

# French and Italian communists shed ideology but not illusions

By Diana Johnstone

PARIS

**F**RENCH COMMUNIST PARTY (PCF) LEADER Georges Marchais went to Moscow last Sept. 22 to give Mikhail Gorbachov a pat on the back in recognition of Gorbachov's conversion to Marchais' ideas. Or so it seemed from reports on the meeting in the PCF daily *L'Humanité*, which noted the Soviet party's necessary self-criticism for imposing a "single model" of Soviet-style socialism while the PCF basked in "the French colors" of its own model. Unlike the Soviets, the French communists evidently have no need for self-criticism.

As is frequently the case, Marchais seemed too smug to be real. The French party had been thought to be lagging behind in its enthusiasm for *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Marchais finally set people straight in his speech to the annual Fête de l'Humanité Sept. 10 before heading for Moscow. Belatedly endorsing criticisms of the USSR made over a decade ago by disillusioned intellectuals who have mostly since left the PCF, Marchais said that "we were worried, but we never despaired of socialist societies." In other words, Gorbachov has proved how right PCF leaders were all along.

Meeting photographers after five hours of talks at the Kremlin, Marchais said his party had experienced "difficult moments" with the Soviet party, adding happily that since Gorbachov came to power in 1985, "our relations are excellent, excellent."

Gorbachov agreed that all was well: "I wouldn't say our positions are identical, but they are very close."

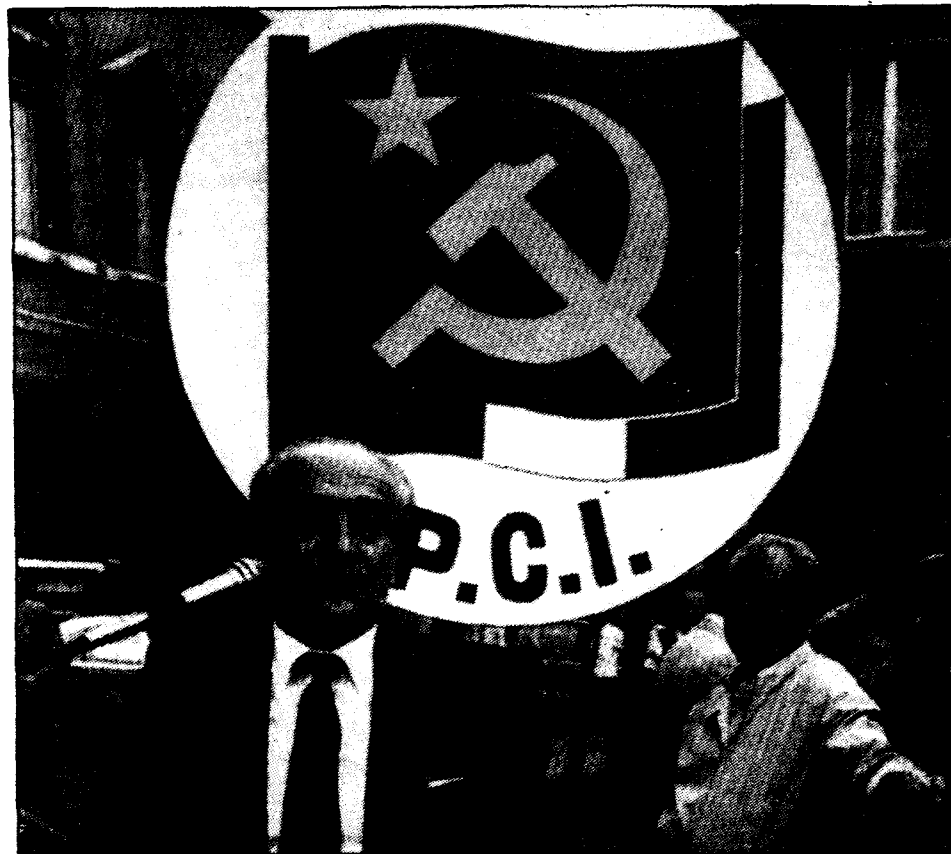
The official statements stressed agreement on "the role of the Communist Party" in the struggle for socialism. The current difficulties and conflicts in the Soviet Union could to some extent have been avoided if the party had been up to the challenge, they seemed to agree. Marchais stressed a new convergence on "the concept of socialism" which did not exist in "the previous period."

It was hard for outside observers to know what to make of this rejoicing at the end of a pre-Gorbachov split between the two parties that no one could remember. What outsiders remembered was Marchais rushing to Brezhnev's side to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The belated but emphatic expression of total French Communist solidarity with Gorbachov's reform policy seemed designed to help the PCF at least as much as the beleaguered Soviet leader. Gorbachov is popular with the shrinking PCF electorate. It was politically urgent to make the point that *perestroika* is intended to rejuvenate, rather than jettison, socialism. Also, it helps Marchais to be able to point to the "unity of views" with Gorbachov on European problems.

**Botch on the Rhine:** Two problem areas are of special concern to the PCF: Germany, and the French Communists' rivalry with their neighbors in the Italian Communist Party (PCI), especially in regard to the European Community.

The PCF has traditionally had good relations with East German Communists. Strong support for the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its ruling Socialist Unity Party



Alessandro Natta of the Italian Communist Party: stuck in the past.

(SED) accords with French dread of German reunification. The summer exodus of young East Germans through Hungary to West Germany has pushed even the PCF to creep toward veiled criticism of the GDR's leadership. Indeed, the stubborn refusal of Erich Honecker's SED to accept the slightest move toward political pluralism seems to be setting the stage for an explosion of major proportions and uncertain outcome. The worst possible scenario for both the French and Soviet parties (and for almost everybody else as well) would be an anti-socialist explosion in East Germany calling for reunification in a mood of enthusiastic reas-

## The West's two main communist parties have become rivals for influence but not, unfortunately, for ideas.

sertion of German nationalism. To prevent this, giving some leeway to reformers still attached to socialism is necessary and urgent.

*L'Humanité* discreetly criticized SED leadership by quoting at length the GDR's vice minister of culture, Klaus Höpcke, who suggested that the causes of the exodus were to be found in East Germany itself and that people should be given more responsibility in their society. This contrasts with the official SED position blaming the West for luring people away.

For what it's worth, Marchais' emphatic endorsement of Gorbachov's course of reforms, coupled with *L'Humanité's* coverage of East Germany, can be seen as an additional discrete warning to East German Communists that they must change their act.

Another political concern of the French Communists in showing their closeness to Gorbachov is their ongoing rivalry with the

Italian Communists. This summer, the split between the PCF and PCI was formalized in the European Parliament. There is in the European Parliament no longer a group calling itself Communist, but now two groups, neither calling itself "communist." The seven French communists are in the "Left Coalition" with three Greeks, three Portuguese Communists and one representative of the Northern Ireland Workers Party. The 22 members elected on the PCI list are in the "Unitary European Left" group with four Spanish Communists, a Dane and a Greek. It was only through the efforts of Italian Socialist Party leader Bettino Craxi that the PCI was denied welcome to the Socialist group, where it is widely appreciated as the best of Italy's social democratic parties.

Moreover, the PCI is forming chapters in France for Italian migrant workers formerly organized inside the PCF, a move interpreted as setting up a direct competition with the French Communists on their home turf. At Soviet leader Chernenko's funeral in March 1985, his successor, Mikhail Gorbachov, took then-PCI secretary Alessandro Natta aside for more than an hour, praising Enrico Berlinguer, Natta's predecessor, for "useful and helpful" criticism of the Soviet Union. The Gorbachov generation has seemed much more appreciative of the PCI's successful independence than of the French Communists' apparent loyalty to Moscow, which has been of little use either to Moscow or to the French Communists.

**Decline of the Roman Empiricists:** However, the change of leadership in Moscow has coincided with a changed PCI leadership that has not built much of anything on this initial sympathy. Since taking over as secretary in June 1988, Achille Occhetto has turned his attention to the West and in particular to the U.S., where he hopes to lift Washington's longtime veto of PCI participation in the Italian national government. Occhetto is also looking for potential Socialist allies in the European Community.

Craxi and his Socialists have managed to

keep Occhetto's PCI on the defensive by harping on the past that the Communists are supposed to have to disavow before being accepted as democrats. Last year, the Socialists found a new if posthumous target in the person of Palmiro Togliatti, the PCI's "historic" postwar leader, who died at Yalta in 1964.

Returning to Italy in 1943 from fascist-era exile in Stalin's Moscow, Togliatti is credited with having built the postwar PCI as a mass rather than a vanguard party, contributing to the construction of democracy in Italy. Last February, Craxi lieutenant Claudio Martelli spoke of "Togliatti the accomplice and hangman." Whatever this was supposed to mean, it made Occhetto nervous. Unveiling a monument to Togliatti in Civitavecchia last July, Occhetto seemed to have come to bury, not to praise. Whatever Togliatti had done "belonged to the past, and it's up to us to

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do something new and different," said the new PCI leader. "It's clear to us that he was inevitably co-responsible for choices and acts of the Stalin era, that is, of a period in the history of the workers' movement that is full of shadows."

The trouble is that until they have actually succeeded in doing "something new and different," this readiness to condemn their forerunners sounds like nothing more than callow opportunism. So far all one can say of the Occhetto generation is that it seems too wishy-washy to accomplish what the older generation did, for better or for worse.

Finally, survivors of the older generation led by Togliatti's companion Nilde Iotti, president of Italy's National Assembly, came to Togliatti's defense. Retired labor leader Luciano Lama said that back when he was in the communist underground and then right after the liberation from fascism, he believed in things he sees very critically now. But he gave credit to Togliatti for saving Italy from the civil war that ravaged Greece. In 1945, said Lama, "there was the force, the determination and the arms in Italy for a communist revolution. Togliatti prevented all that, and today I think it can be considered a great good."

The late 20th century has a hard time finding anything more fascinating to think about than the dramatic errors of the mid-20th century. At the annual Festa dell'Unità summer gathering of the PCI more people were interested in arguments about Togliatti than in forward-looking discussions of ecological socialism.

The PCI's ranking ideologue, Pietro Ingrao, makes an effort to look backward, forward and at the present all at once. He has criticized a tendency to react to the changes in the East by a "separation" of them from us—"they" in the East who embodied "real socialism" that failed, while "we" are something else and innocent. Ingrao insists that the left's survival depends on coming to grips with what is happening in the East. The left has shifted from faith in a uniform socialism to faith in "the market." Ingrao suggests thinking not of "the market" but of "markets," recognizing that Russia will never be exactly like the West. Nor is it clear how long the West will be as we now think it is. In short, Ingrao called for more critical comparative analysis and less self-justification.

The shelves may be bare in Soviet stores, but the Russian marketplace of ideas is dazzling compared to the dreary display in the biggest of the West's Communist Parties. □

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# AIM

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camp for Dakota people. Organizers did not fail to remind their guests of that history.

But the celebration also illustrated the movement's own history. Dick Bancroft, a Twin Cities photographer who has closely observed AIM since its inception, said AIM's celebration of its birthday in a state park showed a shift from "confrontation to negotiation."

"Ten years ago we would have come here and taken over this park," Bancroft said. "Now, we are having a powwow here, and there's an agreement between the state of Minnesota and the American Indian Movement."

"I never would have thought we'd get to be this way," Bancroft added with a grin.

Since the mid-'70s, when AIM leadership was scattered by a wide-scale FBI counterin-

surgency operation, AIM members have gone many different ways. Some have become community organizers, developing schools and business centers. Others have jetted around the world to meet with Arab and African leaders and speak at the United Nations. Some have joined tribal governments.

Sometimes those different strategies clash, and people who stood shoulder to shoulder on the barricades in the early '70s now find themselves on opposite sides of the fence. When a group of AIM and other Indian leaders went to Libya in 1987, some Indian organizers criticized them for jeopardizing AIM's public support. AIM members who joined tribal governments have been accused of "selling out" by other activists. And in AIM groups from Minneapolis to San Francisco, members have fought passionately over issues ranging from tribal sovereignty to petty-cash accounts.

Internal dispute is particularly visible in AIM because the group is not an "organiza-

tion" in the mainstream sense. Its members do not carry cards or passes, no statutes have been written and no official hierarchy built. People in the movement say membership is "a state of mind."

That loose organization can make it difficult to keep the movement alive and cohesive. But AIM members say it's also the movement's strength. "AIM was never a mass organization," Bellecourt said. He points to the movement's roots in Indian spirituality and tradition. AIM is at its best, he said, when it serves as a catalyst, "the spark that kindles a fire long forgotten in the minds of the people."

To keep the fire alive is not easy, AIM members say, as the movement approaches the "age of maturity." During the gathering, while powwow guests circled the drums and listened to traditional songs, a few dozen "hard core" members spent their days in strategy meetings. They came out with a 20-point pro-

posal first prepared for the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties. Among other things, the document calls on Congress to investigate and reaffirm Indian treaties and sovereignty.

But the challenges to AIM go beyond documents, several grass-roots organizers told the AIM leaders at the conference. "It's a war we're fighting," said Mike Chosa from the Lac du Flambeau, Wis., reservation. "And in a war, you need an army."

Chosa told the group of his tribe's struggle to defend resource-use rights against state interference. Although questions of who can take northern Wisconsin's fish, wildlife and timber are vital to tribal members, Chosa said, only a few dozen of the 2,400 people on his reservation attend meetings to address the issues. In urban areas, he said, Indian people are frequently not even aware of their tribal backgrounds and their rights.

"Maybe our issues are right," Chosa told the meeting. "But we ought to take a look at our methodology. We are not doing the things that attract support from the people."

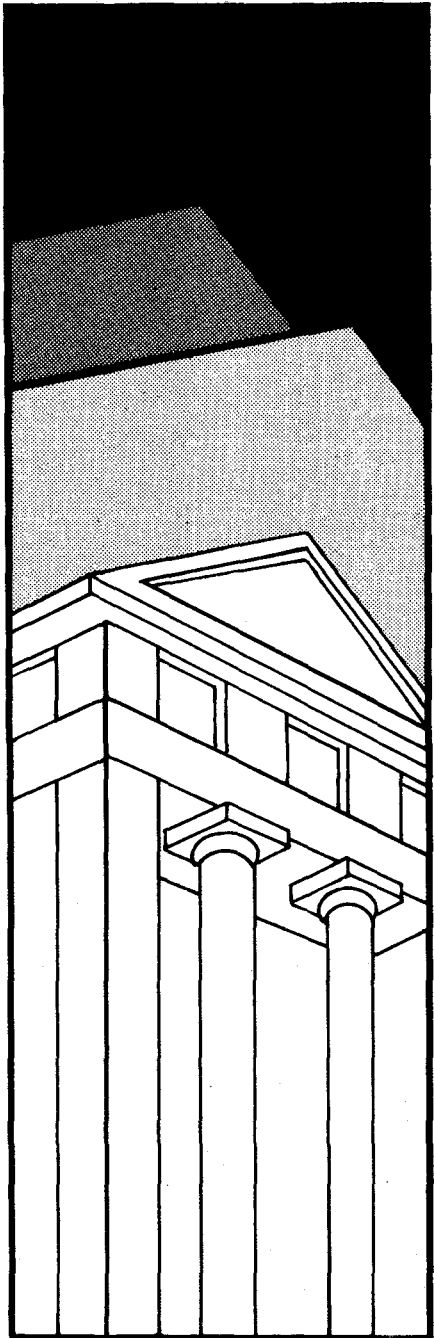
At the end of four days of strategy meetings, most of the AIM organizers tended to agree. But they were also ready to renew their calls for action. During a closing meeting, Leblanc sounded a theme that has consistently brought support for AIM from many different groups: the vision of a "spiritual rebirth." "We do not just speak for ourselves. We speak for the uranium. We speak for the trees. We speak for all humans, and beyond."

If AIM's goal is to translate that global responsibility into action, Leblanc said, the process has only just begun.

Monika Bauerlein is a German journalist based in Minneapolis.

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