

THE NEW POPULAR FRONT IN FRANCE

by George Ross

The 1978 General Elections may well bring the French Left (and the Communist Party) to power in France. The Right Centre coalition which has ruled France for twenty years has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to deal with the present economic crisis—high inflation, unemployment, low growth—which it has played a major role in creating. As a result it has been rapidly losing support while simultaneously splitting into warring factions. The *Union de la Gauche* (Communists, Socialists and Left Radicals) has, meanwhile, become an electoral majority in the country (a fact demonstrated both in opinion polls and in the results of the March 1977 municipal elections). Its leaders, François Mitterrand and the PS (*Parti Socialiste*) and Georges Marchais of the PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) are now seen as genuine statesmen and as plausible Ministers of France, by a majority of Frenchmen. Its 'Common Programme for a Government of Left Union' is received as a credible platform for resolving the economic crisis and bringing needed change to French society. Rumour has it in Paris that high civil servants have already begun preparing for the arrival of new men in power. The stock exchange has begun to vibrate with fear—and with the beginnings of an investment strike against the Left (a strike which, because it has started so far in advance of the actual election date, has had the effect of undermining the existing regime even further). The Gaullist fraction of the ruling majority has already begun a barrage of anti-Left hysteria against the 'socialo-communist enemy' with its 'Marxist programme' to remove France from the 'camp of liberty'. In short, all the telltale signs are present indicating that the Left—after decades in political opposition—is on its way to success.

If, and when, the Left comes to power it will mark the first time since the immediate post-World War II years, and only the second time in French history, for communists to hold ministerial posts. It will crown more than a decade of effort by the PCF to create a new United Front of the Left and bring it to victory. More than anything, however, the arrival of the Left in power in France will begin a crucial test of contemporary French communist strategy. What will happen? What issues will determine communist success or failure? In fact, what will *constitute* PCF success or failure? Is the PCF's 'Eurocommunist' version of United Front politics in

fact a symbol of the final social democratisation of the PCF, as so many critics claim? Or can there really be that 'peaceful, French road to socialism', which the party claims so fervently to want? Futurology has its limits, as we all know. Answers to such questions are never available before the event. Even now, however, it is possible to foresee many of the dynamics which the PCF and the *Union de la Gauche* will confront. Given the potentially vast importance of what may happen in France, reflecting on such things will be a worthwhile enterprise.

I. Communist Strategy in France: The United Front Without Soviet Ties

It is not news for the French Communist Party to be committed to a United Front strategy. The party's history since the 1930's is one of consistent devotion to some form of Frontist alliance policy.¹ Since then, with the exception of brief periods when the party's support of Soviet policies led to complete isolation (1939-1941, 1947-1954) the PCF has devoted most of its energy trying to build United Fronts. Quite early in its history the party realised that it would never be able to come to power alone. Complicated electoralist/popular mobilisation strategies of alliance between the PCF and forces to its immediate right were the only plausible way to any kind of victory. Indeed, long before it became fashionable in the international communist movement to speak of national paths to socialism, the PCF had developed just such a national strategy. The 'Party of Maurice Thorez', as the PCF was known in the dark days of personality cults (Thorez led the party for 30 years from the 'thirties to the early 'sixties), was also a 'Party of the Unity of the Left'. More often than not, the PCF's unity efforts were unsuccessful. Always they failed to bring socialism to France. To the PCF's great credit, however, even where its United Front efforts failed to bring a Socialist France, they did initiate the only moments of genuine social reform in modern French history.

As all observers of modern communism are aware, however, there may be any number of different kinds of United Fronts. In this light, the PCF's contemporary Unity campaign differs significantly from its earlier efforts. Up until the 'sixties, the PCF's strategy had two central reference points, the party's domestic position and the dictates of Soviet foreign policy. It was consistently the latter which provided the ultimate touchstone for the PCF's actions. For example, if the domestic politics of the 1930's Popular Front were impressive and innovative (the 40 hour week, paid vacations for French workers, major attempts to raise working class living standards and correct injustices, political reforms to create more democratic institutions, not to speak of a great growth in communist power within the broader French political spectrum) they were also consistently subordinated to broader Soviet diplomatic goals (in this case promoting a front of bourgeois democratic powers allied with, or sympathetic to, the Soviet Union against the growing Fascist threat). At

Liberation again, the PCF-engineered programme of the *Conseil National de la Résistance* (with its extensive nationalisations, social welfare measures, purges of collaborators, vast increases in working class power on the shop floor, radically democratic constitutional proposals, reformed civil service, police and army, and so on) was subordinate to the overriding goal of keeping an independent France out of the American orbit in the developing Cold War. In both cases, the PCF's duty to further Soviet international goals was more important than its goal of domestic change. And in both cases, this strategic subordination to Soviet interests forced the PCF to blunt its promotion of domestic change and ultimately forced the PCF into opposition.

The critical change in the PCF's outlook has been abandonment of strategic subservience to Soviet goals. This monumental revision in perspective began in the '50's and early '60's because of changes in the context of world politics and in the internal affairs in the international communist movement. Stalin's death in 1953 marked the beginning, as leadership changes in the Kremlin and nuclear stalemate between the USA and the USSR led to 'peaceful coexistence'. Krushchev's 'secret speech' to the XXth Soviet Party Congress (1956), the upheaval in all of the Popular Democracies which followed and the developing Sino-Soviet split strained, and ultimately loosened the bonds of the communist movement. In all this, PCF 'destalinisation', both internationally and domestically, was a very slow process, but the breathing space allowed the party by peaceful coexistence and communist 'polycentrism' led the PCF away from the monolithic hold of Sovieto-centrism which had characterised its positions (perhaps more than any other party outside the immediate Soviet orbit). The PCF's first major declaration of independence from Soviet hegemony was its disapproval of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. By the early 1970's the party had begun to realise that such declarations of independence 'paid' quite well in the currency of French domestic politics. Most recently, the PCF has produced a steady stream of criticisms of the Soviet Union's lack of democracy, its repression of political opposition, the practice of psychiatric incarceration of political deviants and the existence of forced labour camps for dissidents. The PCF's growing independence of Soviet tutelage has not only been domestic. The party's central role, together with the PCI, in blocking the Russians' attempt to take the international communist movement back 'in hand' at the 1976 East Berlin Conference is well known. As the newly convinced 'Eurocommunist', Georges Marchais, noted on returning from East Berlin, 'the elaboration of a common strategy for all communist parties is henceforth totally out of the question.'

Out from underneath the shadow of Soviet foreign policy, the PCF has been able to become more French, to develop a perspective, in the

party's words, for 'socialism in the colours of France.' Indeed, at just the moment when the PCF began to free itself from Soviet hegemony, political conditions in France began to favour a new United Front. The structures of the Fifth French Republic (founded in 1958) promoted a stark Left-Right polarisation. In the '60's the domination of the politics by a Centre-Right coalition headed by the **Gaullists** forced the social democratic Left and Left centre to think the previously unthinkable—that some form of collaboration with the communists might be the only route to power. In this context, the PCF's task was to make itself more palatable as an ally, and more specifically, to erase memories of its Stalinist past. Thus international 'destalinisation' was accompanied by a substantial degree of doctrinal change, as the PCF tried to sweeten the pill of a new United Front for its chosen allies. In the early 1960's the PCF admitted that a one party form of proletarian dictatorship, as practised in the USSR, was a peculiar product of Russian development and its **generalisation** as a model to other situations was 'abusive'. Next the PCF announced its belief that a 'peaceful, French road to Socialism' was possible, in which the transition to socialism could be administered by a multi-party coalition. From here it was but a small step to admit that a multiparty socialist society itself was a distinct possibility for France. Asked repeatedly whether a United Front in power would surrender office if it lost its parliamentary majority or electoral plurality, the PCF responded, 'yes'. What about democratic liberties? The party produced a major document in 1975 which amounted to a ringing commitment for the widest possible expansion of civil and social liberties. Finally, at the XXII PCF Congress in 1976 the goal of establishing a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' for so long the very core of PCF ideas on the transition to socialism, was publicly abandoned. Today, besides the PCF's still-insistent claim that it, and only it, is the 'party of the working class', the only important legacies of the Comintern past which remain are internal and organisational. The PCF remains committed to democratic centralism (which, in the PCF's case, is still rather biased towards centralism) and to the illegitimacy of organised 'fractions' in its own inner **life**.³

Thus the present situation became conceivable because the PCF abandoned its exaggerated devotion to the Soviet Union and, at the same time, modified its own doctrinal stance. It was made possible, however, by years of single-minded communist dedication to the construction of a modern United Front. Everything which the PCF did, from the early 1960's onward, was subordinated to the goal of cementing an alliance between the PCF and forces of the non-communist Left and Centre around a specific programme of change (a 'legislative contract') to be implemented when the United Left won an electoral majority. Initially, the PCF's labours were only barely rewarded—low level electoral accords with reluctant socialists in 1962, support for François Mitterrand in the 1965

Presidential election with little or no programmatic reassurance, minor progress towards a common programme in the 1967 elections and afterwards. Only a series of genuine political catastrophes could convince the non-communist Left that unity with the PCF was the route to salvation—the electoral destruction of the Social Democratic Front and its disintegration after the May-June events of 1968 and the *débâcle* of Gaston Defferre's Socialist candidacy in the 1969 Presidential elections. When the lessons of these events finally penetrated social democratic heads, the PCF's dogged pursuit of a United Front agreement began to bear fruit.⁴ After 1969 the French social democrats began to regroup into the new *Parti Socialiste* under Mitterrand's leadership. This development (which the PCF welcomed because it gave them, at long last, a potential partner of real substance) made possible the negotiations between the PS and PCF which concluded in June, 1972 with the signature of the *Common Programme for a Government of Popular Unity*.⁵ From this point onwards, the *Union de la Gauche* has gone from strength to strength.

II. *Union de la Gauche: Strategy and Theory*

How does the PCF intend to travel on the 'peaceful, French road to socialism?' The 'grand soir' or 'grande journée' when the workers will rise, seize power and smash the state is no longer part of the PCF's vision of change. The PCF's United Front strategy is, in contrast, a multi-stage perspective. Modern France, in communist eyes, is composed of a diversity of social and political forces, many of which have some interest in serious change. Only one force, however, the industrial working class, has an immediate interest in revolution. A 'grand soir' perspective in which the PCF and militant segments of the working class would 'make' a revolution is therefore ruled out because such a revolution could only be the promotion of a minority. As such it would be doomed either to crushing defeat or, in the event of success, to setting up a repressive minority dictatorship. Given these conditions it becomes necessary to forge a social and political alliance of progressive forces around a catalogue of proposed changes which all can agree upon. In its efforts at unity building the PCF has insisted that such a catalogue be incorporated into a formal programme engaging its signatories to the implementation of such changes if and when the United Front comes to power. Hence the 1972 Common Programme, signed by the PCF, the Socialists and the Left Radicals, and supported by the CGT (the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, the PCF-controlled labour Confederation which exercises predominant influence over French organised labour.)

The core of the 1972 programme (which may be slightly revised before the 1978 electoral campaign) is a series of proposed nationalisations in heavy industry, advanced technology sectors, credit and finance. The programme also suggests that a Left government might acquire shares short

of full nationalisation in other industries. Accompanying these nationalisations (which encompass a good portion of the oligopolised centre of the French economy) the Programme proposes a series of social welfare measures (health, education, social security) plus the satisfaction of many outstanding labour movement demands (wages, hours, union power on the shop floor, political rights within the firm, etc.). To coordinate the new public sector, the Programme proposes a democratised form of economic planning. Beyond this, it pledges a major expansion in civil liberties—especially those of workers at their place of work—plus a series of measures which would democratise the workings of French political institutions. Finally, the Programme broaches the issue of a Left foreign policy. Here, in those areas where the Socialists and Communists disagreed most in 1972 (Europe, NATO French defence policy) the Programme is at its vaguest.

The first stage in the PCF's strategy is, then, the election of a Left Union government and the implementation of this Common Programme. The PCF is quite aware that carrying out the Programme will not create socialism in France, that the core of the Programme is reformist. It is also aware that carrying out the Programme will not be easy in the face of its allies' predicted timidity and the opposition of the Right. All of the political astuteness and capacities for popular mobilisation which the PCF and CGT can muster will be needed. With all of this in mind, however, the PCF does believe that the implementation of the programme, *in the specific ways which the PCF desires* (a very important proviso, to be discussed presently), will open up the French situation to subsequent and more thorough-going rounds of reforms which *will* lead to socialism. In brief, the PCF believes that carrying out the Common Programme will sufficiently change French society in the interests of a majority of the French people (while, at the same time, sufficiently increasing the social and political power of the PCF), that it will become possible for the PCF to push its allies towards more radical measures at a later point in time. It will be at these later stages in the unfolding of the PCF's strategy that the 'peaceful, French road to Socialism' will open wide.

To the PCF it is the dynamics of 'state monopoly capitalism' as a contradictory social system which makes United Frontism a plausible contemporary **strategy**.⁶ State monopoly capitalism in the PCF's eyes is a definable stage of imperialism, probably the last stage. It is characterised, in general, by a high degree of economic concentration, advanced monopoly domination over the economy, extensive socialisation of production and the progressive introduction of sophisticated technology in production. In such a context, the monopoly sector has had to devise new ways to counteract the tendency for the rate of profit to decline, a propensity for the system to overaccumulate productive capacity and capital (and thus slide towards stagnation, other things being equal) and a series of problems

arising from advancing socialisation of production (needs for an ever more sophisticated technology and an ever more educated, mobile and, at the same time, malleable work force, for example). Faced with such problems, the 'monopoly caste' (the PCF's term for those in charge of the monopoly sector) has been forced to subordinate the state to its direct interests. Resort to political means has become the major device used to make the monopoly sector profitable and internationally competitive. To do such things the state has entered broad new realms of activity, openly promoting and shaping accumulation in the monopoly sector on the one hand, and directly engaging in the mobilisation and accumulation of capital for the monopoly sector on the other. Fiscally, the state, prompted by the monopoly caste, systematically drains funds away from the general public and non-monopoly sectors of the economy towards the monopolies. Under the pretext of contribution to the general welfare, the taxpayer is in fact urged to make donations to the monopoly caste. Likewise, the private saver depositing funds in his account is, in fact, providing investment capital for the monopoly sector via the state's credit manipulations.

It is the effect of state monopoly capitalism on the French class structure which reassures the PCF about its strategy. To begin with, state monopoly capitalism makes working class lives more difficult. Beyond this, however, it has grave effects on non-working class sectors of the population. The rapid socialisation of production in state monopoly capitalism, with its simultaneous explosion of administrative and 'tertiary' activities, creates a panoply of large new salaried middle strata groups (the PCF call them couches *intermédiaires salariées*) whose living conditions, under contradictory pressures of monopoly development, more and more resemble those of the working class. As subordinate administrative, technical and commercial employees are subjected to the salariat, they become the objects of the necessary cost-cutting, speed-up, rationalisation and income restraint dictated by the profit perspectives of the big firms. As this occurs, the 'middle class' illusions of such groups diminish and they become ever more open to appeals for change from the Left. Thus the productive working class (workers who actually produce surplus value) which forms the social base of the PCF and the militant core of United Frontism can acquire new allies in such groups which are not working class per se (because not productive in the Marxian sense) but find themselves ever closer to the working class in many aspects of work and life. Beyond this, state monopoly capitalism, because it needs to improve the efficiency of the circulation and realisation processes, is compelled to reorganise these sectors along quasi-industrial lines. The effects of this are disastrous for formerly independent middle strata (old petit-bourgeois groups, *boutiquiers*, etc.). Deeply threatened (shopkeepers by large marketing chains, for example), these strata may also be potential allies for a United Front. On the land, state monopoly capitalism has had similar effects,

squeezing remaining smallholders and superexploiting agrarian workers, both groups acquiring their own reasons for ending the reign of monopolies. The logic of the PCF's sociology even sees small and medium sized capitalists as the economic victims of the monopolies and therefore potential allies for the new United Front.⁷

Theoretically, then, the PCF sees good social reasons for broad discontent with monopoly rule in France. Beyond this, it also sees features in the system of state monopoly capitalism which facilitate the translation of this discontent into political action. The use of the state by the monopoly caste to promote the profitability of the monopoly sector creates a unique new political situation. As more and more economic decisions are made *politically* by the monopoly caste, the veneer of mystification created by the formally free market mechanisms of earlier capitalism is progressively torn away. The result of this, says the PCF, is to reveal to ever greater numbers of Frenchmen the naked economic rule of the monopoly caste. A similar process affects political institutions themselves. Executive, bureaucratic power, responsive primarily to the needs of the monopoly sector, has eclipsed parliament and thereby undercut many of the sources of liberal political legitimacy. With these developments, the state comes to look ever more like the executive suite of the monopoly caste. In general, then, the ideological and institutional screens which had, in the past, shielded the realities of bourgeois rule in France from most Frenchmen (the workings of the market economically and the forms of liberal democracy politically) have been partially removed by state monopoly capitalism in pursuit of its profit maximising course.

Everything fits together for the PCF in the light of this theory. The productive industrial working class, that group with the most radical desires to transcend state monopoly capitalism, stands as the core of the United Front. Beyond the working class, state monopoly capitalism has pushed a variety of non-working class strata towards new desire for serious change. Here the 'salaried intermediary strata' are those closest to the workers in their fervour, but petit bourgeois, peasant and small entrepreneurial groups have found their own reasons for discontent as well. From a sociological point of view, then, the PCF believes that it is possible to hammer out a programme of proposed changes which could enlist the political support of as many of these groups as possible.

Since the aggrieved non-working class groups are not revolutionary, such a programme cannot demand revolution. But it can build upon the highest common denominator of desired change to promote substantial reform. And, to the degree that the programme does respond to felt needs, its implementation will lay the groundwork for further change. The political side of the strategy follows from these sociological considerations. To the PCF, each discontented non-working class group has its own particular form of political representation, usually in the form of a

political party. To the degree to which state monopoly capitalism wreaks its havoc on the lives of such groups, the non communist forces of the political Left and Centre which represent them will become ever more amenable to alliance with the PCF. Thus the socialists, who 'represent' to a degree certain segments of the working class and, more importantly, parts of the 'intermediary salaried' groups, will shift away from 'class collaboration' towards greater radicalism as a result of state monopoly capitalism. Ditto the Left Radicals, a 'petit bourgeois' party. Beyond this, even, those segments of the working class and the middle classes who had been enticed towards support of the Right by the appeal of Gaullism (partly because of the charisma of General de Gaulle himself) become good candidates to support the new United Front. In fact, the 'Union du Peuple de France', the PCF's latest formulation of the social alliances which it sees underpinning the United Front, includes virtually everyone in France *except* the monopolists.

III. *What happens in the Real World of Power?*

So far, so good, then. A United Front has been formed, it has attracted a substantial base of support, its constituent parties are loyal to one another and the Front may win a majority at the General Elections scheduled for March, 1978. However, building a United Front to challenge a regime in power is one thing. It will be quite another to keep the Front in power, implement its programme and, most important, keep up momentum towards even greater change later, as the PCF's strategy seeks. What will happen if and when the *Union de la Gauche* comes to power? One can foresee certain issues which are bound to arise, whatever else occurs.

Which of the two central parties in the *Union de la Gauche* (the PS and the PCF) will achieve predominant power in defining *how* the Common Programme is to be implemented? As we will see, this is a critical question for the PCF and its longer term strategic vision. Then, how can an extensive and potentially disruptive programme of reforms be carried out without dislocating the front of social support underlying the political power of the *Union de la Gauche*? Here the central problem will be retaining the support of those middle class strata whose allegiance to the Left is most recent and weakest. Finally, what can the *Union de la Gauche* in power expect from its Centre and Right opposition?

It is obvious that both the Socialists and Communists are genuinely committed to some degree of change in France. Both party leaderships, for example, have publicly pledged that major provisions of the Common Programme will be carried out very rapidly after a Left electoral victory (the proposed nationalisations, perhaps the core of the Programme, will be legislated within six months, according to most recent announcements). However, one ought not to mistake pre-electoral agreement with harmony

between the PS and the PCF. Both the Socialists and Communists agree that the Common Programme should be actualised, although there may well be serious conflict between the parties over how much of it should be carried out, with the PS holding back and the PCF pushing for full and complete implementation. But the real bone of contention will be the parties' very different ideas about *how* the Common Programme should be implemented. It is a safe assumption that the Socialist Party as it stands (although its internal life is very complicated) would like to use the *Union de la Gauche* to set up a Swedish style neo-capitalism, become the hegemonic political organisation within such a political economy, and, in the long run, use such hegemony to undermine the power of communists to their Left. It goes without saying that the PCF has very different ideas about what should happen.

The major (and to this point relatively downplayed) pillar of the PCF's strategy is to design and shape United Front reforms in such a way that they will enhance the PCF's own political and mobilisation power.⁸ In very broad terms, this means that the PCF desires to use the *Union de la Gauche* to weaken the social power of monopoly capital, strengthen the Left in general and strengthen the power of the PCF within the Left to a disproportionately greater degree. What this is all about can perhaps best be made clear by considering PCF goals with reference to specific measures. How would the PCF like to see nationalisation enacted? The PCF calls its approach to nationalisations *Gestion Démocratique* and it involves a series of changes both on the level of directing the industry in question and on the level of the organisation of authority within the industry, particularly on the shop floor. At the top, the PCF would have things run by a tripartite board of directors composed of appointees of the government, delegates from organisations of consumers of the products produced by the industry, and, finally, representatives of the workers in the industry. Beyond this, for the internal life of the industry the PCF would legislate a series of measures to give workers vastly enlarged powers and prerogatives in the day-to-day life of the enterprise. All of this sounds innocuous enough, until one realises that the PCF is proposing to place vast new levers of power in the hands of mass organisations. Then, when one reflects upon the fact that the PCF controls the major workers' mass organisation in France (the CGT) and is consummately skilful at creating and enlarging other types of mass organisations (let us say, of consumers, for example), the PCF's thrust becomes clearer. It is proposing that United Front reforms be implemented in such a way that mass organisations which it dominates will gain major new positions of power both over the functioning of economic life and over the masses of people who live and work within economic institutions. In a newly nationalised industry, to follow our illustration, the PCF would attempt to muscle the government into appointing at least some pro-PCF directors. At the same time

it would do its best to see that the procedures for appointing consumer representatives to the board would favour organisations over which the PCF has some sway. Finally, the PCF could be reasonably certain (at least for any of the industries which the present Common Programme proposes to nationalise) that workers' representatives to the board would be elected by the CGT. As for the reforms legislating greater internal democracy within the enterprise, the PCF's power over the CGT would almost certainly ensure new PCF strength within the industry. Thus if one takes this example of a single industry and multiplies it by the number of industries marked out for nationalisation in the Common Programme, and even if one allows for the likelihood that the PCF will not be able to achieve all that it desires, there still exists a vast potential for increasing communist economic, political and mass mobilisation power. And, beyond the question of nationalisation, the PCF has similar goals for social welfare reforms.⁹

Upon entering, however speculatively, into the engine room of United Front reform, the issue of who is to manipulate the controls becomes explosive. The PCF's entire longer-term strategic scenario depends upon acquiring new levers of power and mass mobilisation through the legislation of certain kinds of reforms. In contrast, the Socialist Party must prevent the PCF from succeeding at this (it is quite unclear what the PS's own nationalisation and reform programme will be except that they will be presented as autogestion—self management—and, in fact, will be highly technocratic) in order to limit the spread of reform to an acceptable 'Swedish' level. Thus the electoral victory of the Union *de la Gauche* will only be a prelude to conflict between the Union's two main components. Each party must seek to use and defeat the other on the issues of how reform is to be implemented. In such a process, someone must and will win, and someone else will lose.

If conflict between the PS and PCF is inevitable when the Left does come to power, the most important question then becomes which of the two parties will have the resources and staying power to come out ahead? Here there are items on both sides of the ledger which are difficult to weigh in advance. The Socialist Party—ironically (given its near collapse in the 1960's)—has benefitted the most electorally from the growing success of the Left in the 1970's. Indeed, there is little question that the PS has become the most powerful party electorally in France (opinion sampling gives them 32-33% of the vote—more than the Gaullists) while the PCF's electoral strength has, at best, maintained itself (around 21-22%). When one considers the evolution of electoral strengths, then, it becomes clear that the PCF's 'state monopoly capitalism' scenario is working out to a degree, but not to the PCF's own advantage. What seems to be happening is that 'new' salaried middle strata seem to be abandoning the Centre and Centre Right to support the Socialists, who have become the 'catch-all'

electoral beneficiary of a general evacuation of the Centre towards the Left. The importance of this electoral advantage for the Socialists in power is undeniable. It will give the PS a claim for more, and more important, ministries than the PCF, and will provide Socialist ministers strong support to resist PCF attempts to work United Front reform to communist advantage. On the other side of the ledger, the PCF, with a weaker electoral base than the socialists, does possess one invaluable tool which the socialists do not, its control over the CGT. As the PCF's major mass organisation, and as the hegemonic organisation within French organised labour, the CGT is in a unique position to mobilise the working class outside formal political procedures to pressure a United Front government. Maurice Thorez once called this resource the 'ministry of the masses', and there can be no question about the PCF's willingness to use it to compensate for its relative electoral weakness." Beyond the PCF's own political and mass organisational resources, it may also gain a small degree of strength from the predictable internal divisions of the PS itself. The PS is still an unstable coalition of factions. The general direction of the Party, under François Mitterrand, is committed to United Frontism as long as it benefits the Socialists more than the communists and, if it is dedicated to any new social project, it is that of an updated social democracy *à la suédoise*. To the Right of this core fraction, yet still within the Socialist Party, is a substantial minority of closet political centrists who, in their heart of hearts, really oppose collaboration with the communists (and any significant degree of social change) but stay with the PS because it offers them their only chance at power. However, on the Left of the PS there exists a minority of genuine Left-Wing socialists (ex-PSU activists and the CERES group) who might very well side with the PCF against the PS leadership in the event of any serious conflict within a United Front government.¹¹

Thus on the question of actual deployable resources, the PCF and PS are in something of a standoff situation. However, when one considers that relative position of the two parties within the broader French political spectrum, the Socialist Party's innate advantages are more clearly visible. The ultimate threat of either party in the event of conflict within the *Union de la Gauche* will be to break the United Front coalition by pulling out. The costs of this thrust will be intrinsically much higher for the PCF than for the PS. For the communists, breaking the *Union* would mean isolation—without the United Front the PCF would stand all alone politically. For the PS, on the other hand, the consequences of a broken United Front would be much less dramatic. The Socialists could, without much difficulty, find new allies to their Right with whom they could live, and share power, quite comfortably. Indeed, the general political strategy of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing has been to hasten just such an eventuality, the renaissance of what the PCF regards as the dreaded 'Third Force.'¹²

Giscard's dream is to join liberals of the Centre and Centre Right with the PS to build what he calls an 'advanced liberal' society in France, characterised above all by an American-style politics in which extremes of the Left (PCF) and Right (to Giscard, the Gaullists) are both isolated and then, hopefully, drastically reduced in influence.¹³

The threat, then, of sundering the United Front alliance will be much more credible coming from the PS, which will have a place to go if the alliance splits, than from the PCF, which has nowhere to go except into the political wilderness. The PS will have much less to lose, therefore, from insisting absolutely that *its* version of reformism be implemented, and not that of the PCF. Thus the situation will be stacked against the PCF, and quite noticeably so. If the Socialists play their cards right they will demand that the Common Programme be implemented to *their* specifications, thereby forcing the PCF to choose between simply tailing the Socialists (in the more expressive French, the PCF will serve as a *force d'appoint*) or taking forceful stands which might break up the United Front altogether and resurrect the fearsome (to the PCF) Third Force. The PS can therefore be counted upon to try to use the PCF to renew French capitalism along neo-Swedish lines, a renewal which, if successful, might make the future perilous indeed for French communism. In the last analysis, the PCF's main resource against this eventuality will be pure political will and dedication. The PCF will, quite simply, have to be willing to take more risks than the PS—willing to tread a very thin line of conflict with the PS between maintaining and dissolving the United Front on issues of principle. Being used by the PS would be a *much* safer and less strenuous route for the PCF. It goes without saying, however, that what the PCF does with the PS at the critical juncture of a United Front in power will provide a genuine test of claims (usually from the ultra-Left, but nonetheless quite serious) that the PCF has become just another variety of Social Democracy.

IV. *The United Front and its Crises*

The preceding discussion is, of course, quite artificial, since it assumes that the French Left in power will implement its programme and act out its internal conflicts in a neutral environment. If one thing is certain, however, it is that the *Union de la Gauche* in power will not face a neutral environment. Indeed, the shape of the minefield which will await a Left government in France can already be discerned. To begin with, the Left will almost certainly come to power in the middle of an on-going economic crisis, characterised by inflation, economic stagnation and extensive unemployment. The Left can also expect to face further economic deterioration from the quasi-automatic workings of domestic and international mechanisms triggered by its arrival in power, ranging from investment boycotts and runs on the franc through pressure against the Common

Programme coming from multinational corporations, international agencies and the governments of concerned Western countries. All of these things will have to be faced at the very same time as the Left attempts to carry out its programme, a process which is itself bound to bring a degree of economic dislocation. And to the economic effects of implementing the Left's Programme must also be added the compounding effects of any errors in economic policy made by a United Front government. The general political problem which may follow from all of this is simple to predict. The Left will come to power, if it does, because segments of the French electorate—primarily middle class segments—will have been persuaded that the Left presents real solutions to an already existing economic crisis. Yet the Left in power may well compound this crisis. And if this happens, how will the Left be able to maintain its base of support?

The problem is not so abstract. The *Union de la Gauche* has promised, in forceful terms, to satisfy a number of outstanding working class grievances around wages, hours and working conditions once it comes to power. Beyond this, many of the social programmes in the Common Programme will, when implemented, lead to important indirect additions to wages. In general the United Front, in power, will tend to favour the redress of working class grievances (as indeed, it should) over those of other groups. The danger in this stance is that it may alienate non-working class support for the Left—especially the critical electoral support of new middle strata which will be quite 'soft' in any case. The danger will become most acute if Left actions to favour workers fuel inflation (against which middle strata, because of their lower level of organisation, have difficulty protecting themselves) or if such actions radically alter existing relationships of status between workers and middle strata.

The PCF's United Front perspective, based on cementing together a heterogeneous grouping of social forces, implicitly acknowledges this dilemma. In the PCF's vision of the world, the working class is revolutionary and other social forces, even if they can be persuaded to support the *Union de la Gauche*, are less militant and radical. In order to assure itself of the continuing support of non-working class elements, then, the United Front will have to have working class support sophisticated enough to moderate its own demands for the greater good of Left governmental success. More correctly, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Left, to stay in power, must keep the expansion of working class purchasing power and more general working class expectations within definite limits.¹⁴ This will not be easy, since it will involve restraining a natural and inevitable working class desire to make the most, and as rapidly as possible, of a government of the Left.¹⁵ Since the PCF, through the CGT, is the only party on the Left with a genuine organised working class base, the brunt of this task of restraint will fall on the PCF and CGT.

It is safe to predict, then, that French workers will be asked to assume responsibility for some kind of incomes policy by the *Union de la Gauche*, and that the CGT will become the main organisational agent for promoting working class acceptance of such a policy. There may well even be some sort of 'no strike' pledge forthcoming early on with the Left in power, enforced by the CGT (Georges Seguy, General Secretary of the CGT, has already hinted at this).¹⁶ All of this will not mean either an absence of working class pressure for concessions from the government or an absence of working class mobilisation. Rather what the CGT will attempt to do (and attempt to persuade other unions to do) will be to get needed advances for workers through public negotiations with the government, without strikes. At the same time, the CGT will have to engage in a broad campaign of education to help the working class rank-and-file understand politically *why* a degree of restraint on its part is necessary for the greater good of the Left.

Whatever one thinks politically of this enterprise of 'disciplining the workers', in practice it may prove very hard to do, for reasons having to do with the structure and internal dynamics of the French labour movement. French labour is 'underorganised'—the percentage of workers actually belonging to unions is quite low. This means that, even for as powerful an apparatus as the CGT, rank-and-file response can be quite unpredictable. Beyond this, the CGT is not the only large union organisation in France. The CFDT, in particular, exists in a situation of uneasy united action and simultaneous rivalry with the CGT. It is in the CFDT's interests for a Left government to succeed, on one level, but, in certain circumstances, it might also be in the CFDT's more immediate interests (or those of specific unions with the CFDT, which is really an umbrella over a variegated group of organisations) to disagree with the CGT. With the CGT playing a restraining role towards the working class the CFDT might well decide if a degree of working class discontent with restraint was in evidence what opposing restraint might make sense. By advocating greater militancy, the CFDT might thereby increase its power within the labour movement ~~the~~ the CGT itself. The CFDT is unlikely to do anything like this unless a situation of restraint really did become intolerable for large numbers of workers. However, in the interstices of the French labour movement there still exist a small number of 'gauchistes' (mainly Trotskyists with the recent decline of Maoism). The extreme Left neither believes in, nor shares, the United Front strategic perspective of the PCF and CGT—indeed, it rarely misses an occasion to proclaim that the PCF is 'revisionist' and has 'sold out' the French working class. Motivated by such concerns, the extreme Left will do its best to promote working class militancy against restraint. There is little danger that 'gauchiste' actions will 'expose' the PCF and CGT to the workers in any serious way, but they might well provide sparks to fire wildcat strikes which would put the

PCF and the government in a difficult position. Generally, then, some kind of working class self-control will be needed to keep the Left's middle class support intact. The PCF and CGT expect French workers to be sufficiently 'mature' to realise this, but also intend to use their prestige and organisational power to promote such 'maturity'. Yet, as we have seen, the PCF and CGT are far from being able to *decree* such 'maturity' and carry it into action by organisational power. In one sense, this is a good thing, because it does provide some safeguard against the PCF and CGT asking the workers to sacrifice too much to the cause of Left unity. In another sense, however, it creates a large element of risk for the *Union de la Gauche*. French workers have not had a sympathetic government for three decades. One could well understand that they might expect too much from such a government after such a long time.


There may be other pitfalls inherent in the ungratifying PCF and CGT task of promoting working class 'maturity' and restraint. The PCF and CGT desire contradictory things from the working class. On the other hand, they will want to mobilise workers in vocal and militant ways for political purposes, to put pressure on the Socialists to shape reform legislation in ways which favour the PCF's strategy. Expecting workers to take to the streets (in an orderly way, to be sure) to demonstrate in favour of certain political options while expecting them not to take equivalent action in the work place in favour of bread-and-butter demands-(which are, after all, much closer to 'ground level' working class concerns than high political questions) may be to expect too much.

The danger that 'immature' working class militancy might upset the delicate balance of cross-class political support for the *Union de la Gauche* is not the greatest danger of all, however, at least for the PCF. The worst thing which could happen would be for the PCF and CGT to promote worker discipline to allow the survival of a United Front government whose real logic tended towards the rejuvenation of French capitalism through social democratic reformism. Consideration of this danger refers back to the prior issue of PCF-PS strategic conflict. If the PCF loses this conflict, and the PS is allowed to move on in its neo-Swedish way, then CGT disciplining of the work force, to the degree which it succeeds, will make French workers into instruments of their capitalist class enemies.

What happens if, even given the CGT's efforts to discipline French workers, serious economic and social problems emerge (with inflation being the main danger)? The permutations and combinations of possible crises are many, and difficult to foresee with precision. They would all create a more or less similar situation, however, at least as far as the *Union de la Gauche* is concerned. As we have repeatedly observed, critical floating support for the Left will lie in salaried new middle strata. Relatively non-unionised and under organised, these strata have only their electoral power to bargain for favourable treatment. If a United Front

government begins to work to their marked disadvantage, this electoral power will begin to shift back Right of Centre. In such an event—which is not at all unlikely—the *Union de la Gauche* would face some very hard, and probably divisive, choices. The defection of middle class support would affect, first and foremost, the Socialist Party. It would undoubtedly reinforce the power within the PS of those who wanted to put a halt to change, those who would want to draw a line half way down the implementation of the Common Programme and begin 'consolidating'. Such a shift in the balance of the PS would, of course, put the PCF yet again in the difficult position of deciding to give in or to press forward at the risk of splitting the coalition. Discussion of this eventuality, however, is incomplete without reference to the peculiar Constitutional situation of Fifth Republic France and the uses to which this situation are likely to be put by the Left's opponents.

The varying 'social crisis' scenarios discussed above (all of which come down to the Left's problem of sustaining support among 'floating' middle strata voters) become even more baroque when one considers the existing institutional structures of the Fifth Republic and the potential uses of such structures by the Right. If the Left wins an electoral majority in **1978**, it will win a majority of seats in Parliament. Unfortunately, this, in itself, will not guarantee control over France's destiny. For, under the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, the President of the Republic, elected under different circumstances from the National Assembly, has the power to appoint the Prime Minister and to dissolve the National Assembly (this latter power may only be used once within the period of a year). The Fifth Republic has not yet faced a situation in which the National Assembly had a Left majority while the President stood on the Right. It may, however, if the Left wins in **1978**. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the present President, was elected to a seven year Presidential term in May, **1974**. He can legally stay around until **1981**, then. Thus if Giscard does not resign of his own accord in the event of a **1978** Left electoral victory (which he is not legally compelled to do, and has said he will not do) an odd and perilous situation for the Left will follow. Giscard would then possess several cards to play against the *Union de la Gauche*. He might, for example, refuse to appoint a Left Prime Minister after the elections and, then, after his own candidate for Prime Minister was refused confidence in the Assembly (assuming that he was, i.e. that the *Union de la Gauche* would not split on this issue) he could proceed to dissolve Parliament and call new legislative elections right away. Of all of his options, this will be the most risky since the Left might well win new elections called in such circumstances, leaving Giscard politically discredited and, furthermore, unable to dissolve Parliament again for a year. A more sensible (and likely) strategy for Giscard would be to respect the results of the **1978**

elections and appoint a Left Prime Minister (probably François Mitterrand). Then, with aristocratic patience, he would sit back and observe while the Left begins to implement the Common Programme. In his contemplation he could anticipate three different outcomes. Either the Left in power would be consummately successful, carry out its programme without losing any substantial amount of electoral support, and leave Giscard and the Right in a desperate situation—the most unfavourable outcome for the Right (and the one most feared by Jacques Chirac, Giscard's main political rival on the Right). Or the United Front might split under the stress of legislating its programme (around the PCF-PS strategic conflicts discussed earlier). At this point Giscard could rush in and propose the creation of a 'Third Force' Left-Centre coalition between the PS and Giscard's own supporters. The third possibility would follow if implementing the Common Programme leads to the kinds of social dislocations discussed earlier in which middle strata electoral support for the Left visibly begins to shift back Rightwards. In this case, once he had ascertained that the Union de  *Gauche* had lost, or was losing, its 'soft' middle class support, Giscard could then use his Presidential power to dissolve the National Assembly and call new legislative elections which the Right and Right Centre would stand a good chance of winning.

The French constitutional situation, therefore, will build significant further biases into the Left's calculus of power.¹⁷ Assuming that Giscard decides to remain in the Elysée Palace after a Left victory, his power to dissolve the legislature at a moment of his own choosing (limited only by the proviso that this could only happen once in a year) creates a situation in which a Left government will have to pay constant attention to the evolution of its electoral support, since it might have to face new elections at any point. Since, at best, the Left's support will be only a bare majority of the electorate, and in all likelihood, a significant part of this bare majority will be 'soft' support open to fluctuation depending upon the performance of a Left government, strong incentives will be created to avoid actions which might alienate such support. In short, a government of Left Union in France will not possess the normal period of an open five years to work out its programme and problems (five years being the normal legislative life). Moreover, it hardly bears repeating that the necessity for keeping up 'soft' middle strata support will be a political asset to those elements within the Socialist Party who desire the least change, and, more generally, to the Socialist Party in its strategic conflicts with the communists.

The arrival of the Left in power in France, if it occurs in 1978 (as anyone on the Left must fervently hope), will be a major test not only of the PCF's will, but also of the basic strategic tenets of what has come to be called 'Eurocommunism'.¹⁸ As we have earlier discussed in detail, the PCF will inevitably face very serious obstacles to the full implementation

of its goals. It will have to make its own strategy prevail within a Left government over the counter-strategy of a Socialist Party which will have any number of political resources working in its favour. It will also have to promote its own version of United Front policies while at the same time acting to prevent the emergence of social crises which might disaggregate general support for the Left. And all of this must happen while opponents of the Left possess a strong strategic reserve in the constitutional position of the Presidency. Moreover, a strong Right-wing counter-attack against the Left (which, in a country like France, could exceed the boundaries of constitutional politeness) cannot be discounted. It will be the PCF's task to thread its way through this formidable network of obstacles without compromising its principles. And, furthermore, it will have to do so without resorting to Left sectarianism (extremist insistence on too much, too fast) which might play into the hands of such a Right-wing offensive. The 'peaceful, French road to Socialism' will not be straight and smooth.

NOTES

1. There exists no adequate history of the PCF to which readers might refer. The poverty of historical work on the PCF is duly underlined by recognising that the PCF's own official history, *Histoire du P.C.F.* (Manuel), Paris, 1964, is probably the most useful source. For a wealth of political information and some astute commentary, one might also look at Jacques Fauvet's *Histoire du PCF* (Paris, Fayard, 2nd ed., 1977). The oppositional *Histoire du PCF* by the *UNIR* group of inner party rebels (3 vols. Paris, 1960 et seq.) is interesting on many points. In English a limited, but useful treatment is Ronald Tiersky, *French Communism 1922-1972* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1975).
2. That all of this is not simple tactical manoeuvring is indicated by the PCF's efforts to put critical scrutiny of the Soviet experience on the party's own *internal* agenda. Evidence for this is to be found particularly in Jean Ellenstein's recent works—published by *Editions Sociales*, the party's publishing house, *Histoire de l'URSS* (Paris, 3 vols. 1971 et. seq.) and *Histoire du Phénomène Stalinien* (Paris, 1975).
3. For the PCF's public debates on the 'dictatorship' question, see the proceedings of the XXII Congress in *Cahiers du Communisme*, February-March 1976. It is an interesting detail in all of this that the PCF's intention to renounce the 'dictatorship' notion was announced by Georges Marchais in a television interview *before* the party itself had engaged in any discussion of matter—an indication both of the present state of the party's internal life and of the audience to which the doctrinal change was really directed. See also Jean Fabre, François Hincker, Lucien Sève, *Les Communistes et l'Etat* (Paris, Editions Sociales, 1977) for the PCF's only major public statement on the question of how the bourgeois state is to be transcended in the absence of a stage of 'proletarian dictatorship'. From an oppositional viewpoint, see Etienne Balibar's essay, *Sur la Dictature du Proletariat* (Paris, Maspero, 1976).
4. On May 1968 and the PCF's attempt to shape the crisis to promote a new United Front, see George Ross, 'The May Events in France and the PCF',

New Politics, Autumn-Winter 1968.

5. The PCF was the first to propose a draft programme (the *Manifeste de Champigny* of December 1968), which came remarkably close to the final agreement of 1972. On the developing unity movement see Robert Verdier, *PS-PC* (Paris, Seghers, 1976), Jean Poperen, *L'Unité de la Gauche* (Paris, Fayard, 1975). For some revealing internal PCF thinking on the final 1972 negotiations, see Etienne Fajon, *l'Union, c'est un combat* (Paris, Editions Sociales, 1975).
6. The theory of state monopoly capitalism was elaborated in the 1960's in the PCF review *Economie et Politique* (under the particular leadership of the economist Paul Boccara) out of the **ruins** of late Stalinist political economy. Its major statement, a formidable document indeed, is found in the collective work *Traite Marxiste d'Economie Politique (le Capitalisme Monopoliste d'Etat)*, Paris, 2 vols., Editions Sociales, 1971. For a more recent and approachable **précis** of the theory, see Claude Quin, *les Classes Sociales et l'Union du Peuple de France* (Paris, Editions Sociales, 1974).
7. The PCF's analysis has not gone unchallenged on the Left, of course. Leaving aside the critiques of the 'extreme' Left, which rejects United **Frontism** altogether and advocates some form of neo-Bolshevism, there has been a substantial literature criticising the theory of State Monopoly capitalism whose main point has been to criticise the extremely optimistic PCF analyses of the nature and political propensities of the 'middle classes'. Perhaps the two most interesting single critical essays, Nicos **Poulantzas'** *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (New Left Books, London, 1975) and Christian Baudelot, Roger Establet and Jacques Malemort *La Petite Bourgeoisie en France, François Maspéro*, Paris, 1975), make **similar** points. Whereas the PCF sees the 'new middle classes' as a congeries of discreet groups each in their own way leaning to the Left, these essays see such strata as part of a rejuvenated French *petite bourgeoisie*, i.e., as segments of a genuine *class*. As such, the authors see these strata as having their own class interests and goals and much less likely to lean to the Left than the PCF claims. For an economic critique of the theory see also Jacques **Valier**, *Le PCF et le Capitalisme Monopoliste d'Etat* (Paris, **François Maspéro**, 1975).
8. There is nothing really new in this. The PCF attempted it, and not without a considerable degree of success, during the Post-Liberation period of reforms just prior to the onset of the Cold War.
9. Again, the post-World War II reforms provide a model. The French social security scheme, for example, which, in its final form, was deeply influenced by PCF goals, was set up to be run by administrators elected from trade unions presented lists in special work place elections. Since the PCF, through the CGT, had the most powerful trade union base, it came to hold considerable power over the orientations and resources of the Social Security system (at least until the Cold War).
10. There are important limitations on CGT mobilising power which must be noted, however. The CGT does not control *all* of organised labour, and it cannot count on the complete cooperation of its main trade union ally (and rival) the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*, the ex-Catholic union organisation) for the purpose of supporting PCF positions. Indeed, what the CFDT does will be a critical variable in the entire situation of the Left in power.
11. Oddly enough the PSU has supplied the PS with some of its more obvious centrists (**Michel Rocard**, for example) in addition to Leftists. The CERES (the *Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Socialistes*) has attracted a group of very

dedicated and active militants who have been a consistent thorn in François Mitterrand's side, so much so that Mitterrand began—in mid 1977—to take serious steps to limit their influence within the PS, no doubt in anticipation of just those stresses of power discussed above.

12. The term 'Third Force' refers to the Cold War governments of France after 1947 in which Social Democrats and Centrists united to ward off the 'Communist threat' on the Left and the 'Gaullist threat' (General de Gaulle's abortive RPF) on the Right.
13. See Giscard's recent manifesto, *la Démocratie Française* (Paris, Fayard, 1976).
14. On this question, with specific reference to the Chilean and Portuguese experiences, see Serge Christophe Kolm, *La Transition Socialiste* (Paris, Cerf, 1977). Kolm is a talented economist with an incisive sense of economic policy issues.
15. There is, of course, an alternative strategic perspective here which would have the Left, and the PCF and CGT in particular, push working class mobilisation to its limit at just this very point, with the object of creating a 'dual power' situation (soviets or workers councils) to sharpen the polarisation of the society to its most acute point, thus creating the conditions for a working class seizure of power. The PCF has, of course, long since abandoned any such perspective. Whatever one thinks of this abandonment, it is clear that the 'sharpening polarisation' dual power strategy is immensely risky—since it is based on the militancy of a minority and on creating a degree of social disintegration which would almost certainly consolidate a powerful Right Wing reaction, which might well have a number of guns on its side. Thus when such a strategy fails, and the odds are very high that it would fail, the future not only of the Left, but of democratic institutions, becomes very bleak.
16. See Seguy's interesting remarks on the role of the CGT under a Left government in *Lutter*, Paris, Stock, 1975).
17. The only way for such biases to be avoided would be for Giscard to resign when the Left wins and, in the subsequent Presidential election, for a Left candidate to win. Even despite present rivalries in the ruling coalition between Giscardiens and Gaullists, this course is unlikely because it would disarm the Right.
18. Here 'Eurocommunism' which, insofar as it implies a unified phenomenon, is a bad term, refers to Western European CP's pursuing United Front strategies without strategic subordination to Soviet foreign policy. Of course, in each individual case, that of the PCF, the Italian PC, the Spanish party and, of late, the Portuguese party, the *national* context of United Frontism makes its shape and nature radically different from others.