

Report from Paris by Emmanuel Grenier

A painful experiment with Greens

A pattern of pragmatic deals in the regions will take a serious toll on the national economy of France.

Green Party politician Marie-Christine Blandin has just become the president of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, the northernmost tip of France, with its famous port of Dunkirk facing England across the Channel. With the breakout of a radical environmentalist to the top post in a region, perhaps Frenchmen will learn what this really means: a painful experiment which Marie-Christine Blandin has characterized as "life-sized practical works."

Since the decentralization law drafted by Socialist Interior Minister Gaston Defferre in 1982, France's 22 regions have become power centers that figure larger and larger in the once highly centralized country. Today, a region is responsible not only for economic development and land management, but also for the implementation of the national economic plan through a procedure of consultations and a regional plan contract. Regions had been defined by the Lalonde Decree as the primary level at which industrial waste treatment should be dealt with. They also intervene in water policy, industrial policy, and farm policy.

In all these sectors, the Greens have developed a competence, if not in depth, at least in form. Like their American models, they understand that making an issue of regulations can be very effective in a country where there is no private environmental law—especially when parliamentary majorities are less and less absolute, and the major parties must find allies wherever they can.

Since the 1989 municipal elections, we have seen the Greens at work in the city councils, and there is no

denying their prowess at being obstructive. But now, the scale has changed: What might be simply regrettable for a village, or even a town, would be disastrous for a region. For the first time, ecologist ideas are inserting themselves into the French state—thanks to the consummate pragmatism of French politicians who will cohabit with the devil himself, just to hold power.

Michel Delebarre, the political kingmaker in Dunkirk, did not want to give the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region to the right wing. So he chose to hand it over to Blandin, whose electoral slate won 6.5% in the region, and who personally only won 4% of the votes in the canton where she was running. For this, he was forced to agree to the most outrageous demands of the Green Party. As a supreme insult to a minister of public works which he once was, he agreed to freeze planned highway projects, including the new highway along the coastline and the doubling of the North Highway. The planned expansion of the Lille airport appears to have dropped out of sight, while some people would even like to question the TGV high-speed rail track for Paris-Brussels-Cologne-Amsterdam.

Jacques Blanc, who presides over the southern city of Montpellier, at the opposite end of France on the Mediterranean coast, also had to make concessions in order to obtain, if not the "support," at least the tacit and comprehensive backing of three Green councilmen. According to the daily *Libération* of April 7, he committed himself to freezing a highway project; against financing for the TGV by the

Languedoc-Roussillon region, in which Montpellier is situated; for controlling expansion of quarries and gravel pits; against expansion of the Port-Marianne subdivision in Montpellier; and for the decentralization of the universities of Beziers and Narbonne. And, to top it off, Blanc is offering the post of vice chairman in charge of land management, to an elected Green.

None of this has anything to do with principle. Before teaming up with the Greens, Jacques Blanc had accepted a management contract with the National Front, the "right-wing" party which poses as the opposite of the Greens.

The Greens seek to win political support by their seemingly reasonable criticisms of the status quo. No rational person can deny their charge, for example, that thanks to the clout of the highway lobby, truck transport is becoming a chaotic tangle and threatening the safety of workers and the environment. Trucks pay only double tolls, although they use the highways 10-50 times more than the individual automobile. With the subsidies on diesel, they also benefit from indirect state aid.

Hence, the Greens call for the rapid development of combined transport infrastructure—in effect, echoing the longstanding demands of the Schiller Institute and the co-thinkers of Lyndon LaRouche in France. But as soon as it comes to actually *building* the infrastructure, the Greens "fog out."

In fact, it's the ecologists who hit the fan the minute someone tried to build the Southeast TGV. And it is the ecologists' spokesman Alain Lipietz who has worked out a tax system for promoting autarchy and providing disincentives to a regional and international division of labor: hardly measures that promote the development of combined transport.