

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Part 8—The centrist line of the OCI (4)

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This eight-part series first appeared on the World Socialist Web Site during May–June 2008, on the 40th anniversary of the general strike in France. We are presenting it here unchanged, but with a new Introduction in light of intervening events. Part 1, posted May 29, deals with the development of the student revolt and the general strike up to its high point at the end of May. Part 2, posted May 30, examines how the Communist Party (PCF) and the union it controls, the CGT, enabled President Charles de Gaulle to regain control. Part 3, posted May 31, and Part 4, posted June 1, examine the role played by the Pabloites. The final four parts examine the role of Pierre Lambert's Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), including Part 5, posted June 2; Part 6, posted June 4; Part 7, posted June 5; and Part 8, posted below.

The political background of Pierre Lambert

As a result of the failure of the Socialist Labour League of Britain (SLL) to analyse the political degeneration of the OCI, this history remained in the dark for many years. Little was known about the OCI's political development, its internal party debates and the background of its leaders.

However, over the past 15 years a large number of personal memoirs, historical works of varying quality and serious academic studies have appeared in France dealing with the history of the Trotskyist movement. A major reason for the growing interest was the election of Lionel Jospin, a former OCI member, as prime minister in 1997, and the considerable electoral successes of self-proclaimed Trotskyists such as Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot.

In September 2006, Jean Hentzen submitted his Master's thesis, a detailed treatment of the early history of the OCI, to the history faculty of the University of Paris, under the direction of Michel Dreyfus, author of *Histoire de la CGT* and a historian of modern French labour movements. [36]

Based on extensive archival materials, interviews with contemporary witnesses and already existing works, the author gave an account of the history of the PCI [forerunner of the OCI] majority from 1952 to 1955. In 1952, Michel Pablo expelled the majority of the French section, the PCI, from the Fourth International because it opposed his policy of “entrism sui generis,” i.e., entry into the Communist Party based on the dissolution of the PCI as an independent organization. In 1953, the PCI majority was among the founding organisations of the International Committee of the Fourth International. From 1965, it called itself the OCI.

Hentzen's work makes clear that there were two different currents within the PCI majority from the outset. One, led by Pierre Lambert, was characterised by a syndicalist outlook. It concentrated its work on the trade unions and, later, on the social democratic milieu. The other, led by Marcel Bleibtreu, emphasized the dispute with the Communist Party.

The conflict between these two currents grew in intensity and bitterness. In March 1953, Lambert replaced Bleibtreu as leader of the PCI. Two years later, Bleibtreu and his closest comrades were expelled from the party, despite the protest of the International Committee. Both factions exhibited substantial political weaknesses, and many of the complex questions connected to the struggle against Pabloite revisionism were never really clarified in the French section.

Bleibtreu, using the party name Favre, was the first to oppose Pablo's revisionist theses at a meeting of the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International in November 1950. Under the title “Where is Pablo Going?” he submitted them to intensive political and theoretical criticism. [37] This document was published in June 1951 and contributed in a major way to the political orientation of the French majority.

Bleibtreu, the tendency's most important leader, was born in 1918 and joined the French Trotskyists in 1934, as they were working inside the social democratic SFIO. After the war, he edited the party organ *La vérité* and became political secretary of the PCI. He was a physician by occupation, and died in 2001.

Pierre Lambert (1920–2008) joined the group of Raymond Molinier and Pierre Frank in 1937, which, due to its opportunist line, differed sharply with both Trotsky and the official French section at that time. During the war, Lambert was active in the illegal trade unions, and after the reunification of the French Trotskyists in 1944 he led their trade union work. He supported the anti-Pabloite majority after some initial hesitation. One of the most important reasons for his eventual support of the anti-Pabloite majority appears to be that the policy of “entrism sui generis” threatened to destroy the trade union work of the PCI. Within the context of this work, many younger comrades in the factories had courageously opposed the Stalinists.

Many characteristics of Lambert's later policies were nascent before the split with the Pabloites. We have already pointed out that in 1947 he pushed through a resolution in the PCI insisting on the complete independence of the trade unions from political parties. From 1950 to 1952, Lambert participated in the publication of a trade union newspaper entitled *L'Unité* (Unity), whose editorial board comprised trade unionists from different political orientations. Besides the Trotskyists of the PCI there were anarchists and reformists, including open anti-communists. Some of them—like the anarchist Alexandre Hébert, from 1947 to 1992 the secretary of the trade union Force Ouvrière in the Loire Atlantique region—retained a life-long loyalty to Lambert.

In July 1952, the PCI held its Eighth Congress where, for the first time, the majority and the Pabloite minority met separately. At the centre of the majority congress was the struggle against the Pabloites, on which Bleibtreu and Lambert agreed. They also agreed that the PCI should not allow itself to be forced out of the Fourth International, but instead remain

inside and fight for a change of course and for its re-admission.

Tensions, however, developed around the focus of political work. Although Bleibtreu rejected Pablo's policy of dissolving the entire section into the Communist Party, he considered it necessary to develop a secret faction of selected cadres within the Communist Party. For his part, Lambert was of the opinion that the organization was too weak for such work, and sought to concentrate all of the party's forces on the trade union work.

These tensions intensified over the ensuing months. At a central committee meeting at the end of December, Bleibtreu gave the political report; Lambert reported on the trade union work. Hentzgen summarizes the opposing viewpoints as follows:

According to Bleibtreu, "the PCI should link the intervention of the independent party with the work of a secret faction and support for the formation of the left oppositionists [within the Communist Party]. The revolutionary party will be developed on the basis of this left opposition."

According to Lambert, "the first task of revolutionaries consists of reconstructing the extremely weakened union organizations: first the CGT, but also the FO. The active trade union work will permit the Trotskyists to penetrate the masses and anchor themselves there. By the effectiveness of their slogans and by the actions they propose, the Trotskyists will succeed in mobilising the workers into action, gradually taking on the role of leadership." [38]

Both viewpoints were ominously close to those of the Pabloites, who said that the revolutionary party would not emerge out of the existing cadre of the Fourth International, but from a left faction within the Stalinist or reformist organizations influenced by the Trotskyists.

Bleibtreu's hopes for the development of a left opposition within the French Communist Party (PCF) found their clearest expression in an alliance with André Marty. This Stalinist veteran, who owed his fame to a mutiny on a French warship near Odessa in 1919, was secretary of the Communist International from 1935 to 1943, and organised the international brigades in the Spanish civil war. He fell into disgrace in 1952 and was expelled from the PCF. Although Marty's brutal actions against Left Oppositionists in Spain had earned him the name of the "butcher of Albacete" and there was little indication that he had made a serious reckoning with his Stalinist past, Bleibtreu regarded him as the leader of a left opposition.

Bleibtreu met personally with Marty, who proclaimed an interest in collaboration, but who was also in contact with the Pabloites. The PCI majority conducted a campaign to defend Marty, and created the *Comités de redressement communiste* (Committees of Communist Reorganization) for the purpose, which were to form a left opposition against the Stalinist leadership. In January 1953, *La Vérité* appealed to Marty: "Go forward, and you will become first the leader and then the organiser of the revolutionary proletarians of this country!" [39]

Bleibtreu curried favour with Marty over approximately three years, encountering considerable opposition inside the PCI. Bleibtreu earned the reputation of advocating "Pabloism without Pablo," which considerably undermined his authority. By March 1953, he was in a minority in the central committee and Lambert took over the leadership of the PCI.

While Bleibtreu maintained contact with André Marty, Lambert had great expectations for another leading member of the French Communist Party, Benoît Frachon, the leader of the trade union federation, CGT.

In 1951 and again in 1953, Frachon called for the unity in action of all trade unions and thus gained Lambert's full support. Although there were tensions between Frachon and other PCF leaders, these never took on a fundamental character. Rather, the turn of the CGT to "unity in action" was linked with the fact that the PCF was considering the possibility of joining the government and was therefore seeking rapprochement with the reformist parties.

In 1954, the PCF did support a coalition government of the Socialists,

Radical Socialists and left Gaullists under Pierre Mendès-France. Lambert, however, claimed that the apparatus of the CGT—contrary to that of the PCF—was tied to the masses.

The demand for unity was at the centre of the PCI's trade union work. From 1953, it had called for the organization of "Assizes for union unity in action" to bring together representatives of different union organisations at the local and national level. PCI members in the trade unions were instructed to link all of the problems of trade union life with the slogan of the "National assizes for union unity in action."

The PCI maintained a largely uncritical position regarding the union leaders. In March 1954, it organized a national conference that expressly centred on "democratic unity," and not the programme of the party. The appearance at this conference of Georges Frischmann, secretary-general of the post office union and a high-ranking CGT functionary, was celebrated as a great success. Afterwards the "Standing Committee for the Assizes" sent a delegation that included three Trotskyists to the various trade union headquarters, including the CGT.

Finally, Lambert met personally with CGT leader Frachon and, on his insistence, was accepted again as a member of the union from which he had previously been expelled. Frachon believed that the PCI's campaign for trade union unity posed no threat to the bureaucracy.

On November 16, 1953, the American Socialist Workers Party published the "Open Letter," which called for a break with the Pabloites and for the establishment of the International Committee. This was greeted with enthusiasm by the PCI. Their international isolation had now come to an end.

La Vérité appeared with the headline "Trotskyism will triumph, an appeal by the American Trotskyists against the liquidators of the Fourth [International]." On November 23, the PCI organized the first meeting of the International Committee in Paris. Although no longer party secretary, Bleibtreu represented the PCI at the International Committee and Gérard Bloch took on the role of its secretary. Despite this change, the disputes within the PCI continued undiminished.

Further differences were added to those that already existed. After Stalin's death and the suppression of the June 1953 uprising in East Germany, different estimations of the Stalinist parties developed. Bleibtreu's tendency argued for critical support of ostensibly left-wing currents inside the bureaucracy, while the party majority around Lambert and Bloch rejected this position and called for a workers' rebellion—as had taken place in East Berlin.

There were also differences regarding the national liberation movements. Here Lambert—in a manner similar to the Pabloites—called for unconditional support without any criticism, while Bleibtreu's tendency said that support should be combined with fraternal criticism.

From May 1952, the PCI maintained close political and personal relations with Messali Hadj, the leader of the Algerian liberation movement MTLD (*Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques*) and MNA (*Mouvement national Algérien*). When Hadj was expelled from France Algeria by the police, PCI members took care of his children. The MTLD was supported by many Algerian workers in France, some of whom had worked closely with the PCI inside the CGT trade union. However, Hadj was and remained a bourgeois nationalist.

With the beginning of the Algerian war of liberation in 1954, support for the MNA, which for a time Lambert likened to a revolutionary proletarian party, moved more to the centre of the PCI's work. The PCI took on logistical tasks and participated in illegal work. The Bleibtreu tendency criticized this position and accused the leadership of displaying "an attitude of servile opportunism towards the MTLD and its deficiencies." [40]

In Algeria, the MNA was displaced by the National Liberation Front (FLN), which emerged from a split inside the MTLD's armed underground organization and had few roots in the working class. It owed

its strength to the support of the Egyptian government under Gamal Abdel Nasser, which supplied it with weapons, as well as its own ruthless actions against its political rivals. Hadj reacted to his increasing isolation by moving to the right politically. In the summer of 1958, his supporters held negotiations with the French government and the PCI broke off relations with him.

The factional tensions inside the PCI became increasingly bitter in the course of 1954. The International Committee, and above all its British section, strove in vain to lessen the tensions and induce positive cooperation between the two wings. Finally, Bleibtreu and two of his supporters—Michel Lequenne and Lucien Fontanel—were expelled over a disciplinary matter: they had answered a police summons against the wishes of the political bureau. Once at the police station, they had refused to give statements, as demanded by existing party policy. But the political bureau had demanded they ignore the summons, which would have led to their arrest.

In a statement dated May 21, 1955, the International Committee expressed its anger at the expulsion of Bleibtreu, Lequenne and Fontanel, demanding that they be readmitted into membership and be represented in all leading party committees. This, however, was to no avail. The PCI central committee rejected the demands of the International Committee.

Lambert's tendency now dominated the PCI, which played only a small role in the work of the International Committee. In 1963, when the American SWP reunited with the Pabloites in the United Secretariat, the French section remained aligned with the International Committee. However, all the important documents against the reunification were written by the British section.

In France, the PCI dedicated itself to work inside the factories, where it maintained a cosy division of labour with the opportunist *Voix Ouvrière* for many years. This came to an end only in 1966, following the conflict at the Third World Congress of the International Committee. From 1959, the two organizations had jointly produced and distributed flyers outside the factories. VO leader Hardy, who as a medical supplies salesman owned a car, often took Lambert on their joint travels.

After their expulsion, Bleibtreu and Lequenne also moved further to the right. They joined the New Left, where they developed their own tendency and participated in the founding of the *Partie socialiste unifié* (PSU), a left-wing umbrella movement from which numerous government leaders and ministers would later emerge. In 1968, under the leadership of Michel Rocard, the PSU controlled the UNEF student federation.

For some time, Bleibtreu was a member of the PSU political committee and even served as general secretary, until his departure in 1964. Afterward, he was active in numerous initiatives—for peace in Vietnam, against child poverty, and in the 1990s, against the Iraq embargo. Lequenne went to Algeria in 1963 to support the national regime, where he joined the Pabloites and became a member of the United Secretariat. From 1974 to 1995, he worked for the newspaper *Libération*. Lequenne died in 2006.

The centrism of the OCI that was clearly expressed in 1968 had a long pre-history. In the final analysis, it resulted from the French section's abandonment of the struggle against Pabloite revisionism.

Concluded

Notes:

36. Jean Hentzgen, "Agir au sein de la classe. Les trotskystes français majoritaires de 1952 à 1955," Université de Paris I, Septembre 2006.

37. "Where is Pablo Going?" by Bleibtreu (Favre), June 1951" in *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, vol. 1, London, 1974

38. Hentzgen, op. cit., p. 57

39. quoted in *ibid.* p. 60

40. quoted in *ibid.* p. 148

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