



France has moved dramatically to the left. Over two decades of rightwing rule has been brought to an end. The Left government provides new possibilities for the trade unions.

## Interview with Georges Seguy

Interview conducted by Jeff Apter

*In France only about 23% of the workforce is organised in unions — about half the number in Britain. There are six recognised TUCs. Apart from the 600,000-strong teachers' umbrella organisation (FEN) and the managers' 300,000-strong CGC, there are 4 other bodies organising all kinds of workers. The 150,000-strong CFTC is close to the Catholic Church, and the 500,000-member FO was created by the Americans in the cold war as a split from the CGT. It is strongly anti communist. The two biggest are the 1 million-strong CFDT, which has recently moved to a more moderate position, and the CGT with a membership of 2 million. A former railway worker, Georges Seguy was sent to Auschwitz at the age of 16 for his resistance work. He has been a leader of the CGT's railway workers' union and, since 1967, general secretary of the CGT itself. He gave this exclusive interview to Marxism Today at the end of June.*

*As leader of France's biggest trade union body, what is your feeling about François Mitterrand's Presidential election victory on May 10 and the ensuing Left victory at the General Election in June?*

They are both events of great importance, not only for France but also for Europe, and indeed, the world. They have created a completely new situation in our country. The workers wanted to be rid of the power of the right wing that has dominated the country's life for a generation and they have succeeded by electing François Mitterrand and a Left government. As a trade union organisation of the Left, the CGT worked for the victory and we intend grasping the opportunities thus offered to the working people and the country to bring about real change.

*In this new situation what are the main questions facing workers in France today?*

There are two types of problem. Firstly, to win the far reaching reforms necessary to bring about lasting change and secondly, to obtain satisfaction of the workers' most pressing demands. I am thinking particularly about a higher minimum wage, greater attention to low wages generally and a narrowing of the often anarchistic and unjust wage differentials between the highest paid manager and the lowest grades. We also want a progressive lowering of the working week to 35 hours with an initial reduction of two hours a week. Other immediate demands are earlier retirement and steps to protect the purchasing power of wages and all kinds of pensions and benefits.

The measures that have been adopted in the Presidential decrees and by the emergency session of parliament in July are a positive step in this direction and negotiations have started with the employers' confederation on reducing working hours. However, these negotiations are already very tough. But this is not all. There is also a whole backlog of other questions needing negotiation especially with regard to unemployment such as vocational training and investment — particularly in the public sector and the nationalised industries — to create the maximum number of jobs as soon as possible.

*So for the first time for many years the CGT is negotiating with the government.*

Yes, it is an entirely new situation for us. For 34 years we have had a succession of hostile governments which have excluded the CGT from negotiations. Not only was our organisation discriminated against but our rank and file has been systematically victimised and even hounded before the courts.

Today we are at last able to fully play our role as trade unionists in a positive, constructive and cooperative way with the government. We are now in a position to attempt to settle a certain number of outstanding social issues which have been continually ignored by the outgoing administration.

We are in direct discussion with the new President who is giving the trade union movement the importance it deserves. These discussions include international questions of concern to us as trade unionists. We are also in close contact with the Prime Minister, a simple telephone call sufficing for a meeting to be arranged, and we are also in touch with all the ministries dealing with social questions.

An era of negotiations is therefore opening before us. We are aware of the new opportunities but also of the limits. The opportunities are new because the government is no longer an adversary but a partner, and there are limits because of the national and international economic situation that has been inherited and also because the policies of the new President and his administration do not go as far as the CGT's programme.

We think, however, that it is possible to win meaningful social advances and progressive reforms.

*You say that in the new government the CGT now has a partner rather than an adversary. Does not this create problems with regard to the CGT's independence?*

We do not conceive our relationship with the government as one of a party participating in a coalition, and therefore pledged to be disciplined in carrying out the government's programme, but as a trade union organisation. We therefore remain entirely in control of our own decisions. There must be respect for our independence and for our autonomy of action.

We do not oppose the government but neither are we giving it unconditional support. We want to help bring about a constructive solution to outstanding problems but within the framework of our activities as a sovereign body. The CGT is extremely jealous of its independence and we want to keep it. This means maintaining our right to criticise the government from time to time. We want to use all our weight to help tip the scales in the right direction but we also want to be a counter-balance when there are things with which we do not agree. This is how we see our role as an independent trade union movement.

*It is clear that the CGT has always worked for a Left government but before*

*the Presidential election it was accused of supporting Communist Party Secretary Georges Marchais' candidature without mentioning his name.*

I've already explained our attitude to trade union independence. But it is well known that we are a trade union body fighting for the interests of the working class. This means that we are not neutral with respect to the keynote economic, social and political problems of the day that have a bearing on the trade union movement.

Before the first round of the Presidential election on April 26 we believed it was the CGT's duty to remind the workers of the organisation's views as to the conditions necessary to bring about genuine change as seen by the CGT's own programme. This was interpreted by some as being an appeal to vote for the PCF's Presidential candidate.

In fact there are always similarities and even parallel positions in the CGT's and PCF's respective programmes. All this means is that of today's political parties, the Communists get the nearest to the CGT's own, independent class positions.

We have always stressed that this is not a phenomenon that we have created but a distinguishing feature of the history of the French working class movement. It is a reality and we would be very happy if we could say the same for the other Left parties especially with regard to the Socialist Party's manifesto. However, having said that, even if there are not as many similarities between the Socialists and ourselves as compared with the Communists, there are enough for progress to be made.

*The situation since Mitterrand's election is entirely new. And appointment of four Communist ministers to the cabinet on June 25 changes it even further. What is the CGT's view as to the presence of Communist ministers?*

Everybody is speaking about it as an event of great national and even international historical significance. I think they are right. The CGT welcomes this great event because we have always fought for the victory of the united Left forces. So we welcome the constitution of a united Left government in which all the Left parties are represented, including Communists.

Communist ministers are now in government for the first time since 1947. Some people were saying that the day such a thing happened it would be the apocalypse. Well, there is still bread in the baker's, newspapers at the newsagent's and the underground is still operating. There have not been any reports of the police breaking down the door at 5 in the morning! So life is continuing as usual — and even getting better as there is now the prospect of real constructive social progress.

I note also that people have said that France's foreign alliances were going to fall apart the day Communist ministers were appointed. But all is going well. France's allies — West Germany, Great Britain and the United States, to mention but a few — seem to be adopting attitudes that are more or less realistic with regard to the representatives of an important part of the French electorate in a Left government.

A further aspect of the fact that there are now Communist ministers is that there will certainly be repercussions, within the West European trade union movement. There could be consequences for the cohesion of the trade union movement including within the framework of the European Trades Union Confederation (ETUC). I think that the realistic and reasonable trade union leaders will take account of this new situation with regard to the CGT's long outstanding application for membership of the ETUC. I should remind you that this was not accepted at the ETUC's June 1980 Executive Committee meeting.

*One of the most important features of the last few months has been the support — separately, but nevertheless, support in the same direction — of*

*both the CGT and the second biggest trade union centre, the CFDT for a Left government. The unity of the French trade union movement has always been a thorny problem and since the CFDT's rightward swing in 1979 relationships have not been good. Surely the new situation provides fresh opportunities for unity.*

We have always said that one of the main causes of the divisions between workers, between democrats, at both the political and trade union levels is anti-communism. To the extent that the entry of Communist ministers into the government deals a mighty blow to anti-communism, new conditions exist for unity between the political parties and this cannot fail to have positive consequences on the trade union movement.

Even if differences between the CGT and the CFDT have not yet enabled real and constructive relationships at leadership level to be made it is clear that the climate that has been created and the entirely new situation today are conducive to bringing about new prospects for unity.

*Another positive feature of the recent period has been an increase in trade union membership, thus reversing the trend of the last few years.*

Yes. It is obvious that the new situation has produced increased feelings of confidence among the workers. In the factories the workers are discussing more. Production is suffering a little, but this is only temporary. So there is renewed confidence and enthusiasm. Where CGT branches — which are based at the workplace — are particularly active, recruitment is taking place. We want to convince the workers that it is not enough to demonstrate their satisfaction at the new situation but to join the union as the CGT has an important part to play if genuine change is to be won. I can say that trade union activities are picking up and there is a revitalisation of the trade union movement as a whole.

*You spoke earlier of the refusal by the ETUC to give membership to the CGT. Are you still trying to get into that organisation? And what is the CGT's attitude to West European trades unionism today?*

By making that decision, the ETUC is depriving itself of the most representative, the biggest and the most militant trade union centre in France. Not only that, but also an organisation which has played a keynote role in the victory of the Left in France. If this role of the CGT is not taken into consideration by the ETUC, there is the risk that the European organisation will appear as being hesitant in welcoming the Left advance in France and the perspectives that are opening up for French workers. It will be interesting to see the attitude of the ETUC's affiliates with regard to the changes that have just taken place and to the CGT's action in bringing it about.

*Speaking of Europe, the CGT has come out against enlargement of the Common Market. At the beginning of the seventies there was opposition to the Market's enlargement through the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark, and more recently, against the inclusion of Greece. The CGT is also against the application for membership of Portugal and Spain. What is your view of the EEC today?*

As long as Europe is dominated by giant financial and industrial interests and as long as it remains the club of the multinational companies, it cannot play a progressive role in the interests of the workers, and in fact, in the interests of the peoples making up the Community.

We said as much when there were only six countries involved. When they became the Nine we said that if the Common Market does

not fundamentally change the Europe of the Nine will be no better than that of the Six. Today we say that the same applies to the Ten and to the Twelve as long as powerful capitalist interests continue to call the tune within the European Economic Community.

I am not, of course, against the idea of European cooperation but in the same way that we have struggled in France against the forces of big capital, we are Europeans and are fighting for a Europe which is more representative of the workers, of the forces of progress and democracy and which lends itself to better economic, trade union and political cooperation. This is why it is natural that the workers and their trade unions act to build a new Europe which is one that is resolutely against the power of big business.

*But is it really possible to change what you call this club of the multinational companies into a workers' Europe, or will it be necessary to destroy it and build something else in its place?*

In the present state of affairs it is difficult to conceive of the destruction of the Common Market and its replacement by something else, but it is surely possible to bring about democratic reforms giving

---

## We do not advocate that France leave the Market but believe that it should be reformed and democratised

---

the progressive forces — and particularly the workers — a new position and new opportunities enabling them to win decisions commensurate with their interests.

*In Great Britain, both the Communist Party, and now the Labour Party are for withdrawal from the EEC. A growing number of trade unions have also adopted this policy and it is possible that the September Trades Union Congress will adopt a policy of straight withdrawal. The opinion polls also show an increasing number who think that Britain ought to get out. Do you think that Britain's withdrawal would help your aim of reforming the EEC?*

There are many similarities in the positions of those who wish to leave the EEC in Great Britain and with our views. We do not advocate that France leave the Market but believe, as I said, that it should be reformed and democratised to look after the workers' interests. I do not think I ought to make a judgement on something which should be left to the sovereign decision of the British people. I really think that a Europe existing on totally different bases will enable a different future than that dominated by big business. For us, withdrawal of France is an extreme solution.

*What is the CGT's present relationship with the British trade union movement? I am talking about ties between the TUC and the CGT at leadership level as well as those between individual unions.*

There are excellent relations between many TUC and CGT affiliates: railways, public services, transport, engineering to name but a few. We attach the greatest interest and importance to these relationships which enable frequent exchanges of experiences and opinions on problems of common interest. As I said, we value such ties but they are not yet operative at the level they should be, at the level of the leadership of the two trade union centres.

It is true that over the last few years I have often met TUC leaders including Len Murray with whom I have talked many times since he has been General Secretary. But I am still looking forward to the TUC accepting our invitation to visit the CGT in France. Such a meeting at

such a level would be mutually beneficial, I am confident, to both sides.

*What is your view of the trade union and political situation in Poland?*

The accumulation of errors in the past, including by the Polish trade union movement, has brought about circumstances resulting in today's situation. The CGT is for the unity of the trade union movement in France so we cannot be happy that there has been a split in the unions in Poland. But it was hard to do otherwise in a very difficult situation. Poland is going through a period in which the economy is in dire straits and which requires immense efforts and a spirit of responsibility by all Polish patriots if things are to get better. I am happy to note that this spirit of realism and cooperation has resulted in consultations between the Polish government and Solidarity which has meant that Poland has, to date, been able to tackle its problems.

We have thought for a long time that the extension of the role of the trade unions in the socialist countries, through independent activities and democratic elections for all positions of leadership from the branch committee to the top executive, is necessary. It is commensurate with a genuine need which is in conformity with the normal and necessary development of socialist democracy. The CGT's ideas on the role of the unions in the socialist countries have been published in important documents in 1971 and 1977 and at the World Federation of Trade Union's 1978 Congress.

This position can in no way be tied up with the opinions of some politicians and trade unionists in France and other western countries, but also in Poland, who see in what they call 'free trade unions' the possibility of waging war against socialism, or, in other words, to create opposition political parties through the trade unions.

The CGT's Executive Committee has expressed its wish that the Polish workers, their trade unions and all progressives manage to bring about, through negotiation, the revitalisation of their country for which they are striving and find the best possible solutions guaranteeing the unity and interests of the working class and ensuring its active role in society which is the *sine qua non* for building socialism in Poland.

So we sincerely hope that the country will soon find its economic and political stability and will be able to continue its efforts in the workers' interests and, indeed, for the development of socialism in Poland.

*A top-level CGT delegation was in Poland at the beginning of the year and further contacts have taken place between the CGT and the Polish trade union movements since then. What, if any, is the CGT's relationship with Solidarity?*

We have a good relationship with Solidarity, and as you say, there have already been several exchanges. We also maintain contact with the branch unions and with the unaffiliated unions and we are happy to note that on the basis of an agreement with the Polish government, all sections of the Polish trade union movement were represented in the Polish delegation to the annual conference of the International Labour Organisation which ended in Geneva at the end of June.

*Lech Walesa has already made several trips abroad. Are there any plans to visit you in France?*

A delegation of Solidarity led by Walesa was due to visit us this spring but the situation in Poland meant that the trip had to be postponed at the last minute. With Solidarity's Congress due to take place soon, I hope that Walesa's visit will be able to take place later on in the year.

Monty Johnstone

## Is the Marxist Tradition Democratic?

No area of struggle or debate is more crucial to Marxists than that of democracy. The appearance of a new collection of essays entitled *Marxism and Democracy* and published by Lawrence and Wishart (pb, £3.50) is calculated to arouse interest and anticipation among readers of *Marxism Today*. Its highly contentious viewpoints will leave none of them indifferent. Many of these ideas have been gaining currency in certain circles on the Left and call for full and serious consideration.

In his introduction, Alan Hunt sets the tone with his suggestion that 'socialists and Marxists can be charged with failing to take democracy seriously'. And he raises the question 'whether the theoretical framework of Marxism, especially in its most potent form developed by Lenin, has been adequate to the task of confronting "the problem of democracy"' (p7). The reader is left in no doubt that he and most of the other authors believe that it has not. However, after having hacked away substantial elements of Marxism regarded by its founders as pivotal, they can hardly be said to have provided us with much of a coherent new theoretical framework to take its place.

Marxism is not a religion but a critical scientific method of understanding and changing the world. Alan Hunt is therefore perfectly right to deplore a defensive reaction to 'the challenge to crucial aspects in the existing state of Marxist theory' in terms of protecting 'Marxist orthodoxy' and thereby failing 'to take issue with the challenging theoretical and political problems posed' (p11).

However, it seems to me that an opposite tendency should also be rejected: that of erecting the scaffolding of a new orthodoxy, which presents a selective and one-sided version of traditional Marxism and particularly Leninism, to which it then proceeds to counterpose an equally selective and one-sided version of Gramsci or Rosa Luxemburg; which rides out to hunt down and expose 'economism' and 'reductionism' in the same catch-all spirit as was once fashionable in scenting out and denouncing 'revisionism'; and which exhibits a predilection for abstruse theorising rather than developing theory on the basis of a rigorous study of specifically located historical experience.<sup>1</sup>

Such tendencies are reflected in varying degrees, I think, in a number of the essays in this book, which comprises papers first presented at a conference organised by the Sociology Group of the Communist Party in December 1978. They are focused on bourgeois democracy as it exists in advanced capitalist countries rather than on problems of socialist democracy.

### Curious omission

A most curious omission for a book challenging 'the theoretical framework of Marxism' is the failure to give proper consideration to the views of Marx himself. In a work abounding in quotations, including from Gramsci (to whom a whole chapter is rightly devoted) and the interesting but avowedly non-Marxist Foucault (extensively cited in Colin Mercer's paper), Marx is quoted in the whole book . . . twice! This is hardly accidental. It is in keeping with the suggestion that we are dealing with a topic on which Marx had little of importance to offer and Marxism needs to be rescued from 'a pervasive and

disabling set of dichotomies' (p101). Indeed, without anywhere attempting to examine what Marx and Engels actually did write on the subject, Colin Mercer even speaks of Marx 'collapsing the word and reality of democracy into . . . its class form' and excluding 'its possible connotation with other determinants' (pp110, 108). As against this phantasmagoria, Bob Jessop, referring to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Law'*, shows that in fact democracy for Marx involved the control of officialdom through specific mechanisms of representation and accountability culminating ultimately in the complete self-government of the people transcending the separation between state and civil society (p57). Such popular self-government, unbridled by bureaucracy, constituted the essence of Marx's democratic objective throughout his life. It was highlighted by him in 1871, in his *Civil War in France*, as the most important characteristic of the Paris Commune, which he and Engels saw as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Colin Mercer totally misunderstands Marx's *Critique*. It is only necessary to read this seminal work to see that it is simply not true, as he alleges, that Marx's 'primary focus' in it was on the 'class character' (p108) of democracy against Hegel whom he presents as a champion of bourgeois democracy. Marx's 'primary focus' was much more basic. It was the refutation of Hegel's monarchist and paternalistic positions, which opposed freely elected representative assemblies 'with the miserable arrogance of the Prussian civil service which in its bureaucratic stupidity looks down on the "self-confidence" of the "people's own subjective opinion"'. To this Marx counterposed his abiding conception of democracy as 'the sovereignty of the people'.<sup>2</sup>

These were the same 'ultra-democratic opinions', as the Prussian censor called them<sup>3</sup>, that Marx had expressed so forcefully the previous year in his first articles which, significantly enough, were on the freedom of the press. In them he made an eloquent plea for democratic liberties and a denunciation of all censorship as a 'law of suspicion against freedom' which remains unsurpassed to this day. 'Lack of freedom', he argued, was 'the real mortal danger for mankind . . . You cannot enjoy the advantages of a free press without putting up with its inconveniences. You cannot pluck the rose without its thorns'. For Marx, there was 'a basic defect in the nature of censorship which no law can remedy'.<sup>4</sup>

These profoundly democratic principles were subsequently to constitute a fundamental part of his outlook as a fully-fledged Marxist, after he had come to envisage their extension and combination with the social and economic freedom that could only be obtained by a change in the class basis of society.<sup>5</sup> As Hal Draper writes in his extremely valuable study of Marx's theory of revolution, 'Marx's socialism (communism) as a political programme may be most quickly defined, from the Marxist standpoint, as *the complete democratisation of society*, not merely its political forms.'<sup>6</sup>

### Lenin's 'economism'

If the present authors largely ignore Marx, a number of them are concerned to take Lenin to task for his alleged 'economism'. Their definition of this term is nowhere explicitly given. In the case of Barry Hindess, who contributes an essay on 'Marxism and Parliamentary Democracy', such criticism of Lenin flows from a rejection of the whole materialist conception of history and politics. He proceeds from positions developed by himself and his co-authors in *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today*, where it is asserted that 'to deny economism . . . is to maintain that political and ideological struggles cannot be conceived as the struggles of economic classes'.<sup>7</sup>

Barry Hindess rejects *a priori* the class character of democracy, since he disputes the possibility of causal connections — as distinct from possible conjunctural convergences — between political institutions, organisations and ideologies, on the one hand, and