on December 13 under the banner: "Those who resemble each other, gather together." Zarka, whose group includes former government ministers like Jean-Claude Gayssot, denounced the main document (Buffet) as "a pledge to the hardliners in the party."

The disarray of the French Stalinist organisation has a special significance for the ruling elite. At every critical juncture since the Second World War, this party has played a vital role in maintaining bourgeois rule. Immediately after the war, it disarmed the working class, strangled a wave of strikes and took part in Charles de Gaulle's first government. During the next decade, it supported French imperialism against the anti-colonial uprisings, along with helping suppress the 1953 general strike. In May-June 1968, it again saved de Gaulle, and throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the Stalinists combined with Mitterrand's Socialist Party to form one of the main ruling coalitions of French capitalism.

The PCF's ability to keep the working class in check has been essential to the French elite for more than 50 years. Through its influence in the main trade union CGT (General Labour Federation), it has been instrumental in keeping Sarkozy's recent attacks on workers on track by stifling opposition.

Under conditions of explosive social and political tensions, there is concern within the ruling elite about the fate of the PCF, which, after all, was "the best of opponents." Its congress took place in the midst of a frantic repositioning of all political forces constituting the left wing of the political establishment.

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) of Alain Krivine and Olivier Besancenot is setting up a New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), abandoning its previous verbal commitment to Trotskyism. Mélenchon, a member of the Senate, has left the Socialist Party and founded the Left Party with a thousand

supporters, imitating Germany's Left Party. And the Workers Party (PT) of the late Pierre Lambert has transformed itself into the Independent Workers' Party (POI) in an attempt to appeal to Socialist Party functionaries in local town halls.

The PCF intends to play a major role in this reorganisation of the "left." Hence its attempts to form new alliances, while at the same time preserving its own organisation. Politically, all the Stalinist factions remain oriented to an alliance with the Socialist Party, which in turn has reached a modus vivendi with Sarkozy's right-wing presidency.

Representatives of the entire "left" were invited to the PCF congress. Those present included Cécile Duflot, leader of the Greens; George Sarre, from the bourgeois Republican and Citizens Movement; Claude Bartelone, from the Socialist Party and a close ally of former prime minister Laurent Fabius; Krivine and Jean-Philippe Divès of the LCR; Clémentine Autain, a Parisian town councillor on the PCF ticket, who is joining Besancenot's NPA; and Lutte Ouvrière spokesperson Arlette Laguiller.

Present were also a number of members of the anti-globalist movement, Attac, as well as supporters of peasant leader and anti-globalisation activist José Bové. Some—like Mélenchon, Autain and the LCR's Divès—directly addressed the congress.

The "fraternal" presence of all these tendencies at the Stalinist congress reveals that there are no fundamental political differences separating them. They are all participating in the setting up of new political mechanisms on the left, desperately needed by the French bourgeoisie to control a coming radicalisation of the working class.

At the end of the conference, Buffet addressed an appeal to the Stalinists' former government allies in the Socialist Party and others on the "left" about the need for a "progressive front for the defence of liberties and democracy." There is a "need to come together at the point of struggles," she said. Buffet has already reached agreement with Mélenchon's Left Party for a joint election campaign in next year's European parliament elections. The new party has obviously struck a chord with sections within the French PCF and was generally well received by it.

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