

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN FRANCE AND
THE POLITICAL LINE OF THE FCR

What is the "Union of the Left"?

The dispute over the political character of the Union of the Left dates from its founding. With each new French election, it waxes hot again. We recall the dispute and exchange of letters between the SWP and the Ligue Communiste during the legislative elections in the spring of 1973 (this will shortly be submitted by the LTF for publication in the German-language edition of the IIDB). At that time all the differences had indeed come to light, but their depth could not yet be precisely estimated. Since then they have developed farther in every respect:

a) In the meantime the question of the character of the Union of the Left has clearly been answered by the events themselves.

b) The mistakes made by the leadership of our French organization with respect to evaluation and political action have considerably widened and deepened in the current presidential election.

The 1973 debate turned on the question of whether the Union of the Left is, essentially, a united front of working-class parties, or whether it represents a class-collaborationist maneuver, of a different class character than the working-class parties it is mainly based on. The comrades of the LTF showed even at that time that the latter was the case.

*The Union of the Left program is a moderate bourgeois program aimed at winning over bourgeois parties.

*All the words and deeds of the Union of the Left's architects are aimed at pulling the liberal section of the bourgeoisie into the bloc.

*This has already succeeded. The Left Radicals, an indisputably bourgeois formation, are already involved in it.

From this, the political character of the undertaking was deduced by the Leninist-Trotskyists as early as spring 1973: it represents an offer made by petty-bourgeois working-class leaders to the bourgeoisie to resolve their crisis of leadership with the aid of a popular-front maneuver.

The bourgeoisie in its majority did not go for it, above all because the class struggle in France has not reached the stage where it would appear advantageous to the bourgeoisie to form governments with the CP, or to make them dependent on CP support as in 1936 and 1945.

In this presidential election the question is even clearer than in spring 1973. The transformations within the Union of the Left are characteristic of its nature. The role of the Communist Party has become more and more discreet; it is stepp-

2.

ing more and more into the background and even doing its best to minimize its role. Mitterrand is turning to the right, taking somewhat more distance from the CP. The Common Program hardly plays a role anymore. And the CP is very helpful in this: they give Mitterrand carte-blanche and display discretion. Marchais states that the government should be formed on the basis of equality for the three parties participating in the Union of the Left, that means, 6 to 7 ministerial posts each for the SP, CP, and Left Radicals (Le Monde, April 24, 1974, p. 5). Of course, Mitterrand's candidacy is formally independent from the Union of the Left, but unimaginable without it. The character of the Union of the Left is decisive in determining the character of Mitterrand's candidacy.

At the same time, the gentleman of the "Left" indefatigably proclaim that their venture brings only good things for French imperialism and deserves every assistance. Thus, Gaston Defferre, chairman of the Socialist fraction in the Assembly, stated with respect to the fears about accepting CP ministers in the government voiced by government minister Guichard: "It is not dangerous. Quite the contrary. It is insurance. After sixteen years of backward social policy, the presence of Communists in the government will be a guarantee for us. We will be able to avoid a certain number of difficulties with social unrest." (Le Monde, April 24, 1974, p. 5)

In this way, a certain measure of success was attained by the "saviours of the nation": the left Gaullists, the "Front Progressiste," are supporting Mitterrand even in the first round of the elections and are campaigning everywhere for the candidate of their choice with the Cross of Lorraine (Gaullist symbol). And Monsieur Marcel Jeanneney, a worthy De Gaulle minister, advises a vote for Chaban Delmas in the first round of elections and in the second...Mitterrand (Le Monde, May 2 1974, p. 4).

So, while they certainly have not yet succeeded in making a decisive breakthrough, they have won some ground. The Radical Socialist gentlemen and those of the Democratic Center stand ready on call, but still hesitate. Their hesitations reflect those of the bourgeoisie.

II. Rise of the class struggle with a Mitterrand victory?

Our French comrades have decided to call for supporting Mitterrand on the second round. In our opinion this is an unprincipled decision, which flies in the face of one of the fundamental programmatic bases of the Fourth International; namely, an uncompromising attitude toward popular-front betrayals. The decision to vote Mitterrand can be traced to pressure from the "left" milieu; the PSU and OCI/AJS are supporting Mitterrand even in the first round of the elections, Lutte Ouvrière in the second. Furthermore, the fear of (temporary) isolation from the masses is involved. But the decisive argument used by the French leadership to justify this step is that a victory by Mitterrand will without fail lead to a sharpening of the class struggle.

The inadequacy of this argument can be demonstrated on

3.

various levels. First, the tendency toward sharpening class struggles is a general one. It began under De Gaulle, continued and deepened under Pompidou, and will go further if the working class does not suffer a decisive defeat. The popular front is a sure means to lead the class into such a defeat. It must be shown that an election victory by Mitterrand will result in an immediate upsurge in the factories, in the universities, and on the streets. That can well be doubted. The opposite is more likely. The whole maneuver is in fact expressly organized for the purpose of diverting the mass struggles into parliamentary channels. That will not succeed in the long run, but can have limited success.

Second, the argument has no bearing on determining our position on the elections. It is simply not a criterion. Under certain circumstances, the assumption of power by a right-wing regime can lead to the sharpening of class struggles, as shown previously in England and elsewhere. That is for us no reason to call for the election of the Tories or the CDU [Christlich-Demokratische Union -- Christian Democratic Union, the main right-wing party in Germany]. With a somewhat more realistic evaluation, our French comrades -- according to this criterion -- should come out for Giscard d'Estaing. The CGT has, after all, threatened an offensive if he is elected.

Third, one simply can not disregard the negotiations now in progress. Mitterrand can already go knocking on doors with an offer from the trade unions "to maintain social peace" for his first six months in office. Isn't that some offer! Who else could now make that promise to the French bourgeoisie but Mitterrand?

Our comrades, however, are building their whole campaign on the opposite assumption. Comrade Krivine is already on television warning about a right-wing putsch, issuing an appeal to soldiers to turn against their reactionary officers and not march against the people...in case of an election victory by Mitterrand. The whole campaign is moving in an unfortunate direction. All the arguments lead to the conclusion that even in the first round one should vote not for Krivine, but for Mitterrand. It is wholly analogous to the campaigns of the DKP [Deutsche Kommunistische Partei -- German Communist Party-- the pro-Moscow West German organization], which suggest metaphorically: better vote SPD. Comrade Krivine begins his article in the May 4, 1974 Le Monde (p. 10) thusly: "To defeat the right, to get rid of the regime that has raged for 16 years -- that is the immediate stake for the workers in these elections....The workers will not give the representatives of the bosses a single vote, not a single vote for Giscard, the Plague, or Chaban, the Pox. And to defeat the candidate of the right in the second round, it is necessary to mass all working-class votes behind Mitterrand, provided in the meantime that he hasn't made an agreement with the bourgeoisie." The last qualification can only be understood as a bad joke after all that has gone before.

It is sad to have to say that the politics of our French organization can at best be characterized not as Trotskyism, but as POUMism. Trotsky's critique of POUMism is as relevant now as then.

III. The middle layers and the elections

It has become clear in the last years, particularly in France, that the general upsurge of workers' struggles is not isolated. The deterioration of the economic situation has also produced intensified struggles in the middle petty-bourgeois layers, that increasingly meet with greater economic problems. Their political conduct is one of the more interesting aspects of these elections, especially since the bourgeoisie finds itself in a leadership crisis.

In the face of this crisis of leadership, part of the Gaullist movement -- even if numerically not especially significant -- has called for the election of Mitterrand. The Democratic Center is split: a section led by Lecanuet is for replacing Gaullism with Giscard d'Estaing. The Servan-Schreiber Radical Socialists haven't officially issued an election recommendation.

We should add that the Left Radicals have supported the popular front for a long time.

In his election campaign, Mitterrand, as candidate of the popular front, has wooed the middle petty-bourgeois layers and the Radical Socialists to a very considerable extent. He has tried to lure them in by explaining that the class-collaborationist program of the Union of the Left is not binding, etc. It is hardly surprising that the PFC accepted this "tactic."

The renunciation of a separate program and independent struggle by the working class for its own goals had, of course, already led to the Common Program. The approval of Mitterrand's election tactics by the PFC only makes more clear the Stalinists' readiness at any time to betray the goals of the class in return for participation in the affairs of the bourgeois government. The concession is explained to the working class by referring to the necessity of establishing an alliance with the petty-bourgeoisie, etc.

In the struggle for class autonomy of the workers as against the class-collaborationist maneuver of the Union of the Left and Mitterrand's popular-front candidacy, a clear answer to the question of how an alliance with the petty-bourgeois layers is to be established is required.

The FCR's propaganda has largely ignored this topic. To be sure, without giving a satisfactory answer to this question, you can hardly weaken illusions in the popular front and further the resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership for the working class.

Of course, the FCR is right when in connection with an election victory by Mitterrand it points to the necessity to breach an eventual social pact; when it emphasizes that the class must struggle independently for its interests. But it ignores the decisive question and the "most obvious" argument of popular front politicians for their readiness to make concessions when, on the basis of the Chilean experience alone, it abruptly calls attention to the danger of a putsch and summons the soldiers, in this event, to resist. That comrade Krivine

5.

offers only such answers shows that the FCR has no ready answer for the workers on how to minimize the danger of a putsch. That would certainly be the first question to come up.

An election victory by Mitterrand clearly presupposes a turn toward the popular front by a significant section of the petty-bourgeoisie. The problem of every popular front (and Chile can be studied as a model) is that by virtue of its fundamentally bourgeois politics, it cannot solve the economic problems it faces, at least not in a period of general downturn in the imperialist economy.

If the economic downturn leads to a leadership crisis for the bourgeoisie, with a section of the petty-bourgeoisie turning toward the popular front, and to its victory, this is because a popular front suggests strength on the parliamentary level, and the petty bourgeoisie expects decisive solutions for its difficulties. To be sure, the popular front represents strength only on a parliamentary level, since it directly depends on tying the hands of its most militant section, the conscious revolutionary workers, with illusions.

Given an intact bourgeois state apparatus, decisive interventions in the economic structure are not only not on the agenda, but also impossible. Parliamentary cretinism will thus inevitably lead the petty-bourgeois middle layers to look around for an alternative -- under certain conditions, a fascist movement. Similarly, in view of economic difficulties and a diminishing mass base for the popular front, the danger of a putsch also increases.

But such a danger can be avoided -- if starting today the workers say "no" to concessions; if they show their full strength in struggle and unequivocally reject their petty-bourgeois leadership in the elections; if they offer the petty-bourgeois layers genuine action alliances, making an energetic struggle against the bourgeoisie possible.

IV. The political line of the FCR

Unfortunately, that is not the political line of the FCR. The question of establishing an alliance with the petty-bourgeois layers -- a cardinal question for every class-conscious worker concerned with making his class interests prevail -- is not raised, or is only treated insufficiently. Instead of pointing out how this problem is bound up in content with a totally independent class struggle, and thus unequivocally (!) taking a stand against popular front politics, their readiness to support Mitterrand confuses the issue. Instead of emphasizing that appeasement politics, which the popular front politicians pursue in the class struggle, make a putsch more possible and accordingly deserve no support, they support the popular front, although critically.

Briefly stated, we do not believe support to class-collaborationist maneuvers of petty-bourgeois working-class leaders is wrong simply on the grounds of abstract principle. A tactic must stop at the class line -- any other conduct is opportunist! And opportunism is not corrected by seeking to prop it up with

an extremely subjective analysis, in which one maintains that the victory of a popular front candidate would have a positive effect on working-class struggles. What is wrong in this reasoning?

We have mentioned that popular front maneuvers can only be realized in specific situations of capitalist downturn -- whenever the bourgeoisie, in the face of an upsurge of mass struggles, finds itself in an acute leadership crisis, and the petty-bourgeois working-class leaders offer the bourgeoisie a bloc to contain these struggles within the framework of the parliamentary system. The objective basis of this phenomena is the sharpening of the contradictions of the capitalist system! Whether the betrayal of working-class struggles by the workers' organizations supporting the popular front yields success depends on the depth of the objective crisis (!). "Success" in this case means: acceptance of restrictions by the workers and no turn toward a revolutionary alternative.

If the Trotskyists pursue the wrong political line, if they offer no clear political alternative to popular front politics and its false perspectives, if there is a persistent crisis and a series of struggles, that is, if the containment power of the popular front reveals itself as insufficient, then a putsch threatens. To place this in the forefront of election propaganda, now (!), as is the case, shows what kind of political evaluation the FCR has of itself....But in any case, it is ridiculous to speak of the treachery and containment measures of the popular front politicians as historically progressive. Working-class illusions in treacherous leaderships can have no progressive function. In a crisis situation they can only hinder the development of struggles. In contrast, what should the position of Trotskyists look like in the second round?

In the presidential election, in contrast to the 1973 legislative elections, programs in the form of individuals are up for elections, rather than parties. The possibility of calling for a vote for only the CP and SP, instead of the Union of the Left, therefore does not exist. It is only a choice between two essentially bourgeois candidates, between Giscard, the right-wing Plague, and Mitterrand, the popular front Pox. So the only possibility that remains is to call for abstention. Under certain conditions a temporary isolation from the masses has to be accepted.

We should maintain a principled position in the present period, carry on uncompromising agitation in opposition to the popular front swindle, point out the fact that Mitterrand's candidacy is not only a betrayal of the historical interests of the class, but even of its immediate interests (e.g., the trade-union social pact). Then we would be in the best position to face the coming period with its unavoidable disappointments and disillusionment.

V. The question of the Socialist Party

The Compass tendency has proved to us once again that political mistakes must be promptly corrected or they will deepen. After further confusion about the nature of the non-German Social Democrats, the die is now cast once again and another

piece of Trotskyist analysis is lost: the Socialist Party of France is an ordinary bourgeois party.

In the Compass steering committee's April 27, 1974, position paper on the French presidential election, the reasoning is as follows: The SP has also gone through a transformation into a "people's party" only it was not as successful as the SPD. The "new" SP under Mitterrand has merely taken a tactical turn. It is not a working-class party, since it is only based on peripheral (?) sections of the working class (public sector, service sector, white-collar sector, "climbers" in the wage hierarchy, class-politically backward sectors (!), as well as the main sectors of the petty bourgeoisie. It is not based on the organized working-class movement, and its electoral followers want to preserve the capitalist system, while the electoral followers of the PCF want to overthrow the capitalist system.

What is striking here, first of all, is the method of analysis. While in the case of the SPD, the basis of argumentation was that the SPD's control over the trade unions plays no role in determining its political nature; here in the case of the SPF, it is considered important that the SPF's trade union federation, force Ouvrière, has degenerated, and its base in the other trade unions is slight. The transformation into a people's party under Gaston Defferre has indeed "succeeded," but was not "successful." Hence: operation successful, patient dead. But the patient, conforming to the motto "You only live twice," rises up again: as bourgeois. And after that follows the next operation: Operation Mitterrand.

Let's get serious again: the "new" SP under Mitterrand does not differ in political nature from the old SP, the SP under Gaston Defferre, nor the SP under Leon Blum. During the 1936 popular front there was a shifting of rank and file supporters from the SP to the CP; the 1973 popular front will fairly certainly have the opposite shift.

But we don't want to concentrate here on the question of the SP in too great detail, since the characterization by the Compass comrades is too sketchy and doesn't offer enough points of departure for a thorough critique. We will say only this: in no way do they try to point out where the politics and program of today's Socialist Party differ from those of the earlier SP, something they at least tried in the case of the SPD. It isn't indicated in what respect the class base has changed. (Is it in the shifting from "central" sectors of the working class to "peripheral"? Not enough "real" workers in blue overalls?) The argument is used that the SP does not base itself on the organized workers' movement. That is not accurate. Of course, its trade union federation, F.O., is actually fairly unimportant, but it is currently in the process of procuring a larger base in the CFDT. By the way, one more thing on juggling with criteria: in the SPD discussion this criterion was always played down with a reference to Peronism (here not comparable), but now in the case of the SP this must be reckoned with. And lastly: the Union of the Left is "still not a popular front" (see p. 3 of the Compass position paper), but the SP is a bour-

8.

geois party? One must admit that with this "innovation" the confusion has grown considerably.

The French comrades present a similar contradiction. Their congress in 1972, as is well known, refused in its majority to characterize the SP as a bourgeois working-class party. This makes support of the popular front by the French comrades even more unprincipled.

We will take up this problem again in connection with the SPD in the discussion on the Social Democracy.

VI. Would support of Piaget's candidacy have been the correct response to the current situation in France?

The question of whether, in the current presidential elections in France, it would have been correct to forgo an FCR candidate and support instead the running of a working-class candidate who represents independent working class action, we consider a tactical problem, which has to be decided on the basis of the concrete situation.

In principle, there is nothing to be said against such a tactical course, provided such a candidacy:

a) Represents an attempt to unite all forces that are decisively opposed to every form of class collaboration and support class independence behind such a candidate.

b) The candidate as an individual symbolizes independent working class action, e.g., the leader of a significant strike.

c) Provided the support for such a candidate does not hinder our comrades from leading a campaign with independent content, which serves to present and explain to the masses the revolutionary Marxist program.

We reject in principle any eventual programmatic blocs. They are not within the tradition of the Trotskyist movement.

Such a candidate, as a representative of the independence of the working class, could have been counterposed to the popular front candidate Mitterrand.

Such a proposal would also be justified as a maneuver to win over from those organizations supporting the popular front their members who are against this policy, be it in the first or second round of elections (e.g., the PSU).

The split in the PSU shows that such a maneuver, based on the above premises, would have been thoroughly justified.

However, such a proposal loses all sense and purpose if one takes an opportunist attitude vis-a-vis the popular front, as is the case with the FCR.

We have the impression that the considerations we have outlined did not underlie the FCR's proposal for a united campaign behind Piaget. The FCR proposal was based neither on a correct

9.

assessment of the popular front maneuver, nor on a thorough analysis of the internal situations in the left organizations. Rather it appears that the comrades of the FCR have simply enthusiastically adopted the proposal of the Maoist newspaper Libération. This, and the fact that the FCR wanted to present Piaget so that he would be known as the united candidate of the "revolutionary left" (?), suggests that in supporting the Piaget candidacy, the FCR let itself be guided not by the objective needs of the class struggle, but rather by the "needs" of the "new mass vanguard" (?) (see communique in Rouge from April 5, 1974).

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