

French Socialist Party remains deeply divided following Reims congress

Francis Dubois

18 November 2008

The congress of the French Socialist Party, held November 14-16 in the eastern French town of Reims—and attended by about 4,000 people, including 631 delegates, 860 members and around 700 journalists—ended in a state of open division.

Despite appeals from and pressure by leaders of the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS), the congress failed to win a majority for a “synthesis” of the four main motions, which had been put to the congress following a previous meeting of the membership on November 6.

The election of the party leader will now take place in a secret ballot of all the members on November 20. This is the first time since the Rennes congress in 1990 that a PS congress has ended without a majority. At its last congress, held in November 2005 in Le Mans, the party managed to create a last-minute “synthesis.” The party leadership was then split mainly over the question of the European constitution, with a majority supporting the treaty. The victory for opponents of the constitution in the French popular referendum held the same year had led to a severe crisis in the organisation.

This year, on the night of November 15, the hundred or so leaders of the party and their supporters gathered in the “Resolutions Commission” could only register the failure of any compromise that could have led to a last-minute unity. In a calculated move, Ségolène Royal, the PS presidential candidate in the 2007 election, slammed the door on the commission. Eventually only European deputy Benoit Hamon and the mayor of Lille, Martine Aubry, maintained their candidacy.

On Sunday morning Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris, explained that he didn’t want to “add to the disunity” and withdrew from the contest. At the end of the proceedings, outgoing party secretary Francois Hollande summed up the situation with the words: “I take note of the fact that there was no majority today in the Socialist Party, it is a difficult moment.”

The November 20 vote will determine who is to be the next first secretary of the Socialist Party. If no candidate achieves an absolute majority the two best placed will contend in another vote the next day. The candidate with the largest number of votes will be the next party leader. The election of the party leadership is seen as an early nomination for the party’s presidential candidate in 2012. Royal has an apparent advantage over her rivals since she heads the list with most votes (29 percent).

The Socialist Party went into the congress very divided. The four motions presented by Ségolène Royal, Bertrand Delanoë, Martine Aubry, and Benoit Hamon, who represents the so-called left wing of the party, each received between a third (Royal) and a fifth (Hamon)

of the votes, with none of them obtaining a majority. An ecological and “utopian” motion received only marginal support. None of these factions represent any sort of opposition to capitalism.

As the factions that had crystallised around the motions battled it out—many of them having a transient character and serving as umbrellas for various wings and conflicting interests—the atmosphere at the congress became heated. It oscillated between booing and rapturous applause as each faction tried, in the name of “unity,” to outsmart, intimidate or twist the arm of the other.

Royal, whose entrance into the congress Friday was accompanied by a widely reported bustle, had declared her bid for leadership before its start, trying to impose her “unity” onto her three rivals. There was then much talk of a majority gathering around an “anti-Royal front,” composed of Aubry, Delanoë and Hamon. This was seen by many delegates as the only way to achieve some sort of majority.

As was stressed in the media and by the Socialist Party leaders themselves, there were no basic or irreconcilable differences between the various motions. This was stressed as well by those moving the motions at the congress, leaving the observer to wonder about the reasons behind the venomous and palpable antagonisms. Most journalists, as well as many delegates fearing for the unity of the PS, described the proceedings as an unfortunate and unnecessary “battle of egos.”

While there are no differences amongst the various social democratic factions about the necessity of defending capitalism, and preventing the working class from challenging it politically, there are disagreements about the best way to achieve such objectives. The political future of the PS, and the substantial material interests connected to elected and non-elected posts, depends on the party’s ability to fulfil this function. The PS has been an essential prop of French capitalist politics since the early 1970s.

There were extensive reports on the congress and it made the front pages of all French newspapers for three days. It is foreseeable that under conditions of sharpening economic and political crisis, and a political radicalisation of the working class, the French bourgeoisie will again need the social democrats in government.

Since its defeat in the presidential election in April 2002, the Socialist Party had been in open crisis. Lionel Jospin, the sitting PS prime minister, received fewer votes than fascist candidate Jean Marie Le Pen. Jospin’s humiliation marked the end of the “plural left,” a PS-led coalition with the Communist Party and the Greens. Since then, this thoroughly bourgeois party has moved rapidly to the right.

After the 2007 defeat in the presidential election, a substantial number of its leaders either openly joined the Sarkozy government, or collaborated in one of its “commissions,” e.g., former minister of

education Jack Lang (who supports Aubry), and former prime minister Michel Rocard (who supported Delanoë), who were both present at the congress. This open collaboration with the current government was not even mentioned, let alone debated, during the congress.

An expression of the present disarray of this party is the fact that only 126,000 members (55.38 percent) voted on the motions on November 6.

The French Socialist Party now finds itself torn between Sarkozy's UMP (which, since the outbreak of the financial crisis, has swung towards a course of state intervention destined to defend the interests of French finance capital against its rivals) and the newly formed Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) of the Pabloites, which aims to establish a new, more "radical" base for the political "left" and the trade union bureaucracy. Until now this role had been played by the Socialist Party and its closest ally, the Communist Party.

A reaction to this situation was the split just before the congress of a faction led by PS senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Mélenchon has proposed immediate collaboration with the NPA in the upcoming European election.

The various motions put to a vote before the congress do indicate some tactical differences. These are differences over alliances with other bourgeois parties, in particular over a coalition at the national level with the Modem (Democratic Movement) of Francois Bayrou, and the attitude towards other parties, i.e., alliances with the Stalinist Communist Party, and the pseudo Trotskyist Lutte Ouvrière.

Such alliances have taken place in various areas at the last local elections and have been supported by all camps. Some, like Delanoë and Aubry, advocate a traditional alliance with the Stalinists and the union bureaucracy; others, such as Royal, favour an alliance with liberal politician Bayrou. Others, like Hamon, leave the door open for an alliance of the entire left (including the NPA).

There are also differences over Europe and the role of the European Union, as well as the issue of how to respond to the financial and economic crisis. Most of the motions advocate a stronger regulation of the financial markets. For their own reasons, the Socialist parliamentary group abstained in the vote on the government's rescue package. All tendencies now propose some degree of reform of the capitalist system. These proposals are no different from what is being currently considered and debated in the conservative UMP or Modem.

However, the main point of friction at the congress was that of the future course of the party epitomized in the move by Royal to become party leader, and the hostile but divided reaction of the other tendencies. Under the slogans of "more democracy" and a "renewal of the party," Royal is campaigning to turn the Socialist Party into a populist organisation centred around her individually. In other words, she seeks to build an election machine along the lines of the Democratic Party in the United States, based on supporters mobilised at big meetings, instead of a party based on an organisational structure such as the French Socialist Party. Her line is meeting strong resistance from a substantial number of those who have led the party over the last three decades.

Royal and her faction have pursued this line since the presidential election campaign in 2007. Her camp used the existing disunity amongst the PS leadership to push through her candidacy.

In her speech, which consisted of a mixture of demagogy and pressure on the other factions, she stressed the need to allow the grass roots of the party and, above all, the French people to decide. She spoke of the "opening of the party to the masses" and of the

"transformation of our party into a big popular party." One of the most prominent proposals, which also caused frantic applause from sections of the floor, was to put the question of alliances to a direct vote of the "militants" and to open up the party to anybody willing to pay the reduced membership fee of 20 euros.

Royal stressed that a "struggle by all republicans" in France was needed against Sarkozy. Ironically, she asked the other factions if they were not tempted by "another popular front." She demagogically pressed the congress to unite behind her, saying, "During the time we waste in pathetic fights, misery is spreading and thriving."

Her stance met with much opposition from other sections of the Socialist Party, which fear that this line will lead to a dissolving of the apparatus and alienate any remaining support from working class voters. The forces behind Aubry and also Hamon oppose this line. For these forces this would mean the end of the Socialist Party as it has existed since 1971.

There is the genuine fear among these sections, close to the trade union bureaucracy, that Royal's path will jeopardise their chances of maintaining some sort of influence in the working class and therefore prevent the party from playing the role it does best: posing as a left alternative to the traditional bourgeois parties in order to suffocate the militancy of the French working class.

There was concern in the media and amongst delegates that the failure to come to an agreement at the Reims congress would lead to an irreversible fracturing of the party. Some considered the break-up of the Socialist Party as a distinct possibility in the near future.

Despite the drama, one striking thing about this congress was that there could be no open discussion of political issues between the various feuding factions. The only function of the coded wording of the speeches was to serve the fierce horse trading and jockeying for positions. Not a single important political or social question was raised or debated during the two days of the congress.

Everything was done to prevent the real politics of the Socialist Party coming to light, for any open political discussion would have quickly exposed the utterly right-wing character of this organisation.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact