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# Western Europe Weekly Review

11 January 1978

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France: Communists Spurn Electoral Accord

The French Communist Party's decision, announced at the party's convention last weekend, not to conclude an electoral accord with the Socialists further reduces the Left's chances for a victory in the legislative election in March. Communist leader Georges Marchais left open the possibility that his party might sign an agreement for the second round of the two-round election to be held on 12 and 19 March if his party showed sufficient strength in the first round.

The Communist Party is clearly more concerned about rebalancing the forces of the Left and consolidating and expanding its own electorate than it is about winning the election. An electoral accord signed now, followed by two months of a show of unity, might have reassured voters disenchanted by the Left's squabbling and could even have attracted some of the large number of undecided voters, for there is still a strong desire for change in France. "Twenty years of center-right government is enough" is still the Left's most persuasive slogan.

The Communists, however, are willing to risk electoral defeat and a reduced parliamentary representation in order to cut the Socialists down to a more manageable size and possibly cause the removal of the popular Socialist leader, Francois Mitterrand.

The Communists are aware that their behavior since the breakdown of the Left alliance last September has stirred up latent anti-Communism among the Socialist electorate and that more than half of the Socialist voters now say they will not shift their votes to the better placed Communist candidates in the second round. This percentage can be expected to increase as the Communists continue their polemics against their former Socialist allies in the time that remains before the election.

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The Communists have repeatedly said that they do not want to participate in a Left government that will just "manage" the economic crisis and that they want rapid profound reforms. They fear being a junior partner in a government that might be forced to continue an austerity policy that is anathema to the party's working class electorate.

A national poll of voting intentions in mid-December continued to show the same phenomenon: leftist losses are not being translated into rightist gains. The poll showed the Left at 50 percent (Communists 21, Extreme left 2, Socialist and Left Radicals 27), the Ecologists at 3 percent, and the Center-Right at 47 percent (Gaullists 22, Giscardians 18, Centrists 7). Because of the vagaries of the electoral system and uncertainty about voter discipline on the Left, these percentages, if actually translated into votes, would probably give the governing coalition a victory, but that is by no means assured.

The question of what the balance of forces will be on each side of the political spectrum is becoming almost as important as who wins the crucial election in March. It looks as if the Socialists will continue to dominate the left by a significant margin, and the Gaullists will probably do the same on the right. There may be further shifting on the right, for President Giscard is as determined to rebalance the center-right to the disadvantage of the Gaullists as Marchais is to redistribute strength among the leftist parties.

The election is likely to be close. A slim victory for the center-right, involving a reduced majority and Gaullist dominance, would not give France the strong unified government it needs to tackle its economic troubles and institute social and structural reforms. A slim victory for a divided Left would probably produce an even more weak and impotent government.

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