
THE CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF FRANCE

BY WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

THE Communist Party of France held its Ninth Congress in Arles on December 25-29. The holding of the Congress assumed the aspect of a first class political event. All the capitalist papers devoted extensive space to it and followed its debates closely. Characteristically enough, the journal which gave the least attention to the Congress, so far as I could see, was the official organ of the Socialist Party, *Le Populaire*. The big publicity around the Congress shows a general realization of the great and growing role of the Communist Party in the political life of the French people.

Present at the Congress were some 1,300 delegates, representing 341,000 Party members in France and its colonies. This big body of Communists, together with the youth organizations, comprise well onto half a million members. Maurice Thorez, General Secretary of the Party, was thus able to characterize the Communist Party as the largest party in France. There were also present a considerable number of delegates from various other Communist Parties—German, Spanish, Italian, Czechoslovakian, Chinese, Philippine, English, Canadian, American, and others. The delegate from the Canadian Party was Tim Buck, and those representing the Commu-

nist Party of the U.S.A. were Earl Browder, Robert Minor, Alexander Trachtenberg, and myself. The Canadian and American delegations submitted a joint greeting to the Congress, which was broadcast over the radio.

Arles is located in Provence, on the river Rhone, in the south of France, about 500 miles from Paris. It is one of the most historic spots in France. The town was established about 2,400 years ago and has successively been the scene of Celtic, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, and various other civilizations. The place has several famous ruins, notably a big Greek theatre and a huge Roman arena. Arles was for a time the capital of the Roman empire. It was also in this district that the famous hymn of the 1789 French Revolution, the "Marseillaise," was composed. In selecting this historic city for its Congress, the Communist Party emphasized its identification with the traditions and culture of the French people.

The Party interests itself in every phase of the life of the masses and, characteristically, it surrounded its Congress with a whole series of popular activities. Besides rousing speeches by Cachin and Thorez, there were features such as a communal Christmas

tree (with presents for the children), an industrial exposition, a number of banquets, several theatrical and motion picture productions, many popular meetings and lectures, excursions to neighboring historical places, trips to local museums and monuments, a grand spectacle of folk-dancing, fancy riding, and bull-fights in the Roman Arena.

THE WORK OF THE CONGRESS

Briefly stated, the task the Congress set itself was the organization of the struggle against fascism at home and abroad, through strengthening and energizing the Popular Front, intensifying France's democratic role internationally, establishing the unity of the working class, consolidating the alliance with the peasantry, and building the Communist Party. The order of business of the Congress was as follows:

1. Popular Front France and its mission in the world.
2. The liquidation of the split and the establishment of the unity of the working class.
3. The obligations of the Popular Front toward the peasants of France.
4. The great family of Communists.

Reports upon these four basic questions were delivered, respectively, by Maurice Thorez (General Secretary), Jacques Duclos (Secretary), Renaud Jean (Central Committee member), and Marcel Gitton (Secretary). The reports were rich in political content and were all brilliantly presented. That of Thorez, lasting four hours, especially produced a great ovation, the crowd singing alternately the "Internationale" and the "Marseillaise."

The blazing enthusiasm with which

the reports were received and the unanimity of their adoption by the Congress were striking demonstrations of the Bolshevik unity of the French Party. It was quite clear to us foreign observers that the French Party is fully conscious of its great responsibility in the historic task of leading the French masses away from fascist slavery and into socialist freedom, and that it is clear and positive regarding the road that must be traveled.

As the Congress proceeded, innumerable telegrams and other messages of solidarity came pouring in from the masses — from factory workers, from peasant groups, from Socialist Party organizations, from trade unions, etc. I was especially interested in a telegram from a French regiment of soldiers. Greetings from Romain Rolland brought the Congress to its feet in a burst of applause. A grim touch of struggle was lent to the Congress by the pulling through the town of thirteen trucks loaded with food and clothes, bound for Republican Spain, the border of which is only about 150 miles distant.

DEMOCRACY VERSUS FASCISM

Thorez, in his report, showed that the great issue confronting the toiling masses is the question of democracy against fascism. He called for the unity of the French nation in the Popular Front to smash fascism, which originates in the 200 rich families that dominate the country's economic life and resources. French fascism has already been dealt a heavy blow by the Popular Front, but it has not been killed. It remains a deadly menace to the well-being and liberty of the masses.

In dealing with the danger of fascism within France, Thorez handled the question in a very practical manner. As the basis of his argument, he made a running comparison between conditions in Popular Front France and those in fascist Italy and Germany, and he held up the Soviet Union as the revolutionary example of democracy that the democratic French masses must strive to emulate.

Thorez showed how, through their Popular Front, the French workers had won the 40-hour week, vacations with pay, wage increases; had vastly strengthened their trade unions and political parties; and had extended their civil rights. He also recited the gains of the peasants and the middle class groups within the Popular Front. All of which had made life easier for the masses and given them fresh hope for the future.

As against this picture of progress and expanding democracy, Thorez outlined the barbarous course of fascism in the adjoining countries of Germany and Italy; their destruction of the trade unions and cooperatives, their suppression of the toilers' political parties, the wiping out of all civil liberties, the drastic reduction of living standards, the general decline in culture, and the wholesale preparations for war.

But while making this comparison, so deadly for fascism, Thorez did not fail to point out the weaknesses and dangers of the Popular Front. The big capitalists, with rapidly increasing profits, are sabotaging the Popular Front conquests, are raising the cost of living, organizing and strengthening their armed fascist bands of Do-riot, de la Rocque, etc., and the gov-

ernment is not taking sufficiently energetic measures to counteract this offensive of reaction. The speaker demanded the integral fulfillment of the Popular Front program agreed upon.

Thorez then proceeded to outline a whole series of the Communist Party's demands for old-age pensions, increased taxes upon the rich, nationalization of various industries, including insurance companies; disarming of the fascist leagues and the imprisonment of their chiefs; and the establishment of the rights of the colonial peoples in North Africa, Indo-China, etc. In this latter respect, Thorez said that the Party's fundamental demand for the colonial peoples was the right of self-determination, the right of independence. But, as Lenin pointed out, "the right of separation does not signify the obligation to separate." The Party proposes to "create the conditions of a free and friendly union between the French and colonial peoples."

That the workers are in a mood to fight for this was shown dramatically during the Congress by a whole series of important strikes in Paris in the chemical, transport, and food industries, as well as in the public services.

Stating that "the Popular Front is not an occasional tactic, an electoral maneuver, but the close and permanent alliance between the working class and the middle classes, which is one of the fundamental conceptions of Leninism," Thorez called for the strengthening of the Popular Front by establishing local Popular Front committees, and by holding a national congress of these committees.

While stressing the necessity of the Popular Front masses to defend and

develop democracy under capitalism, Thorez did not fail to emphasize the revolutionary goal of the Communist Party.

"We fight for the future, when our people will know happiness and joy, grace to the free labor of all its sons, reconciled in the communist society of tomorrow. . . .

"The Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Stalin has made the Socialist dream of yesterday the reality of today.

"Lenin, Stalin, the Bolsheviks, were inspired by the glorious example of our Paris Commune. The Communists of France will be inspired by the victorious example of the great Soviet Commune."

THE STRUGGLE FOR PEACE

The fight against international fascism and war, which is inseparable from the fight against fascism in France, Thorez put in the center of his report. He said that "France, whether it wishes or not, must choose between the front of peace and the front of war; which is the choice between democracy and fascism." Speaking for the Central Committee, Thorez declared it was the world mission of France to fight beside the forces of democracy and peace.

Thorez recalled the historic role of the French Revolutions of 1789 and 1848 in spreading democratic privileges throughout the world. In the present crisis of humanity, he said, France must play a similar liberating role. Together with the U.S.S.R., the suppressed masses in many countries look to democratic, Popular Front France for inspiration and support. But the Popular Front government has not always been conscious of its democratic world mission, notably in the cases of Ethiopia and Spain, where it yielded to the fascist aggressors.

Thorez was especially sharp in condemning the so-called policy of non-intervention in Spain, followed successively by the Blum and Chautemps governments. He declared that France's foreign policy had not weakened the aggression of the fascist powers, but strengthened it.

Democracy has not exhausted its role, as so many enemies of the workers declare. The Popular Front is not only a defense, but an extension of democracy. Thorez pointed, besides France, to the U.S.S.R., and said:

"We can say of the Soviet democracy that it is the broadest democracy, because it rests upon new economic and social foundations, on the suppression of exploitation of man by man, that it is the extension of democracy, that it is democracy pushed to the end, to its last stage, that which immediately precedes the perfect communist society."

To Mussolini's boast that "the Europe of tomorrow will be fascist," Thorez answered with a categorical "No, Europe will not be fascist! It is democracy which, again, is going to win in Europe and spread its benefits to the peoples united in peace."

Thorez called upon the Popular Front to establish a foreign policy "democratic and French" for the organization of peace. His emphasis upon the fact that the foreign policy of the French government must be based on the interests of the French nation, which dovetail with those of the masses in other countries, hits in several directions simultaneously. For one thing, it struck at the fascists, who would make France internationally a tail to Hitler's kite; then it clashed with those Socialists, liberals and others who would make France's peace policies dependent upon England's

wishes; and finally it refuted all those miscellaneous enemies of the Communists—fascists, Trotskyites, and others who, seeking to break the Franco-Soviet pact, allege that our Party strives to make France simply a supporter of Soviet foreign policy.

Thorez outlined in detail the elements of a “democratic and French” international peace policy based upon the principle of collective security. A few of the most important of his proposals were: the abandonment of secret diplomacy, the strengthening of the League of Nations, the application of international law in Europe and the Far East, the opening of the French frontier to Republican Spain, the renewal of Franco-British relations on a new basis, collaboration between the United States and France in the Far East on the basis of President Roosevelt’s Chicago speech, and, he said, “the Popular Front should show, conforming to the will of the people, its attachment to the Franco-Soviet pact, the surest guarantee of peace for our country and for Europe.” Thorez stated that the Communist Party was willing to enter the Popular Front government.

ONE PARTY OF THE WORKING CLASS

On the basic question of unifying the Communist and Socialist Parties into one party, the Congress report was made by Jacques Duclos, who is one of the three secretaries of the Communist Party and also Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies. Duclos stressed the vast importance of unification, showing how it would enormously strengthen the whole Popular Front and facilitate the achievement of its program. He said:

“Think of the power that would be represented by a sole party, made up of the 450,000 Communists, youths and adults, and the 300,000 Socialists, youths and adults, fraternally united.

“Think, too, of the power that would be represented by one party, with a parliamentary group of 260 Deputies, with a journal like *L’Humanite*, with a circulation of 425,000 and another journal like *Le Populaire*, with a circulation of 200,000.

“Think, also, of the attractions that such a united party would exercise upon the multitudes of workers who would come with hearts full of joy and hope to take their places under the flag of the reconstituted unity.”

In thus arguing for the great surge forward that would come from uniting the two parties, Duclos was able to refer to the splendid effects of unity on the industrial field. Before unity the two rival federations together hardly counted 1,000,000 members between them. But after unity was achieved they immediately and spectacularly shot up to 5,000,000 members.

Duclos gave an extended resume of the struggles of the French workers, from the earliest stages of their labor movement, for industrial and political unity. Arriving at contemporaneous developments, he showed that the responsibility for the present split situation, which took place at the congress of Tours in 1920, does not rest upon the Communists. At that time the delegates voted 3,208 to 1,022 for affiliation to the Third International; but the reformist minority refused to accept the congress decision and the split became a fact.

During the next fourteen years the Communist Party made no less than 27 separate advances to the Socialist Party with proposals for unity of ac-

tion. But the S.P. leaders rejected all these proposals, until July, 1934, when, in the face of the big fascist offensive and under heavy pressure from their own rank and file, they finally signed a pact of joint action with the Communists.

Since then the Communist Party has also made many proposals to unite the two parties into one. But the Socialist Party leaders have been cagey and evasive. Especially have Trotskyite and extreme Right reformist influences opposed unity. Under the constant pressure of the Communist Party for unity the Socialist Party leaders, however, finally set up a negotiations committee. At their recent Marseilles congress they also adopted conditions for unity which they believed the Communists could not accept. But the Communist Party did accept, and, moreover, accordingly made the most concrete proposals for immediately merging the two parties. Whereupon, to extricate themselves from the unwelcome unity situation, the Socialist Party leaders, seizing as a pretext some criticism made by Dimitroff, head of the Comintern, against reactionary Second International leaders, a short while ago liquidated the unity committee and broke off the unity negotiations—without, however, giving up the policy of common action with the Communist Party in the Popular Front.

This action by the Socialist Party was joyfully greeted by the employers' interests and was sorrowfully received by the workers. But the Communist Party will not be discouraged in its unity efforts. One united party is a burning necessity and it will be brought about despite all reactionary

opposition. Amidst tremendous applause Duclos pledged the Communist Party "to work, heart to heart, with our Socialist brothers until unity is achieved."

COMMUNISTS AND CATHOLICS

An important question, much discussed in and around the Congress, was that of united front action between the Communist and Catholic masses. This is the policy of the "extended hand," which promises to play a big role in further strengthening the Popular Front. The Communist Party is the great unifying force among the French anti-fascist masses. It was the main element in establishing trade union unity, it was the initiator of the Popular Front, it is the great champion of Socialist-Communist unity, and now it is determined to win the Catholic workers and peasants for this unity.

For a considerable time the Communist Party has been persistently working to establish close cooperative relations with the toiling Catholic masses. This has already produced such favorable results that even the Pope himself has been obliged to pay attention to it. Although the Pope's recent remarks about "collaboration" were highly equivocal, they nevertheless greatly alarmed many reactionary high French Catholic clericals, who hastened to pronounce themselves against any working with the Communists. But the masses of their followers are responding, nevertheless. In this matter, Thorez said in the Congress:

"It is known that we are Communists, partisans of philosophical materialism, atheists, lay people. On the doctrinal and philo-

sophical plane we, contrary to all others, never have and never will make any concessions in principle. We have the solidly established conviction that our doctrine provides the sole national scientific explanation of the world and its evolution. We only want to use in our propaganda weapons exclusively ideological. We have already proved that we are thus following the counsels of our masters, of Marx, Engels, Lenin, as well as Guesde. War must not be declared against religion (which would only be an Anarchist phrase), said Lenin; we must work to assemble, to unite all the workers, regardless of their beliefs, against the real enemy, capitalism and its detestable product, fascism.

"We welcome with joy into our ranks the workers, whatever may be their philosophical or religious convictions, whether they believe in God or not, whether or not they go to the church, the temple, or the synagogue, if only they are determined to put an end to the agony of capitalism and to erect upon its ruins social property and social production."

THE PEASANT QUESTION

The Arles Congress paid much attention to the peasant question, the reporter on this subject being Renaud Jean, Central Committee member and Chairman of the Agricultural Committee of the Chamber of Deputies. Jean made a long report of which space limitations here forbid giving even an outline. He portrayed in detail what the Popular Front had done for the small farmers and agricultural workers, who form such a vital sector in French economic and political life. He declared that the peasants, especially because of means applied to regulate production, fix prices, and restrict speculation in foodstuffs, were considerably better off under the Popular Front government.

But, highly critical, he declared that great grievances still exist. He outlined a detailed agricultural program,

including such proposals as moratoriums on debts; reduction of rents and taxes; no foreclosures for debts; the right of renters to re-rent their farms; reduced prices for fertilizer; the cheapening of farm credits; abolition of speculation in grains and other farm products; collective selling by farmers; strengthening of the cooperatives; limitation of the hours of agricultural laborers; insurance against hail, drought, and other calamities.

Jean stated that the great obstacle to improved conditions for the agricultural population was the resistance of the reactionary Senate, which constantly blocks proposals of the more progressive Chamber of Deputies. This resistance must be broken. The Senate, he said, resists the demands of the peasants far more than those of industrial workers. Among the practical organizational measures, Jean urged full Party support for National Farmers' Day on January 30, organized by the Confederation of Peasants-Workers to develop backing for the demands of the peasants and agricultural workers.

THE GREAT FAMILY OF COMMUNISTS

It was under this picturesque title that Marcel Gitton, Communist Party Secretary, made the report on organization. In this article I can give only the briefest indications of his two-hour speech, which was rich in the facts and currents of Communist Party life.

Gitton portrayed a picture of real unity and healthy growth of the Party. There are no factions or internal groupings of any consequence, and the Party is extending its organization into every corner of France. At its

last congress (Villeurbanne, in January, 1936) the Party had 86,902 members; in December, 1936, it had 288,483; and now it has 341,000. In October, 1935, the Party comprised 4,221 units; by October, 1936, the figure had mounted to 10,776; and in October, 1937, it was 12,992. The Young Communist League has a membership of 85,455, as against 25,816 in January, 1936; the Young Girls of France, 17,527; and the Young Peasants (newly organized) an estimated 10,000.

The reporter stated that from the point of view of circulation, *L'Humanite* is now the third largest morning paper in France. In the space of three years it has more than doubled its number of readers—from 200,000 in 1934 to 425,000, its average circulation for the first nine months of 1937. On Sunday, December 19, *L'Humanite* had a circulation of 952,455. In 1936 this flourishing paper made a profit of 495,800 francs. The Party has 70 other papers, mostly regional, with a combined circulation of 495,800.

Gitton also reported solid progress in election and parliamentary activities. In the 1936 elections the Party polled 1,502,558 votes, as against 776,630 in 1932, and the number of its members of the Chamber of Deputies leaped up from 10 to 73. The Party also has two members in the Senate. In the 1937 local elections, despite a fierce Red-baiting campaign by the reactionaries, the Party increased its vote by 35,088 over that of 1936. In 324 local communities the Party has a majority of the representatives, and in 555 more it has minorities.

Gitton critically pointed out many errors made and weaknesses displayed

by the Party in its multitudinous activities. He especially laid great stress upon the urgent necessity of giving a Marxist-Leninist education to the vast masses of militant workers who have recently streamed into the Party and the trade unions.

CONCLUSION

The Congress of the French Communist Party is bound to have strong international results. It was a practical demonstration of the effectiveness of the Popular Front both in organizing the masses for struggle against fascism and war, and, what goes inseparably with the former, in building the Communist Party into a strong mass party.

At the Congress I was greatly impressed by the realism and hard common sense of the French Communists. They are not content "to pay themselves with words," however radical-sounding the words may be. With their feet on the ground, they are utilizing every means to mobilize the masses for the decisive struggle for democracy and against fascism—a struggle the victorious outcome of which will pave the way for socialism. Their Bolshevik realism was shown on many questions—by their stand on nationalism, on religion, on the everyday demands of the toilers. Thorez gave voice to the latter phase neatly in discussing the radical proposals urged by the Socialist Party to be added to the program of the Popular Front. While agreeing that the Communist Party, as a revolutionary Party, must support these propositions, nevertheless, he pointed out that "instead of putting on paper formulas apparently more revolutionary, it

would be better to apply effectively the more modest measures that figure already in the Popular Front."

I was also much impressed by the splendid political initiative being shown by the Party, with its present policies as well as its recent activities. The Communist Party is indeed the vanguard of the French proletariat. This it has amply demonstrated in the past by its militant and successful struggle for trade union unity and for the formation of the Popular Front. The Party is showing this vital initiative now in its determined fight to unify the Socialist and Communist Parties, to enforce the everyday demands of the workers and farmers, to win the peasants and the Catholic masses, to develop a strong policy of

collective security against war by the Popular Front government, etc. Especially in this basic matter of exercising political leadership, so fundamental to the building of the Communist Party and its influence, the Communist Parties in all the capitalist countries would do well to study the proceedings of the Congress of Arles.

Of course, the French Communist Party has made mistakes, and, being made up of human beings, it will continue to do so. But its current mistakes are of a minor character. The main thing is that the Party is obviously on the right track. It is giving a daily demonstration of first class Communist work, and the Comintern may well be proud of such a Party.