

## FRANCE

## Looking beyond dancing in the streets

By Diana Johnstone

PARIS

**F**RENCH LABOR IS WAKING UP to its change in fortune with a caution worthy of Lech Walesa. That is, there is a strong pervading sense that demanding too much too fast could wreck an historic opportunity for lasting social change.

The election of Socialist Francois Mitterand as president of the French republic reverses the relationship of forces within the labor-management-government bargaining trio that decides many social questions at the national level.

"We now belong to the presidential majority," said Communist Georges Seguy, secretary general of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), in a striking phrase deliberately meant to drive home to militants that they are now in a completely new situation. The CGT has ground to a halt as it prepares to shift from its recent policy of nearly constant (if superficial and largely fruitless) agitation, of warning strikes and protest marches, to a new period of negotiations presided over by a friendly government.

The rival French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) is adjusting with greater ease to the new situation, since it had already shifted a couple of years ago to emphasis on negotiations, a policy frustrated by the right-wing government's firm alliance with the *patronat* (management). CFDT leaders feel their long careful study of the technicalities of a whole range of problems is at last about to pay off, and they immediately spelled out a number of short, medium and long-range goals, starting with an increase in the minimum wage but extending to qualitative social measures such as easier access to abortion.

CFDT leaders were aglow with what secretary general Edmond Maire described as a "profound and serene joy." But Maire cautioned that while the election had succeeded in "breaking up the government-*patronat* couple," the victory was severely limited by the ongoing strength of capitalist management, "especially in a system that is open to the world and should remain so."

The CFDT called for gradual reduction of the work week to 35 hours with no loss of wages and adoption of a fifth week of paid annual leave over the next five years, combined with fiscal measures to help small and medium businesses meet the higher cost of labor so that more and not fewer jobs result. The CFDT also called for a 30 percent increase in the real purchasing power of the minimum wage spread over the next three years, combined with efforts to prevent the pay raises at the bottom from pushing the whole wage mass upwards.

In short, the CFDT is acutely aware of the dangers of inflation that could "put France at the mercy of the IMF or the Bundesbank." "An economic and monetary debacle after an unchecked distribution of income would be followed by political defeat," Maire warned, "and the right would come back to power for another generation."

The CGT wants to move faster in raising the minimum wage to 3,500 francs per month (the franc has fluctuated in recent months from 4 to 5.5 to the dollar; most French employees are paid a 13th month's salary in December, which usually covers annual income tax). CGT number two leader Henri Krasucki said it was also urgent to develop a new industrial policy. But Seguy added that the CGT was making "no take it or leave it proposals" and was ready to negotiate patiently for "durable change."

Both the CGT and the CFDT announced that membership recruitment, after a long slump, has picked up briskly. Rivalry between the two labor organizations may be held in check by the undeniable popular desire for left unity.

Navigation into the invisible future is influenced by memories of past shipwrecks, and the French left today does not want to repeat the mistakes of the 1936 Popular Front, whose ephemeral success was soon followed by the revenge of the right at Vichy, thanks to Hitler's invasion. Exactly 45 years ago, the electoral victory of the left parties brought Socialist Leon Blum to office as prime minister. The victory set off a vast wave of strikes that caught everyone by surprise. By the end of May, some two million workers were on strike, occupying 9,000 factories. "Everything is possible!" left-wing Socialist Marceau Pivert wrote in his paper *Le Populaire*, and from his exile in Norway Trotsky announced that "The French revolution has begun." This was definitely not the opinion of French Communist Party (PCF) leader

**In 1936 the slogan was "Everything is possible." This time the unions are urging caution.**

alizations.

Maire said that as in 1936 and 1945, the arrival of the left in power should be marked by a major institutionalized advance for labor, and proposed that this should be a "genuine active role" for the union local within each company. Perhaps as a start, he suggested that workers' organizations should keep an anti-inflationary eye on pricing practices of the companies they work for at a time when private capital may deliberately feed inflation to discredit the left. This institutional advance would not cost anything, and would help lay the ground for the CFDT's long-range goals of democratic economic planning and decentralization. Other major CFDT objectives include a public health system based on prevention, new relations with the third world and a law to assure sexual equality in all jobs.

**A new pragmatism.**

In 1981 the mood of the workers does not at all seem likely to produce a 1936-style social explosion, nor is there a vigorous revolutionary far left to egg them on. In the past few years, the important Trotskyist strain in the French far left seems to have rapidly been losing faith in its traditional strategy of the general strike, without finding any other. The current

ture against rising fascism. The Communists feared that their participation in government would unduly alarm the British, leading Britain into closer relations with the fascist powers.

Today, the PCF wants to take part in the government, as it did after World War II, and appears ready to make an honest effort to help the left succeed. But it is probable that the PCF has serious doubts about Mitterand's chances of success, based on its own economic analysis.

The vast majority of thoughtful people on the left today are far too sobered by the magnitude of the tasks ahead to be looking for a chance to snipe at the Socialists for "selling out" or "betraying socialism." In 1936 the left was full of lyric enthusiasm and abysmally ignorant of economics. Today, the left has an incomparably greater grasp of economic problems, but the economic problems themselves are also incomparably more complex.

For one thing, Mitterand needs to remodel France's productive apparatus to favor industries producing for the domestic market—the very industries that have been crumbling under the attacks of the outgoing government, whose policies favored export industries with the aim of inserting France firmly into



George Seguy, who heads the General Confederation of Labor, says the CGT is ready to negotiate.

Maurice Thorez, who on this occasion uttered his famous phrase: "It is necessary to know how to end a strike...Everything is not possible."

The strikes, which began spontaneously, were encouraged by groups of Trotskyists, anarchists, left Socialists and a small PCF dissident group, some at least hoping that the general strike would culminate in revolution. French workers never started trying to run the factories, as workers in Northern Italy had done in the 1920 strikes. But it took a while to get everyone back to work, even after union leaders, management and the government signed the Matignon Accord, a major milestone in French labor history that established the 40-hour work week and paid annual leave. But the wage increases won in 1936 were wiped out by inflation within a year.

The 1936 Popular Front gains were renewed in 1945, another milestone year, by the post-war coalition government including Communist ministers that also enacted a major progressive reform of the social security health coverage program as well as the first major nation-

heirs of the anarchist tradition have serious doubts about the revolutionary role of the industrialized working class and are busily absorbed in study of how new technologies may affect social relations. Oddly enough, the working-class movement seems on the whole to have been inoculated against "more revolutionary than thou" agitation by the PCF and CGT's recent parody of ultra-left sectarianism in their vain attempt to outbid the Socialists. Its own criticism of the PCF has served as a sort of mirror for the far left. Prior to the 1978 legislative elections, there was talk of the possibility of *debordement*—of an "overflowing" movement like the 1936 strikes that would overwhelm governing left parties and shove them radically leftward. In 1981, the word seems to have vanished from the political lexicon.

In 1936, the PCF turned down an invitation to take part in Blum's cabinet, preferring to support the Popular Front government in parliament while remaining outside. At that time, unity of all democratic forces was conceived by the Third International as a strictly defensive pos-

the world market. And indeed France is far more dependent on fluctuations in the world market than it has even been, and far more vulnerable to international moves of capital. Unless Mitterand succeeds in improving the competitiveness of French consumer industries, the greater purchasing power to be granted to low-income groups will only go to increase imports, inflation and the commercial deficit.

At the same time, Mitterand must deal with the social shock of technological innovation, which is rapidly reducing demand for hourly manpower. It may well be that the only way to solve these problems involves creation of new relationships with the third world—but this will entail unpredictably dangerous conflicts with an American administration embarked on an aggressive campaign to control third world resources regardless of social cost. Still dazed by abrupt emergence from a long wilderness, the French left has scarcely begun to measure the enormity of the historic challenge and opportunity facing Francois Mitterand.

# LETTERS

*IN THESE TIMES* is an independent newspaper committed to democratic pluralism and to helping build a popular movement for socialism in the United States. Our pages are open to a wide range of views on the left, both socialist and non-socialist. Except for editorial statements appearing on the editorial page, opinions express in columns and in feature or news stories are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the editors. We welcome comments and opinion pieces from our readers.

## TOTALITY

AS A REGULAR READER OF YOUR PUBLICATION, I have seldom, if ever, found myself in agreement with your positions on the issues. However, I have respected your publication for seeking to avoid factual inaccuracies.

I was therefore surprised to see in your article, "Reagan's legal aid vendetta," by Bill Blum and Gina Lobaco (*ITT*, April 22), a number of totally false statements.

The authors assert with respect to Legal Services, "Phillips has inaccurately characterized legal services as defending sodomites and transsexuals, organizing prison unions, 'employing avowed Marxists, like Staughton Lynd,' and 'lobbying for new laws that will further socialize America.'" Please indicate to me which part of that statement is untrue. I have extensive files supporting every statement which I have made concerning Legal Services.

The article goes on to say, also inaccurately, that "LSC attorneys are now strictly prohibited from representing clients on issues involving unionization, abortion or integration; and the 1978 Moorhead Amendment to the Legal Services Act forbids lobbying by LSC employees on any pending legislation."

With respect to lobbying, to touch on merely one of these inaccuracies, the Legal Services Corporation Act permits lobbying, either at the request of a member of Congress, or in behalf of a client. Inasmuch as Legal Services attorneys represent organizations, as well as individuals, and because they are not barred from seeking out clients, it is relatively easy for them to lobby.

—Howard Phillips

National Director, The Conservative Caucus

*Editor's note: (1) No part of the statement is completely untrue, yet it is inaccurate to characterize the Legal Services Corporation as Phillips does, both because the activities that he implies are LSC's major work are actually a small*

*part of it and because it is not exactly correct to equate "organizing prison unions" with representing those who are attempting to do so (and then only at the discretion of the warden—Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners Union, Inc.). And, of course, it is a matter of opinion as to whether or not laws for which LSC clients may have lobbied would "further socialize America."*

*(2) On the second point, LSC lawyers are themselves of two minds. The Moorhead Amendment, which was first passed in 1978 and has been attached to every LSC appropriations bill thereafter, states that "No part of the appropriation shall be used for publicity or propaganda purposes designed to support or defeat legislation pending before Congress or any State legislature." Thus the amendment effectively proscribes lobbying efforts—unless there is a client involved. This is true of all federally mandated organizations.*

## NOW HE'S GOVERNING

WHEN A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN is over and a candidate wins the election, I try to make it a habit of comparing the winner's campaign platform with their governmental performance. Before me is a two-page advertisement that appeared in the *U.S. News & World Report* on Nov. 3, 1980, paid for and authorized by the Reagan/Bush Committee. The heading of the ad is entitled "Before you vote..."

In President Ronald Reagan's platform plank "Peace is the Key," is this statement: "The establishment of much closer ties with our allies, and a system of much more frequent communication with our adversaries. There must always be a readiness to talk, to plan, to negotiate, to work non-stop for the world's greatest cause: the cause of peace." My question for President Reagan: Why isn't the above plank being used in his foreign policy with the Soviet Union?

A while back President Leonid Brezhnev offered to President Ronald Reagan

an opportunity to talk together. Reagan refused, saying that he first had to meet with his allies—why? There is no need or reason to converse with other national leaders before sitting down with the president of the Soviet Union. I believe Reagan is contradicting his election mandate.

Reagan's campaign promise speaks of working non-stop for the cause of peace, it doesn't speak of Western nations in a circular bunch. The U.S. is one of the two "superpowers" and we, being a "world power" must have the courage intelligently, peacefully to face our so-called enemy eye-to-eye. Where is Reagan's readiness to talk of peace?

—James G. Borden  
Onset, Mass.

—Bruce C. Allen  
Democrats for Change  
Cleveland, Ohio

## A NATURAL

I'M SORRY TO BE LATE WITH THIS check. Your reminding letter stated you hoped I'm "satisfied with" what I've been reading in your fine paper.

I'm more than "satisfied," I'm thrilled to have had the opportunity to read "a socialist newspaper"—the first I've ever seen. I've thought of myself for so long as a very disgruntled and thoroughly disgusted Democrat. But 22 issues of *In These Times* have taught me that I am just a naturally-born socialist, as I drank in every word in every issue—with underlining and expressions of agreement written in.

I wish I could send enough money to put this wonderful weekly publication in every home in this nation! This country calls itself "a nation under God," a truly "Christian Nation," but doesn't realize that true Christianity is a truly social religion; and that a nation under God teaches and keeps God's Ten Commandments for daily living.

—K.G.  
Little Rock, Ark.

## PLUS ONE

ARTHUR D. KAHN IS ABSOLUTELY right (*ITT*, May 6). The Hitlerian holocaust is not a unique phenomenon in the history of the Jews, and he cited some instances to prove it. He did not go back far enough, however. Go back over 3,000 years and you see Joshua going into Canaan and slaying every man, woman, child, beast and fowl, leaving nothing alive. Pretty good holocaust, wouldn't you say? And more recently, Menahem Begin, as head of Irgun, bombed the King David Hotel while it was full of old people, women and children. So, holocaust is old and it is new.

As for anti-Semitism, if Koestler (Thirteenth Tribe) is right, and there is a plethora of evidence, then the bulk of European and American Jews are not the Semitic seed of Abraham at all but are the descendants of the Turkic people of Central Asian Kahazar. The term anti-Semitic then loses any literal meaning.

Finally, don't be too put out that Kahn implied that you are a gentile. They're not all that bad, really.

—Ted Means  
New Orleans

*Editor's note: I know, some of my best friends are gentiles.*

## BLUEPRINTS

THERE MAY BE LOTS WRONG WITH Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne, but I hardly think her move to the Cabrini-Green housing project is part of it. David Moberg's article (*ITT*, April 22) seemed a petulant complaint that Byrne had accomplished what the left so often fails to accomplish: to take bold actions that capture the popular imagination.

The headline was "Jane Byrne Plays to the Crowd." Much of the opening paragraphs dealt with Mayor Byrne's supposed personality problems. All of this reminded me of the typical left treatment of Cleveland's former mayor, Dennis Kucinich. He, like Byrne,

was capable of taking imaginative and striking action. Rather than learn from this, the left seemed jealous of his ability to reach the people.

Rather than carp at Byrne's action, it would be appropriate to applaud and learn from it. The left has lots of programs, and lots of blueprints for the reconstruction of society, but lacks the ability to "play to the crowd." The problem is that the left too often distrusts the crowd, and especially distrusts white working people, for whom Mayor Byrne apparently has an appeal. It seems that it drove you really wild that she did something that appealed to both black and white people.

*David Moberg replies: The problem is not Byrne's boldness, but the substance of her actions and her administration's incoherence. The Cabrini-Green move was a mixed bag, as I indicated, like so much of what she does. But it was one of her better efforts. True, blueprints are not enough, but neither is a flair for publicity—especially when there are no blueprints.*

## BLACK CAUCUS

I APPRECIATE THE ARTICLE ON THE Congressional Black Caucus by John Judis (*ITT*, April 22). I feel akin to the views expressed by this group and lament those Democrats who have "caved in."

In my opinion, this core of people represents the stock of leadership in the wake of the party's dissolution last November and the current rush to the right.

*In These Times* should take it up to regularly voice this front so as to push it towards the recognition and support it deserves.

—Stan White  
San Francisco

## A GOOD RECIPE

I AM MOST SATISFIED WITH YOUR weekly paper. Nowadays, for recipes, assorted gibberish and the funnies, I read my daily newspaper. For truth, accurate reporting and in-depth analysis, I read *In These Times*.

—Greg Bacon  
Clark, Mo.

## WHITE COLLAR HOOD

ROBIN HOOD WAS RIGHT! AND SO WAS Eric J. Hobsbawn (*ITT*, April 22).

"Robin Hood...still means something in today's world..." says Hobsbawn. The fact that these closing words of his are true, at least for myself, are worth repeating.

Upon my realizations that time is theft in a 'time-means-money' capitalist society and that I (as one merry man) was borrowing (read stealing) time not to mention materials, copying costs, postage, etc., (as a housing activist working on the payroll of a private-for-profit management corporation), I turned directly to *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* in answer to questions of mine concerning the banditry of another merry man.

Of course, it was only my exaggerated understanding of what I was doing that led me to Robin Hood. My trivial experience is noteworthy today as other champions of economic and social justice may be finding themselves working for private corporations, while still making their contribution to social change causes.

Thank you *In These Times*. Thank you Mr. Hobsbawn. And thank you Robin Hoods.

—Jonathan Goldhill  
San Francisco

*Editor's note: Please try to keep letters less than 250 words long. Otherwise we may have to make drastic cuts, which may change what you want to say. Also, if possible, please type and double-space letters—or at least write clearly and with wide margins.*

## IN THESE TIMES

*In These Times* definitely fills a need, an important one, and does so successfully. I've found the foreign commentary and coverage particularly impressive and valuable.

Noam Chomsky



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