

# Socialists rally round Fabius as right uses Aids blood scandal to attack

**Paul Webster in Paris**

**T**HE Socialist Party executive committee holds an emergency meeting on Sunday to counter an opposition move to destroy the credibility of the first secretary, Laurent Fabius, in the run-up to the March general elections.

Rightwing parties have seized on François Mitterrand's approval for the setting up of a parliamentary high court to judge ministerial responsibility in the blood transfusion scandal as their main hope of wrecking the Socialist election campaign.

Mr Fabius was prime minister from 1984 to 1986 at the height of distribution of HIV-contaminated blood to haemophiliacs, of whom more than 250 have died of Aids. Four state-employed doctors have since been tried and the head of the blood transfusion service, Michel Garretta, was sentenced to four years in jail.

The opposition is determined to pin blame on Mr Fabius and two of his ministers, Edmond Hervé and Georgina Dufoix, who were in charge of health and social affairs.

In agreeing to demands for a parliamentary high court, Mr

Mitterrand was responding to pleas by Mr Fabius to clear his name.

The weekend meeting hopes to show he was not aware of the dangers of contaminated blood, despite US warnings.

But short-term defence may be less important than the fending off of longer term attempts to keep Socialists out of power for many years. Socialist leaders believe that the opposition Gaullist and centrist movements, led by Jacques Chirac and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, are using the blood scandal to mask their own divisions and lack of joint policies.

The fact that Mr Mitterrand, who is trying to put together a new majority with less dependence on Socialists, did not defend his former prime minister when he announced approval for the high court is being seen by the opposition as a signal that the Elysée considers Mr Fabius as a possible political burden.

But by calling the weekend meeting, the Socialist Party appears to have been strengthened after a series of internal quarrels. All factions, including anti-Fabius groups, have taken up the defence of the first secretary and consider the opposition moves as underhand.