Back from the Brink: French Communism (*Parti Communiste Français*) Re-orientates

The French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français*; PCF) survived the crisis of 1989 and by 1999 had consolidated a stable level of support, based on its continuity as a Marxist party based on the working class. It played a major role in the protests against Maastricht in the mid-1990s and made a considerable contribution to forging the left alliance which defeated the right in the French general elections of 1997, participating – as a result – in the ‘plural left’ government of Lionel Jospin until 2002. It also contributed to building new left cooperation on a Europe-wide basis – a crucial element for the left in the massively destabilising post-1989 period. However, it faced catastrophic electoral collapse in 2002 and again in 2007, which has led to contentious internal restructuring and analysis and a rejection of the strategy which led it to remain in the Jospin government after it had taken a neo-liberal turn. In 2009, the PCF entered into the *Front de Gauche* – with the new *Parti de Gauche* (PG) – to contest the European elections, meeting with modest success.

Having survived the collapse of the Soviet Union under the continuing leadership of Georges Marchais, the PCF continued, in the early 1990s, to emphasise its communist identity while allowing some relaxation of traditional party structures and statutes. At its celebration of the 1917 Russian Revolution in 1991, ‘the party declared Leninism “un ideal toujours moderne”.’ Performing reasonably in the regional elections in March 1992 – achieving 8% of the vote – the party was able to demonstrate that it had survived the supposed terminal crisis of communism. But the national referendum on the Maastricht Treaty in September 1992 presented the PCF with the...
opportunity to do better than just survive – it was able to make a significant political comeback. The Maastricht Treaty set out a strictly monetarist framework for economic and monetary union of Europe, establishing strict limits on the levels of total public debt and government budget deficits. The achievement of these, at 60% of GDP and 3% of GDP, respectively, would require major public spending cuts in most EU states.

The potential of the anti-Maastricht campaign to reach broadly across French society was enormous. With a committed and well-organised membership – in the region of 134,000 – popular campaigning was something that enabled the PCF to draw on its strengths. The party turned with enthusiasm to exposing the neoliberal nature of the Maastricht Treaty and opposing the social and economic hardship that would inevitably follow. The campaign also enabled the PCF to clarify its position in post-1989 French politics: to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of class-based politics and show the clear difference between the politics of the Parti Socialiste (PS) – the social democratic party which had, under the leadership of François Mitterrand, overtaken the PCF in the 1970s – and that of the PCF. In the event, the referendum was narrowly lost, but it was a turning point for the PCF. It had renewed its militant image, and demonstrated – through its key role in such an important struggle – that it had continuing relevance within French society.

The verdict of the voters on the PS and its support for Maastricht was harsh, but it gave new opportunities to the PCF to advance its ‘strategic aim of “re-balancing” the French left’. In the legislative elections of March 1993, the PS vote collapsed from 36% in 1988 to 19% in 1993. The PCF vote, however, was consolidated at over 9%, indicating an endorsement of the party’s attempts to build a new left space, working more widely with other left and progressive organisations than had often been the case. The results restored the PCF to a competitive position which it had not occupied for many years. Its electoral platform in 1993 included its traditional demands, such as greater taxation on speculation and capital export, a higher minimum wage and a 35-hour week. But it also included a rejection of any regressive reform of the nationality laws and urged the extension of immigrants’ voting rights. Of particular significance was the changed approach to the electoral process, outlined by Marchais. According to Stephen Hopkins,