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INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT

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USA- Trump Makes Early Enemies

President Donald Trump and his alt-right advisor Stephen Bannon—“President Bannon” as he is being called—are making enemies fast, and lots of them. Leaders of some of the country’s largest corporations have come out against Trump’s Muslim and refugee ban. Some Christians, including Evangelicals, object to the ban’s privileging of Christians. Trump’s statement on the holocaust, which failed to mention Jews, offended major Jewish groups. Workers, workers’ centers, and labor unions, which represent many immigrants, have also spoken out against the Muslim ban.

These controversies and conflicts, especially the major capitalists who are breaking with Trump on this issue, are very significant. The problems that Trump faces are a reflection of conflicts among elites over the U.S. role in the global economy. American corporations have become globalized in a variety of ways. First, they have operations around the world that involve deploying executives and other employees to many different countries for long term stays or short visits. Consequently, restrictions on travel represent a serious problem for such companies.

Thousands demonstrated at airports across the country, including New York’s JFK airport. Second, the massive global migrations of the last 40 years have provided many corporations with immigrant employees from virtually every nation on earth, employees who are executives, technicians,
and workers. These may be people on their way to citizenship, Green Card workers with permanent residency, workers on specific visas, or undocumented workers. Restrictions on employees in all of these categories also represent a threat to modern multinational corporations. Most important, modern corporations operate with global production chains, with parts made in one country, products assembled in another, and then perhaps sold in yet another. Trump’s policies threaten to throw a monkey wrench into the machinery of world production both by inhibiting international population movements and by altering agreements like NAFTA that allow for the free expansion of supply chains across borders.

Trump’s white nationalist economic and political program appears to want to rip the United States out of these complicated relationships, and that will be bad for many businesses, which is one of the sources of this initial friction between the administration and the corporate world. Trump is also, of course, trying to influence corporate decisions about where to invest and where to build new plants, demanding that manufacturing jobs remain in or return to the United States. From the point of view of corporate boards, this is an intrusion into their business and their right to make a profit. Yet, at the same time, he is promising to reduce government regulation of all sorts—including labor and the environment—and to cut taxes. Business of course loves these concessions, and they will likely limit outright opposition to the administration, at least as long as there are still doubts about how far Trump’s nationalist and protectionist program will be taken.

Yet, the present controversies and conflicts are not only about the material issues of the business world. The “white” part of the white nationalist program makes categorical opponents of Muslims and Jews, as well as Asians, Latinos and, of course, Blacks. Trump’s and Bannon’s white nationalist ideology also represents a profound break with American’s historic ruling class ideology of democracy, pluralism, and more recently of diversity and inclusion. The ideological rupture that is taking place, exacerbated by Trump, also represents a major development that gives rise to splits from the top to the bottom of American society.

While the United States has a long history of racism and pockets of society that subscribe to rightwing racist ideas, most Americans do not hold the alt-right, white nationalist ideology, and converting many of them to it will take some time. Others, of course, will never accept it. Meanwhile the struggle between traditional liberalism, contemporary neoliberalism, and white nationalism will continue to cause conflict.

The CEOs Rebel

Several corporate CEOs spoke out against Trump’s Muslim and refugee ban. Mark Fields of Ford stated, “Core to our values are respect for people. And all of our policies, including our human-resource policies, support a diverse and inclusive workplace, and we don’t support policies that are counter to our values.”

Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook said, “My great grandparents came from Germany, Austria and Poland. Priscilla’s parents were refugees from China and Vietnam. The United States is a nation of immigrants, and we should be proud of that. Like many of you, I’m concerned about the impact of the recent executive orders signed by President Trump. We need to keep this country safe, but we should do that by focusing on people who actually pose a threat.” Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, which has provided Trump with several cabinet members and top advisors, told employees, “This is not a policy we support, and I would note that it has already been challenged in federal court.” Blankfein was a Hillary Clinton supporter in the last election.

Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz wrote to company partners and employees:

“I write to you today with deep concern, a heavy heart and a resolute promise. Let me begin with the news that is immediately in front of us: we have all been witness to the confusion, surprise and opposition to the Executive Order that President Trump issued on Friday, effectively banning people from several predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States, including refugees fleeing wars. I can assure you that our Partner Resources team has been in direct contact with the partners who are impacted by this immigration ban, and we are doing everything possible to support and help them to navigate through this confusing period.”

Schultz also expressed his support for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that Trump has vowed to eliminate, and expressed Starbucks’ commitment to hiring refugees.

CEOs of the tech companies, which both have operations around the world and employ many immigrants, spoke out especially strongly. Reed Hastings of Netflix wrote on Facebook:

“Trump’s actions are hurting Netflix employees around the world, and are so un-American it pains us all. Worse, these actions will make America less safe (through hatred and loss of allies) rather than more safe. A very sad week, and more to come with the lives of over 600,000 Dreamers here in a America under imminent threat. It is time to link arms together to protect American values of freedom and opportunity.”

At Google’s headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., hundreds of employees demonstrated carrying signs reading, “Silicon Valley: Built by Immigrants.” There were also protests at Google offices in New York, San Francisco, and Seattle with over 2,000 joining the protests in all the company’s offices. Google employees welcomed company founder Sergey Brin to the protest with cheers. Brin, Google’s co-founder, spoke to employees: “so many people were obviously outraged by this order, as am I myself, being an immigrant and a refugee,” Brin told the crowd. “I’m glad to see the energy here today and around the world to know that people are fighting for what’s right out there.”
Tech companies went further than others, with Amazon and Expedia joining the State of Washington’s federal lawsuit against the Trump administration because the new policy adversely affects their businesses.

**Republican Leaders Criticize Trump**

While most Republicans have enthusiastically endorsed Trump’s policies since his election, some have remained silent, and a few leading Republican politicians have spoken out against Trump’s executive order. Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham and some eighteen other Congressmen criticized Trump’s Muslim ban either in principle or for particular aspects of it, such as the detention of Green Card holders, or its crude implementation.

McCain and Graham issued a joint statement saying, “We fear this executive order will become a self-inflicted wound in the fight against terrorism. It may do more to help terrorist recruitment than improve our security.”

Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Bob Corker told the media, “We all share a desire to protect the American people, but this executive order has been poorly implemented, especially with respect to green card holders. The administration should immediately make appropriate revisions, and it is my hope that following a thorough review and implementation of security enhancements that many of these programs will be improved and reinstated.”

**Christians and Jews Angry with Trump**

Despite their reservations, most Evangelical Christian conservatives voted for Trump, but some now express differences. Several major Christian groups, especially those that work with migrants and refugees, took a strong stand against Trump’s Muslim ban and especially the privileging of Christians. A series of religious leaders told the New York Times of their objections to the policy. Rev. Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief, the National Association of Evangelicals’ international aid group, told the NYT, “We oppose any religions test that would place the suffering of one people over another.”

Bishop Joe S Vásquez of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement reading: “We need to protect all our brothers and sisters of all faiths, including Muslims, who have lost family, home and country.” Sarah Krause, a senior director for refugee programs of the Church World Service, made up of mainstream Protestant churches, said that her group “denounces the prioritization of Christian refugees over Muslim refugees. We are called on by our faith to love the stranger. To do anything other than that is in violation of our Christian principles.”

The president of the National Association of Evangelicals, which represents more than 45,000 churches, sent a letter to Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence stating that, “The U.S. refugee resettlement program’s screening process is already extremely thorough. We believe that our nation can continue to be both compassionate and secure.” The letter asked the president to resume the US refugee resettlement program “immediately.”

Jewish groups expressed their incredulity and indignation at the Trump administration’s omission of a mention of Jews in its holocaust remembrance statement. The Republican Jewish Coalition, which receives large contributions from casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, understated its view when it called the White House statement, “an unfortunate omission. History unambiguously shows the purpose of the Nazi’s final solution was the extermination of the Jews of Europe.”

Mort Klein of The Zionist Organization of America stated, “Especially as a child of Holocaust survivors, I and ZOA are compelled to express our chagrin and deep pain at President Trump, in his Holocaust Remembrance Day message, omitting any mention of anti-Semitism and the six million Jews who were targeted and murdered by the German Nazi regime.”

**Workers, Workers’ Centers, and Labor Unions Protest Trump’s Ban**

While Trump has had success in winning over the conservative building trades unions, many other groups of workers, workers’ centers, and labor unions have come out against Trump. On January 28, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, a non-profit that represents 19,000 taxi drivers, called on its members to strike for one hour at the John F. Kennedy Airport against Trump’s Muslim and refugee ban. Many taxi drivers are immigrants, a large number of them Muslims. The Alliance wrote, “We cannot be silent. We go to work to welcome people to a land that once welcomed us. We will not be divided.” It added on Twitter, “Drivers stand in solidarity with thousands protesting inhumane & unconstitutional #MuslimBan.”

The CUNY Professional Staff Congress (PSC), of which I am a member, is protesting the denial of entry to our sister Saira Rafiee, an Iranian graduate student who was visiting family in in Iran last week when Trump’s executive order took effect. The PSC is also providing her with legal assistance. A demonstration in support of her is planned for February 3. Barbara Bowen, PSC president stated, “I vow to fight for her. I join the students and faculty fighting for the simple right of someone who has legal status, who has been thoroughly vetted, who is on a visa, simply to rejoin her fellow students, faculty, staff and resume her studies. It is an outrage.”

Trump’s presidency has already created a variety of fissures in American society and internationally. The resistance movement will be working to exacerbate these until they become deep rifts between Trump and various elements of his political base.

**February 1, 2017**

**USA- From the Women’s March to the International Women’s Strike**

The organizers of the January 21 Women’s March on Washington were expecting a large turnout, but
the almost 3m people who decided to take to the streets around the country, and in a number of cities around the world, went well beyond the most optimistic expectations and represented a serious embarrassment to Donald Trump. The most notable fact about the Women's March is the massive participation of people with no previous political experience, nor participation in protest. This fact alone, regardless of the political limitations that have characterized the call for the march and its public representation in the media, should be a reason for optimism, as well as an invitation to think seriously about how to maintain momentum and about the ways in which women’s mobilizations can work as a trigger for the birth of a mass movement; tackling not only the aggressively right wing policies of the Trump administration, but also the effects of neoliberalism and institutional racism on the life of millions of women and the working class more generally.

The composition of the marches

While the narrative surrounding the march has been largely monopolized by liberal leaning organizations and spokespersons such as Planned Parenthood, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Sierra Club; and while initially only white people were included among the main organizers, the actual composition of the marches was much more diverse. One cannot explain the sheer number of participants without taking into account the complexity of motivations and factors that led people to take to the streets, as well as the diversity of the participants.

The marches certainly attracted disappointed Clinton supporters, but also worked as a catalyst for a more widely spread resentment and fear of Trump’s unapologetic misogyny and sexist policies – particularly concerning reproductive rights – and for a general opposition to his islamophobia, racism, climate change denial, and authoritarianism. Moreover, they also attracted organizations and campaigns working on a number of issues ranging from the fight for the minimum wage to climate change, as well as many rank and file union members.

Criticisms of the Women’s March

In the days following the march, a number of criticisms have been leveraged against it, focusing mostly on three issues. The first was the march’s self-representation as ‘well-behaved’ and ‘peaceful’, which obscured the fact that it was not respectability that explained the absence of arrests compared with the #DisruptJ20 demonstrations of the day before, but rather the massive presence of white women, who are much less likely to be harassed by the police than women of color.

The second issue was the liberal narrative surrounding the march, which exclusively focused on Trump’s reactionary policy announcements and made little mention of class, obfuscating the fact that women’s rights and living conditions, especially those of migrants and women of color, working class and unemployed women, as well as trans and queer women, have been under attack for years, including under Obama’s administration.

A third concern was more of an expression of resentment against the mass of people who felt motivated enough to take to the streets to protest against Trump, but did not feel motivated enough to take part in Black Lives Matter demonstrations and in protests against police brutality against people of color of the last few years.

Even taking into account all of its pitfalls and contradictions, however, it would be a mistake to think that there is no connection whatsoever between the Women’s March and the mobilizations of recent years, from Occupy to Fight for Fifteen, from Black Lives Matter to the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline. In fact, while Trump’s election has triggered an increase in the scale of mobilization, the various struggles of recent years have been key in shifting popular perceptions concerning protests, their legitimacy, and their efficacy.

While there is no perfect political continuity between the call for the Women’s March and these more radical, racial justice and class-based mobilizations, one could hardly imagine almost 3m people taking to the streets in a single day without the groundwork laid by the last five years of nation-wide social mobilizations. A change of scale unavoidably entails a more heterogeneous composition of protest, both on a social and on a political level, and therefore political limitations of all sorts, but the large participation in the Women’s March should be seen as one of the outcomes of mass social resistance that was years in the making.

Toward the March 8 Women’s Strike

Another important element of analysis for understanding the potentialities created by the Women’s March is the international wave of women’s struggles that has taken place in recent months across a number of countries: women led strikes and demonstrations have swept through Poland, Argentina, Italy, Ireland, and elsewhere. It is too early to say whether we are witnessing the birth of a new feminist movement, but the signals certainly look promising.

This context should be central to the discussions about what to do next in the wake of the Women’s March and of the more recent demonstrations against Trump’s Muslim ban. The International Women’s Strike network has called for a strike on March 8th.[1] So far, feminist collectives and coalitions from Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Ireland and Northern Ireland, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Poland, Russia, Scotland, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, and Uruguay have joined the call and are making preparations.

The various coalitions working on this are articulating their own platforms and demands, which in most cases combine together opposition to male and sexist violence against women and LGBT people,
social demands such as the minimum wage, labor rights, equal pay, public services and health care, opposition to racism and xenophobia and defense of migrant women, environmental issues and reproductive rights.

The forms of action vary by country and include demonstrations, pickets, boycotts, sex strikes, and direct action. Moreover, in some countries, such as Italy, coalitions of women and radical trade unions are working on creating the conditions for a wave of women led workplace strikes.

Joining the March 8 International Women’s Strike and creating and expanding strike coalitions in the United States would not only help maintain the momentum generated by the Women’s Marches, but would also be a step towards reshaping the mobilization along the lines of international and anti-imperialist solidarity, advancing the leadership and agency of racialized, migrant, and trans women, asserting the centrality of the fight against institutional racism and Islamophobia, and bolstering opposition to the dismantling of social reproduction provisions and labor rights. Against Trump, but also beyond Trump.

We want to contribute to the development of this new, more expansive feminist movement.

As a first step, we propose to help build an international strike against male violence and in defense of reproductive rights on March 8th. In this, we join with feminist groups from around thirty countries who have called for such a strike. [1] The idea is to mobilize women, trans-women and all who support them in an international day of struggle—a day of striking, marching, blocking roads, bridges, and squares, abstaining from domestic, care and sex work, boycotting, calling out misogynistic politicians and companies, striking in educational institutions. These actions are aimed at making visible the needs and aspirations of those whom lean-in feminism ignored: women in the formal labor market, women working in the sphere of social reproduction and care, and unemployed and precarious working women.

In embracing a feminism for the 99%, we take inspiration from the Argentinian coalition Ni Una Menos. [2] Violence against women, as they define it, has many facets: it is domestic violence, but also the violence of the market, of debt, of capitalist property relations, and of the state; the violence of discriminatory policies against lesbian, trans and queer women, the violence of state criminalization of migratory movements, the violence of mass incarceration, and the institutional violence against women’s bodies through abortion bans and lack of access to free healthcare and free abortion. Their perspective informs our determination to oppose the institutional, political, cultural, and economic attacks on Muslim and migrant women, on women of color and working and unemployed women, on lesbian, gender nonconforming, and trans-women.

The women’s marches of January 21st have shown that in the United States too a new feminist movement may be in the making. It is important not to lose momentum. Let us join together on March 8 to strike, walk out, march and demonstrate. Let us use the occasion of this international day of action to be done with lean-feminism and to build in its place a feminism for the 99%, a grass-roots, anti-capitalist feminism—a feminism in solidarity with working women, their families, and their allies throughout the world.

Linda Martín Alcoff is a professor of philosophy at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center and the author of “Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self”. She is currently at work on a new book...
on sexual violence, and another on decolonizing epistemology

Tithi Bhattacharya teaches history at Purdue University. Her first book, The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (Oxford, 2005), is about the obsession with culture and education in the middle class. Her work has been published in journals such as the Journal of Asian Studies, South Asia Research and New Left Review, and she is currently working on a book project entitled “Uncanny Histories: Fear, Superstition and Reason in Colonial Bengal”.

Cinzia Arruzza was a leading member of Sinistra Critica in Italy. Today she is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York and a feminist and socialist activist. She is the author of the author of “Dangerous Liaisons: The Marriages and Divorces of Marxism and Feminism”.

Nancy Fraser is Loeb Professor of Philosophy and Politics at the New School for Social Research. Her books include “Redistribution or Recognition” and “Fortunes of Feminism”.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is an assistant professor in Princeton University’s Center for African American Studies and the author of "From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation”.

Rasmea Yousef Odeh is the associate director of the Arab American Action Network, leader of that group’s Arab Women’s Committee, and a former member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Mexico-Against Trump and Peña: unity from below and without borders

The following statement was published by the Revolutionary Workers’ Party, PRT, Mexican section of the Fourth International, as the U.S. President, Donald Trump, signed his executive order to begin work immediately on a wall along the border between the two countries, and repeated that Mexico would have to pay for it. As a result, the Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, was forced to cancel his planned visit to the White House on 31 January.

After the dramatic increase in fuel, electricity and water prices throughout the country and a month of uninterrupted, massive protests across the country that have deepened the crisis of legitimacy – which is increasingly a political crisis – of Mexico’s oligarchic regime, we are now beginning to see the first steps of the new, extreme right, xenophobic, macho, racist and anti-Mexican administration in the White House. This can only bring further complications, contradictions and possibilities of struggle to the Mexican political scene.

The timid response of the Peña government once again shows its inability to cope with the country’s crisis, including now the measures taken against Mexico by the Trump government and its continual threats. The protectionist turn of the new US government is underway: it has not only blocked investments in Mexico and liquidated the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade agreement (TPP), it has also threatened to “renegotiate” the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in its favour (virtually cancelling it), and to impose 20% tariffs on Mexican exports to finance the wall of shame on a border that is already militarized, not to mention the massive deportations that are around the corner. All of this, which is an expression of the crisis of neoliberalism, could destroy the foundations on which decades of neoliberal economic policies were erected to secure Mexico as the United States’ back yard. Indeed, Peña Nieto’s most recent structural reforms, especially in the energy sector, were designed and imposed on the assumption of the Mexican economy’s deep and almost exclusive dependence on the imperialist interests of its northern neighbour.

It was on this neoliberal assumption that NAFTA destroyed the Mexican countryside, dismantled the incipient domestic industry to favour the “maquiladora” model (of export processing plants), gave away to US (and Canadian) companies the country’s minerals, destroyed labour rights and spread precarious work, to name but a few of the clearest effects. At the same time, since the time of Miguel de la Madrid [1] both PRI and PAN governments have justified their submission to US interests, saying that it was better to have them as “allies” than as “enemies.” These technocrats never imagined, when they prostrated themselves before the White House, that a future tenant might turn round and play with them. For these Mexican rulers and officials never saw themselves as statesmen, as representatives of an allied, sovereign nation, but as mere subordinates. That is why we cannot expect the Mexican government, or the parties that signed up to the "Pact for Mexico", to represent the interests of the Mexican people in any "new NAFTA negotiations," or in the face of abuses against Mexicans in the US and the imminent construction of the Wall.

There will only be a new form of subordination, more bowing and scraping, which will only bring worse consequences for workers on both sides of the border. The discomfort of Peña Nieto’s government is not only an expression of his own personal incapacity, although that is real enough. Above all, it is because for decades they have faithfully subordinated themselves to the dictates of neoliberalism – most fully expressed in the structural reforms imposed by Peña and the parties of the Pact for Mexico. And now that Trump is giving a more right-wing and protectionist turn to imperialist politics, the neoliberals in Mexico have been left in the lurch, with no alternative to the crisis. They can offer no alternative because they dug Mexico’s grave by following the imperialist dictates, which is all they know how to do, and now those dictates are in contradiction with the ones they followed so faithfully.

It is important for the left, the social movements and for working people, not to fear a renegotiation of NAFTA, which had only terrible consequences for working people. The worst mistake now would be, as the PRD did, to "defend NAFTA" against Trump. On the contrary, peasants, democratic unions, and the
left in general, have for decades been fighting NAFTA and its consequences. We fight for a sovereign and independent nation that uses its natural resources to build a strong economy that benefits the majority, who are us, the workers.

Trump’s "protectionist turn" does not imply that the United States no longer has an interest in grabbing our natural resources and taking advantage of cheap, precarious labor to overexploit it. From the perspective of workers’ interests, faced with Trump’s protectionist trade policy, it is no alternative to "look to other countries" (such as those proposing China or the European Union), which would mean remaining a semi-colonial and dependent country. These unequal and subordinate relations will not improve the situation of the country or of the workers, but they will certainly maintain the privileges of the ruling caste. We need to break the model, not just change master. The end of neoliberal Mexico should be the opportunity to unite all of us from below, starting with the working people, organizing and fighting to remake an independent and sovereign Mexico, one which is fair and democratic, free and egalitarian, ecological, without exploitation or oppression of any kind. That is a revolutionary political perspective.

Everything indicates that the "renegotiation favourable to the United States", which Trump proposes in relation to NAFTA, means more destruction of Mexican infrastructure and greater subordination of the Mexican economy to the needs of its northern neighbour. In this restructuring of US production, the empire will try to secure the basic inputs it needs to do this at the lowest possible cost.

Given the economic and political collapse of the Mexican neoliberals with this protectionist turn by the new US government, the calls by Peña and other political figures like Andres López Obrador, to forge a "national unity" against Trump, are desperate attempts to overcome their crisis of legitimacy.

National unity? What do we Mexican workers have in common with the magnates who, faced with a changed political landscape, are seeking to accommodate themselves and their interests to the new master? What do the corrupt, xenophobic, and billionaire members of the Trump cabinet have in common with the millions of black, Latino, and white workers whose situation has been made more precarious by both Democratic and Republican policies in recent years? Nothing can be more poisonous than supposed calls to national unity with those who were the first to plunge us into this crisis.

It is urgent, of course, to forge the broadest unity against the policies of racist hatred, denial and oppression of the other. But that means unity from below and without borders. Trump and Peña represent the enemy, the same enemy, regardless of momentary insults. U.S. workers, the Sioux, Mexican migrants (our brother and sister workers across the border) and Latinos in general, the Black Lives Matter movement, the millions of women who flooded the streets of the United States, these are our main allies.

Although the outlook is grim, it is also true that these draconian blows (of Trump and Peña) are already facing the obstacle of mobilized resistance. On the one hand, Trump’s inauguration was welcomed by mass protests, with women in the front line, and new mobilizations and struggles are promised. These are a starting point. On this side of the border, the massive mobilizations against the petrolazo (fuel price rises) and the structural reforms herald a new period of struggle and resistance. Struggles that again will be screaming, Out with Peña! It is urgent for people in struggle on both sides of the border to reach out so that together we can face the capitalist monster. We need to take up again the exemplary international solidarity with the cause of the Ayotzinapa 43, who disappeared in September 2014. This is not about the scam of national unity, but of unity without borders, unity from below, unity in diversity, of the unity to resist and win.

In the Mexican case, it is urgent that the social discontent that has been expressed in massive and spontaneous mobilizations across the country, which in a few cases like that of Baja California, have won partial though not yet consolidated victories, can be channeled and organized into more permanent and democratic fronts of struggle – fronts which different organisations can promote and where they can come together. Almost a month of spontaneous daily protests across the country against the fuel price increases, have begun to see greater participation by forces that had previously organized against neoliberalism. This Thursday 26th a decisive sector of the working class, represented by the New Workers’ Central, the Mexican Electricians’ Union (SME), and the National Assembly of Electric Users (ANUE), supported by the Political Organisation of the People and the Workers, has taken part in a very large mobilization through the streets of Mexico City, marking the presence of an organised proletarian wing within the framework of the spontaneous, popular, citizen protests of recent days. The mobilisation of 26th was preceded by dozens of occupations and protests at gas stations and workplaces of the former Mexico City Electricity Company, organised by the ANUE and SME.

On 31 January, another big mobilization has been called in Mexico City, by another important pole of reference, involving peasant organizations and the UNT (National Workers’ Union), including most importantly the union of telephone operators and university students. The scale of the crisis and the protests poses the need and responsibility to develop an organized pole of the working people in struggle, independent of the calls for "national unity" from the government and all the institutional parties (now not only the parties of the Pact for Mexico, but also Morena [2]. This demands a conscious and responsible effort to create a genuinely unitary space, to be able to coordinate all the struggles across the country and to raise the protest and struggle to the level needed at this moment and to carry through to their conclusion the three mobilizing slogans of recent days: Against the fuel price hikes, Against the structural reforms, Out with Peña. This
means raising the protest to new levels of struggle, including a possible, nationwide civic strike. But that cannot be just a propagandistic call. It means above all creating and coordinating the social forces capable of making it reality.

In fact, getting rid of the structural reforms, especially in energy and education, cannot be separated from the political objective of getting rid of the Peña government now (not by the smooth and institutional route proposed by López Obrador, of waiting until a few elections scheduled in 2018, which would mean a negotiated transition). Indeed, in the medium term, getting rid of the structural reforms can not mean simply returning to the Constitution as it was before 2013 (or 1994, when NAFTA came into force). It requires a new Constituent Assembly to redesign the country. This is even more true now that Yankee imperialism, represented by Trump, is imposing a new turn on the neoliberal globalization that the parties of the Pact for Mexico and its governments enthusiastically imposed on our country, destroying rights and historical conquests which may or may not have been reflected at some point in the Constitution.

Building unity from below, of all the movements and expressions of resistance, certainly faces many difficulties. But the continuation and deepening of the crisis could propel it forward in the coming weeks. On 4 February, there will be new petrol price rises, already approved in the Fiscal Income Law by the parties of the Pact for Mexico. And the practical implementation of Trump’s plans will hardly bring a period of peace and stability, despite the calls for “national unity”. Again, just think of the social consequences of building the wall and charging for it, along with the possible mass deportation of Mexican workers from the US.

Today, as perhaps never before, it is urgent that social movements on both sides of the border seek spaces to meet and discuss and develop joint campaigns. Solidarity is crucial to curb racist hatred. The internationalist spirit is the only way out to defeat xenophobic nationalism. There are many possible meeting points. The hundreds of movements that for years have been resisting ecocidal mega projects in Mexico, now see themselves in the mirror of Standing Rock; the dozens of political prisoners in Mexican prisons and the protesters recently detained in the US, who could face up to ten years’ in prison, are part of the same repressive policy; the women who, since last year, have taken to the streets throughout Latin America against violence against women and femicide, find their sisters in the millions of “pink pussy hats”.

Peña and Trump: They will not pass !

United we will win!

Mexico City, 25 January, 2017

[1] Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado was a member of PRI who served as the 52nd President of Mexico, 1982 -1988 and introduced many neoliberal policies.

Spanish State- Vista Alegre II: The show is over, are the politics starting?

Vista Alegre II has ended. After the deafening noise, the end has come. To analyse the causes of an unexpected result and to suggest some lines for future action, when spectacle and psychodrama give way to politics, here are five immediate thoughts on the second Citizens’ Assembly of Podemos:

1. The internal process that led to the renewal of the leadership in Madrid was to a great extent repeated and extended here. In Madrid, the relationship of forces was more favourable to Errejonismo [1] which, had it won there, would have been seen as unstoppable at the state-wide Congress. The tactic adopted in Madrid by Anticapitalistas, creating Reinica Podemos together with the “Pablist” current was based on the assumption that we need to renounce to some visibility and our own space in order to gain time and I think we made the right decision.

The most urgent task then was to prevent the more institutionalist and moderate theses from becoming hegemonic. This process showed that support for Pablo Iglesias was stronger than was thought in popular layers and that among Podemos supporters this sector is strong even in a primarily urban environment. The result for Madrid, taking as reference the average for the list, was not as tight as was believed: 51% for Juntas Podemos (pro-Iglesias + Anticapitalistas) as against 39% for Errejon’s supporters. There were already signs that this situation could be replicated at Vista Alegre II, taking into account the weight of Madrid within Podemos.

Errejon’s sector did not evaluate things in the same way, and threw everything into the state assembly. Hence the error that led them to suffer a considerable setback: overestimating the virtual relationship, and social networks, as against the identification and size of the greater part of the body attached to Podemos with the figure of Pablo. In this sense, the populist relationship with the rank and file held, paradoxically, much better for Iglesias than Errejon. [2]

2. The whole stark dispute that has surrounded this Assembly had to do with a political culture very much determined by the model of Vista Alegre I: public competition to win an electorate that was non-activist and was to be reached by the media and networks. As positions of responsibility are distributed according to these parameters, appearing in the media and accumulating followers in networks becomes one of the essential features of any applicant. The whole culture of Podemos is impregnated by that maxim, which ends up conferring on communication and its derivatives the only measure of political action. So the communications media becomes the setting for all internal debates, instead of the local circles of Podemos whose role in the stage that is ending has been almost symbolic. With the additional ex cesses of a struggle for control of the project, the elements that have seasoned the spectacle of the last few
weeks were already there for two and a half years at least.

3. Pabloism [3] has consolidated its position as the current with full control of the state-wide apparatus of Podemos. They have a popular base for improving and extending the implantation of the organisation, but on the other hand, they must apply formulas of decentralization that their organizational document ignores or rejects. Beyond a State Citizen’s Council where they count on an absolute majority, the main counterweights in this period will come from the territories. Hopefully, however, they will know how to integrate and build a collective leadership which has until now been absent, and the leadership bodies will serve to deliberate and translate in an orderly manner debates to all the activists and the circles.

4. Errejón’s sector has burned many boats in this battle. Abuse of both the adjective “winning” and the verb “win” when you lose one internal process after another can end up creating estrangement among outsiders and frustration among your own supporters. The Errejón project underestimated the accumulated weight of the social and political traditions of the past and present in this country, and his application of Laclau’s theories to a region in the south of Europe has not worked well. This is not a country in Latin America. The populist hypothesis introduced interesting innovations on the use of discourse but moved it very far from effective material relations, which has ended up making a lot of noise with little practical result. They will need to outline their current beyond permanent sloganeering and Twitter campaigning. These are necessary of course but they would do well to review some of the precepts that led them to consider everyone else to be losers and outdated compared to their infallible transversality.

5. And, last but not least, Podemos en Movimiento and Anticapitalistas. The decision to present a space of their own has been a success, but this was not obvious after the results in Madrid and Andalusia. A risky decision, where we ceded space in order to gain visibility, which was fundamental in order to project a third sector which was radical and based on the movements, but sensible and reasonable. A crop whose harvest will be deferred, in contrast to the model adopted for Vista Alegre I when the pressure to win at all costs was growing. The list was superb, the campaign also, and only a system as unfair as it is petty left us with two representatives when we could have had nine or ten with any proportional system. One of the lessons of 15-M is that you cannot say one thing and do another. We cannot criticise the Spanish electoral system and have an internal system which is much less democratic. If this method was applied in the national assembly, Podemos would have less than half the deputies it currently has.

After this congress, Anticapitalistas can celebrate a good campaign, where team spirit has been displayed, opposing views have been respected, and loyalty to the Podemos project has resulted in a “moral victory” – as has been pointed out by various media outlets. This slow accumulation of legitimacy will undoubtedly be useful for what is to come. Encouraging a new cycle of mobilisations will be one of the essential collective tasks we must deal with, and for this the relations Podemos en Movimiento and Anticapitalistas have with the social movements will be key.

**Madrid, 14 February 2017**

[1] The current around Íñigo Errejón. Errejón had previously been number 2 to Podemos’s General Secretary, Pablo Iglesias, but political differences between them had become more apparent over the last few months and they put different proposals to this Assembly.

[2] See Dave Kellaway in *Socialist Resistance* “Podemos votes against a moderate turn at Vista Alegre II”: “[Errejón’s] political document received 33.7% against 56% for Iglesias and 9% for the ACs, there was similar vote on the Organisational, the Ethics and the Equalities documents. On what became the crucial contest – the vote on the leadership slates – Iglesias won 60% of the seats to Errejón’s 37%.” We can add that Anticapitalistas won 13% in that latter vote.

Raul Camargo was a leading member of Izquierda Anticapitalista in Madrid. He is now part of the “Anticapitalistas” movement and participates in Podemos.

**Spanish State- Iglesias, Errejón, and the Road Not Taken**

This weekend, Podemos will gather for its second congress. At stake at is whether Podemos will be a party that merely seeks to win elections or one that wants to transform society. The meeting, planned as a kind of internal and external catharsis, will bring to a head all the strategic debates that arose after the party’s leadership imploded in March 2016. This division had, until last spring, been only latent, held primarily by the minority membership who had always opposed the party model and strategy codified at Podemos’s first congress in Vistalegre in October 2014.

**The Three Souls of Podemos**

The three factions within Podemos are represented by Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, and the Anticapitalistas.

Until last spring, Iglesias and Errejón shared the leadership having pushed the Anticapitalistas to the margins at the party’s inception in 2014. At the first party congress later that year, they successfully pushed for Podemos to aim for victory in the 2015 general election, establishing a centralized, homogeneous, and top-down organizational structure to achieve this goal. The result would come to be known as the electoral war machine or, simply, the Vistalegre model.

Although the split would not become visible until March 2016, a fight between Iglesias and Errejón had been brewing for over a year. The two men fundamentally disagreed over the proper...
response to another upstart party, Ciudadanos, which championed democratic renewal and the fight against corruption from a neoliberal perspective. The media and big business praised it as a sort of right-wing Podemos and hoped it would divert social anger toward a pro-business alternative. Ciudadanos’s unexpected strength represented the Vistalegre strategy’s first real obstacle.

Errejón wanted to answer this challenge with soft politics, amounting to a relative ciudadanization of Podemos — reversing Ciudadanos’s strategy of manipulating Podemos’s slogans. After some hesitation, Iglesias decided instead to confront the new party, decrying it as a neoliberal party that supported the traditional parties. This debate marked the first time Podemos’s leadership acknowledged that the road to electoral victory was more complex than expected.

The leadership breakdown opened an unprecedented period of public discussion, although the membership mainly served as passive spectators unable to join the debate. Thankfully, because of the divide within the leadership, internal discussion and plurality have become the party’s norm, though it still suffers from the negative political culture and organizational dynamics of the Vistalegre model.

The split also regularized the Anticapitalistas and allowed for recognition of the role that some anticapitalist leaders played in the party’s inception. As such, it signifies the demise of the so-called official account of Podemos’s genesis that had been promoted after the 2014 European elections. This farcical party history erased the Anticapitalistas, allowing members of the leading group around Iglesias and Errejón to embellish their own contributions to the birth of the party — with the exception of Iglesias himself, whose central role in the creation of Podemos cannot be challenged.

These three currents all have radically different political projects. We can define Iglesias’s pragmatic-instrumental populism mixed with impatient Eurocommunism, which differs in form from the original iteration by embracing the prospect of electoral victory. His combination of rebellious rhetoric with a moderate governmental horizon takes the Italian Communist Party’s Berlinguer era “historic compromise” with the Christian Democrats as its primary model — the policy of the historical compromise. Indeed, Iglesias uncritically embraces this legacy, failing to critically assess Syriza’s experience in this context.

We might summarize Iglesias’s proposal as belligerence in opposition, raison d’etat in government. In this sense, he maintains his orientation toward moderation but has realized that Podemos’s strength lies in its appearance as an anti-establishment force. As such, if the party were tamed, it would lose its social base, which Iglesias mainly anchors in the working and popular classes.

Iglesias’s proposal prioritizes electoral and institutional activity. In contrast to his position at Vistalegre, however, social struggle now at least plays a role in the strategy. His fiery discourse and praise for social struggle have created a better environment for radical and movement-oriented ideas within the party. Suddenly, those who had called for something other than the triad of “communication–campaigns–institutions” recognize that the general secretary had been partially converted. No doubt, this is a valuable change of atmosphere.

On the other hand, Íñigo Errejón’s political project is built on constructivist populism and aims to normalize Podemos. It calls for a peaceful transition in which the exhausted traditional parties are replaced with something new, exchanging elites, and very little else. Errejón wants to connect with the generational aspirations of young and middle-aged people, who are frustrated and broken by the crisis.

Errejón and his supporters’ call for “transversality” has swung between a serious discussion about building a new political majority and an excuse to smooth over all traces of radicalism. Behind this core idea lies a project mainly aimed at the middle classes, using post-class rhetoric to emphasize meritocracy and to call for a smooth transition toward a better future. It is focused at an amorphous political center that has become the imagined center of gravity for the people.

The rationale is to attract “the missing ones,” meaning to win over the voters who are not yet convinced that Podemos is trustworthy enough to run the Spanish state. As a result, it takes for granted that current Podemos voters will always remain loyal. However, they are likely to demobilize if the party forgets about them in its quest for respectability.

Errejón’s strategy emerges from this understanding of political life, which he sees as polarized between a “soft us,” built through gentle discourse that attracts the middle classes and less politicized voters, and a “strong them.” His analysis, however, contradicts itself. The “gentle” nature of both the voting bloc he wants to build and the discourse it requires makes it difficult to sustain the polarization on which his strategy is based, no matter what symbolic, emotional, or identitarian strategies he uses to foster it. His lack of attention to social struggle makes it even harder to create a favorable climate for political polarization. Put differently, it is harder to polarize society using superficial discourse in a context of social passivity, than with rebellious language in a context of mobilization.

Errejón has always denied that his vision resembles the catchall of parties’ strategies, alleging that his proposal politicizes debate, emphasizing the difference between “us and them.” However, Errejón’s proposal really amounts to a populist-constructivist catchall. The end result will not differ very much from where the People’s Party (PP) or the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) have taken the nation; it simply starts from a different point and thus takes a different path to the same destination. While conventional parties are legitimized entities that seek to enlarge their base of voters each election and prevail against a ritualized adversary, Podemos
— and Ciudadanos — have to start from scratch. Errejón’s strategy aims both to expand the party’s social and voter base and to legitimate Podemos — if not absolutely, at least partially.

Recognizing the electoral war machine’s limits and the need to prepare for sustained political combat, Errejón now proposes the party work toward what he calls a “popular movement,” recognizing the importance of cultural and social activity to complement electoral and institutional strategy. Four tasks comprise this new project — which replaces the metaphor of the blitzkrieg with the siege — to invigorate civil society’s social, cultural, and leisure associations and networks; to set up a strong symbolic and cultural collective identity; to train cadres and technicians; and to use party branches to increase links both locally and nationally.

This approach has two important limitations. First, two years of the Vistalegre model have made this new strategy almost impossible to implement. The war machine pushed the rank-and-file membership away, emptied local branches, and created suspicions about organized civil society. Now, these excluded members are expected to revitalize their local parties and engage with civic institutions.

Second, social struggle — not to mention self-organization — plays no role in either the electoral strategy or the new popular movement. Therein lies a major inconsistency: on the one hand, Errejón correctly analyzed the political possibilities of 15-M after 2011, but, on the other hand, he does not see the need for a new social push — a new 15-M — to relaunch anti-austerity struggles and completely break down the establishment party system.

This is not to say that Errejón’s point of view completely excludes conflict, but he understands it mainly in terms of electoral and public-relation campaigns. As a result, he ignores the politicization of real conflict in communities and workplaces, surfing social struggle and sapping its energy with an artificially rebellious discourse that masks the weakness of his actual political and economic proposals.

Errejón has changed his priorities in preparation for a long-term struggle, but he persists on the road toward Podemos’s political normalization which would quickly temper the party’s ambitions for political and social change. His will to power is stronger than his will to change the world.

For this reason, it’s hard to imagine what might happen if Errejón successfully seized power. His ultimate goal goes no further than a generic policy proposal. However, the musical analogy presents the difference as one of manners and style, which would be more useful if it contrasted the content of the two men’s proposals. Instead, Podemos should discuss which goals it wants to be kinda like Coldplay and another that wants to be like Bruce Springsteen. Let’s be like the #Boss.” The comparison would be more useful if it contrasted the content of the two men’s proposals. However, the musical analogy presents the difference as one of manners and style, which subsequently frames all debate around these issues.

Instead, Podemos should discuss which goals it wants to achieve as well as the strategies that can build a new political majority. The latter discussion only making sense if it is clear about its political purpose. It is not Podemos’s style but the content of its project where in fact the debate needs to begin.

Beyond Springsteen and Coldplay, Podemos has at least one other important current: the Anticapitalistas, which has sponsored the Podemos en Movimiento list at the upcoming congress. A key player since the beginning, Anticapitalistas’s strategy has always been to create a party built on the political potential that emerged up after 15-M, not only in terms of the electoral opportunity that had opened but also in terms of the new
possibility for radical political and social change. The Anticapitalistas project attempts to synthesize radicalism’s ambition with building a majority.

Anticapitalistas has served as a movement party within Podemos. As such, it opposed the Vistalegre model that tried to transform 15-M’s legacy into electoral victory. It is organized around internal democracy and rank-and-file empowerment, focusing on external campaigns rather than internal quarrels. Its strategic perspective sees victory as a dialectical combination of self-organization, mobilization, elections, and institutional work — something deeper than just winning elections. To build this, Anticapitalistas has emphasized program discussions, which would allow the party to present serious alternative policies. Questions like debt and the banking system have centered these debates, trying to learn from Syriza’s fiasco — something Podemos’s leadership has always refused to do.

Working against the party’s main current since the beginning, this political wing has been central to Podemos’s trajectory, despite its small institutional power which has only weakened after Podemos’s expansion after the 2014 European election when Iglesias and Errejón were on the rise.

Without it, militant disaffection in the branches would have been even higher, democratic and movement-oriented counterweights to the leadership would have been nonexistent, and the attempts to organize membership and present different viewpoints would have become impossible. For these reasons, the support that the Podemos en Movimiento list wins at the congress will be crucial for the party’s future — as a guarantee that no matter what adverse circumstances may come, the call of real political and economic change, internal democracy, and the break with austerity and the Spanish political regime will persist inside Podemos.

### The Machine From Within

Facing clear evidence of its limitations, both Iglesias and Errejón have admitted the need to change certain organizational and political aspects in order to democratize the current party structure. Iglesias has proposed some limited reforms that would amount to partial and selective democratization. Errejón, who considers himself at a disadvantage in this fight, has raised the banner of internal democracy and pluralism — even though he held them in low esteem when he was the party apparatus’s strongman.

Both have defended the decision to build this disastrous party model as a necessary evil, an inevitable stage in an extraordinary situation where winning the general election had to be prioritized. There are two main problems with this justification: first, it presents the strategy as a choice forced by the situation. In reality, the approach corresponded to Iglesias’s and Errejón’s conception of politics.

Neither electoralism nor verticalism — not to mention the lack of internal democracy — were adopted as transitory or exceptional measures, but rather represented an attempt to set up a party controlled by a leading bureaucracy. Second, they can offer no real proof that the formula adopted in Vistalegre improved the electoral result. In fact, we might suspect the opposite: it seems reasonable to imagine that a more participatory party, with a more active membership and more credible leadership, would have won as many, if not more, votes.

We cannot blame the electoral war-machine model for Podemos’s political and organizational problems. Any new party would struggle to consolidate its structure, settle recurrent quarrels, build cadres, and discourage careerism. But the leadership chose a model that exacerbated these difficulties to extraordinary heights. The hollowing out of the local branches and the acute decline of active membership illustrate this failure.

The dynamics of militancy and participation are always spasmodic. In every political and social movement, exhaustion, lack of interest, or the implicit delegation of responsibility to active members always depletes the initial crowds. What can be called “liquid militancy,” using Bauman’s famous concept of liquidity, is the political and organizational equivalent of a fragmented and individualized society with fragile biographies. The Vistalegre model’s weakness is not simply that it failed to organize a major layer of activists. Rather, it did not try to do so — in fact, the party leadership worked hard to demobilize the branches, whose early momentum it always regarded with suspicion and fear.

The process of internal oligarchization was swift and deep enough to intellectually knock out Robert Michels himself, and the party became an extension of the leadership. Anyone who did not agree was perceived as an intruder. Fear of democracy loomed over the Vistalegre model and its management. Oddly, Podemos’s leadership never had much confidence in itself and rejected any kind of democratic confrontation, whether internal or external. It was frequently and unnecessarily self-defeatist in its use of clever procedures to pass proposals that would probably have been approved through more democratic methods.

In fact, the leaders took refuge behind a political structure designed to prevent rank-and-file members from influencing their decisions or the party’s course. Ultimately, it became too constraining even for the leaders, who eventually found themselves presiding over a gelatinous mass with unstable lower structures that had to be artificially sustained from the top.

Despite taking Gramsci as a key intellectual role model, the leadership did not follow his lead when it came to organizational questions. In its public communications, Podemos very effectively created a counter-hegemony, but in organizational matters, the leadership set aside its quest for hegemony in favor of pure and simple domination. They were happy to prevail without necessarily convincing.

Eliminating both member participation and militancy became a major goal after Vistalegre. The formula to achieve this consisted of three elements. First, it
Today, the political and organizational model set up in Vistalegre has been deeply eroded because of its own contradictions. Podemos’s leadership will certainly make some changes at this weekend’s congress. But real change can only come from real criticism of what was decided in 2014, not from the justification that it was a necessary step in an exceptional situation. Without genuine criticism of the electoral war machine, Podemos will not be able to imagine a future for the party that goes beyond the simulation of change. The proposals made by Podemos en Movimiento, mainly driven by Anticapitalistas, aim to overturn Vistalegre and shift to another strategy and structure.

Nevertheless, Podemos cannot move backwards. The first party — the one of spontaneous self-organization and overwhelming enthusiasm prior to the 2014 European elections — will never come back. Thousands of militants and their hopes went away with it. Political mistakes cannot simply be rewound in order to take the right path. But it is useful to look back without nostalgia to find a way to launch Podemos politically and socially, giving it the freshness that was bureaucratically confiscated from it. Three elements seem crucial here: fostering democratic internal life, renewing focus on social activity, and developing a permanent and qualified strategic discussion.

**High School of Strategy**

Every emancipatory party should work to become a high school of revolutionary strategy and raise the membership’s political capacity. Podemos has been doing the opposite until now, with its hasty debates, rushed plebiscites, and discussions reduced to electoral strategy. The high school of strategy and the electoral war machine are antithetical projects. We should therefore regard the leadership’s implosion as good news: it brought about real strategic debate.

At stake in the congress is how much the new Podemos will resemble the first. This will determine the degree of its strategic strength and the depth of its commitment to changing society. Three options are clear. The Anticapitalistas current represents a crystal-clear break from the political and organizational nightmare that should have never happened. Pablo Iglesias calls for continuing the current model, adding in some partial democratic readjustments and maintaining his anti-establishment rhetoric. These minor changes are compatible with his limited horizon of political and economic change.

Finally, Íñigo Errejón represents an attempt to reassert Vistalegre’s political legacy as a lever to take another, perhaps definitive, step forward on the road to transforming Podemos into a party that channels social malaise in a harmless direction that in no way threatens the powers that be.

Josep Maria Antentas is a member of the editorial board of the magazine Viento Sur, and a professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.
France- Some notes on the political situation

We knew in France that 2017 would be politically polarized by the preparations for the presidential election. It is true, in more than one respect, but this polarization also reveals the general crisis of the institutional parties and the institutions in general and the chasm that separates the leaders of the Socialist Party (PS) and the right wing party Les Républicains (LR) from those they are supposed to represent. Also its dynamic could, perhaps, escape the ritual of the suffocation of the social movement.

The successive fall of Holland and then Valls is the first manifestation of the institutional crisis.

That the outgoing President was unable to seek reelection, and that the Prime Minister was defeated in the PS primary elections by a candidate from the left of the party is the true balance sheet of five years of PS rule, and the party has been plunged into its deepest crisis since its creation.

As for the UMP, the picture is no prettier. While the reactionary electorate had moved en masse to eliminate Sarkozy and elect a Mr. Clean playing on Catholic traditionalism and probity, the revelation of a diversion of 900,000 Euros of public funds, two fictitious jobs in the Revue des deux mondes, handsomely paid jobs for his student children, fifteen bank accounts (according to what we know up to now) has heavily compromised the presence of François Fillon in the second round, and even the simple maintenance of his candidacy. [1]

This "Penelope Fillon affair" is especially revealing of two things:

1. Their world is not ours! Political leaders generally consider that the state coffers are at their disposal and that they can use public money like they use their official cars. The same people who support all the social attacks against workers, by slashing all the systems of redistribution, justifying all the redundancies and protesting at allowances for the unemployed, leaving more and more people in poverty, think it normal to help themselves handsomely from those coffers. It is the behaviour of a plutocratic class, which is surprised even to be asked for accounts. Fillon and his friends do not even feel the need to justify a remuneration equivalent to more than 40 years pay for somebody on the minimum wage, for someone who “helped” and “morally supported” her husband. Without speaking of 100,000 Euros for a few lines of literary criticism. These people live in a world cut off from the vast majority of the population.

2. Note moreover that after the revelations in Le Canard Enchainé and the articles on Médiapart, political leaders studiously avoided any “lynching” despite François Fillon’s complaints of persecution. Because these “revelations” illuminate the functioning of a political system cultivating these financial payments. Parliamentary deputies enjoy a scandalous level of remuneration and 10,000 Euros per month at their disposal for aides. The senators of the right have been hitting the jackpot for years, as everyone knows.

These systems, nepotistic or not, benefit all the elected members of Parliament — including Dupont-Aignan [leader of a small right-wing party] and the National Front, as silent as the other, Jean-Marie Le Pen has even stated his support for Fillon. The National Front is currently the subject of a claim from the European Parliament for the repayment of 300,000 Euros apparently used to pay salaries for FN full-timers. More than 20% of deputies (of all groups) employ members of their family as assistants, for real functions or not.

This strengthens the basic democratic demands: the abolition of the Senate – an assembly of bigwigs elected by bigwigs – and the abolition of the payment to deputies of 12,800 Euros per month (without counting the allowance of 9,561 Euros for aides).

Barely three months away from the presidential elections, Les Républicains have no choice but to “stand firm” and try to stifle the scandal, fearing that organizing a new primary could be catastrophic. It is also clear that none of the direct opponents of Fillon will put oil on the fire because it is the whole operation of the parliamentary system of the Fifth Republic which is put at issue by a practice which is formally legal. But this collusion is exposed day after day by the continuation of the judicial proceedings and the pressure of the media revelations from le Canard.

The crisis of the PS is now open. The primary vote reflects an electorate directly cut in two, the balance swinging markedly toward Hamon with the votes of young people, workers and white-collar workers, and Green and Front de gauche voters. [2] An anti-Valls vote punished the Macron and El Khomri laws on removing nationality and the state of emergency. But, on the other side, both the vote for Valls and the reactions since Monday show that a political breakdown is taking place within social democracy. Within the PS, Hamon represents the current around motion B which won less than 30% of the vote at the last congress in 2015, a resistance which has crystallized the hope of maintaining a PS in the traditional social democratic left, neither more nor less.

In concrete terms, the choice of Hamon marks, for his voters, the rejection of the Hollande-Valls orientation, the social liberal orientation of the bulk of the apparatus, aiming at the construction of a republican-democratic force in the image of [former Italian PM] Renzi’s Democratic Party. This resistance can obviously be compared to the vote for Corbyn in the British Labour Party or the Sanders current in the US Democratic Party.

Again, the music is stronger than the words. Hamon stresses his reluctance on the extension of the state of emergency, the rejection of the NDDL airport plan, the closure of nuclear power plants, control of GMOs, an improved in-work welfare benefits system for young people, refusal to stigmatize Muslims and rejection of banning the headscarf. Also, he
surfs on a whole series of social and democratic demands that exist in the popular classes. In this, moreover, the profile of Hamon comes close to that of Mélenchon (except on the headscarf!), even if the latter is more republican, and plays more on the profile of the “providential man”. We will see what will happen to the contradictory electoral cohabitation that Mélenchon must accept, especially if the PCF makes him pay for his arrogance in forcing it to accept the dictates of his movement France Insoumise. [3]

A big problem is now posed to the PS apparatus and its elected representatives. With the vicissitudes of Fillon, Macron seems to be in a position to qualify for the second round. Hamon has every interest in asserting a campaign with a left identity, encroaching on the Mélenchon and Green voters, distancing himself from the balance sheet of Holland/Valls. But such a candidacy breaks with the orientation of the majority of the PS, and no polls show him qualifying for the second round, so it goes against the grain for the apparatus and the majority of elected representatives. All the more so in that the presidential logic introduced since the introduction of the five year term in 2002 makes the presidential elections the launching pad for the legislative elections. By and large, the PS group (295 members) could repeat the experience of 2002 after the ousting of [former PS prime minister] Lionel Jospin and the re-election of [rightwing president] Jacques Chirac: 141 members, or a 50% reduction.

A number of PS deputies are in the process of deserting to Macron, whose campaign is structured by several PS notables such as Ferrand and Collomb. [4] The reformist pole (Savary and so on) is calling for withdrawal from the party, and some of them are rallying to Macron. [5] But this choice would be difficult for the party apparatus and its main leaders. The PS is a structure, a party that cannot dissolve itself into the Macron campaign as it is constructed. In addition the rejection by the leadership of the candidate legitimately chosen from the primary would be a factor of total explosion.

Therefore, the centre of the party will navigate between these pitfalls and try to do a very difficult balancing act: influence the Hamon campaign, reconciling support for the last months of the Cazeneuve government with “support” for the candidate of the party, to calm the rebellious “right”, while turning a blind eye to those who will campaign for Macron for the presidential elections, while trying to keep a grip on the investitures for the legislative elections. [6] A perilous exercise that it will be difficult to guide.

In all this, one thing is sure: the apparatuses and candidates of the two traditional parties of the Fifth Republic, the PS and LR, formerly the UMP, face this “major” election in a position of crisis. And this crisis, in its two symmetrical reflections, manifests the discredit, the erosion of the institutional parties who have been the managers of austerity policies. To such a point that all candidates claim to be “out of the system”, or even “anti-system”. Both Fillon and Hamon have benefited from this rejection of the “old faces” like Sarkozy, Juppé, Valls and Montebourg. [7]

Of course, it is a total sham since both Fillon and Hamon are former ministers (as is Mélenchon), professional politicians, of a system whose nature is illustrated by the most recent scandals.

Macron has the paradoxical status of a candidate outside party and exempt from the balance sheet of Hollande, whereas he was deputy general secretary to the Presidency as early as 2012 and was at the origin of the CICE tax break for business and the pact of responsibility, and was then minister of the economy, bringing in the two laws most despised by the popular classes (the one which bears his name and the El Khomri law).

Marine Le Pen faces some difficulty after the right and left primaries. The candidacy of Fillon removes her best media opponent, Sarkozy, and means competition for the ultra-reactionary traditionalist vote. Similarly, the absence of a socialist candidate defending the balance sheet of Hollande destabilizes her profile. Her own involvement in scandals will make it difficult to take advantage of Fillon’s difficulties. Nevertheless, it is notable that she still remains ahead in the polls, without having started her campaign or made a policy declaration for several weeks, the main receptacle of a reactionary, racist protest vote based on rejection of the parties who have managed the country for 20 years. Even if it cannot be excluded that Marine Le Pen is knocked out in the first round, it is likely that only a “national union” (around Macron or Fillon if he is still candidate in the weeks to come) for the presidential elections and the undemocratic system of election of deputies will prevent the National Front emerging as winner of the upcoming elections.

All this further emphasizes the urgent need to build a real anti-capitalist alternative, a new political representation of the exploited and the oppressed.

This is what is needed to counterbalance the attraction of the FN to the masses. The party still appears to give an outlet to popular frustration in a programme that is xenophobic and reactionary. Stopping this sham depends on the relationship of forces created, among the workers and exploited, by an anti-capitalist political force based on the solidarity of all the exploited and on social justice. Similarly, the support for Hamon also shows the rejection of neo-liberal policies, of the police state and Islamophobia, the need for urgency on the climate, without his programme showing the slightest way of questioning capitalist austerity.

Finally, Mélenchon and France Insoumise open no perspective in this direction. By playing the role of the providential man, and trying to impose submission to his autocracy on all those who want to support him, he has made a risky bet. Relying on the nomination of Holland or Valls, he sought the role of the anti-Sarkozy, then of the anti-Fillon, white knight of the anti-austerity left wing. Now destabilized by the nomination of Hamon, this profile alone cannot be sufficient. This is all the more the case in that
pressure is growing for a single candidacy to the left of Macron. It is more than likely that the PCF will join this campaign as well as a part of the campaign and trade union movement which is very hesitant in relation to Mélenchon, even if many considered him as the “useful” vote.

This unitary dynamic, unfortunately, is going to be built solely within the institutional framework of electoral mechanics, rather than putting down the bases of the construction of a popular anti-capitalist forces, bringing together those in the workplaces and the popular neighbourhoods, with all the transversal links to those who fight the system and want to build a force which is anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, anti-discrimination, internationalist and ecologist. The political bases and the methods of France Insoumise and the PS are obviously not oriented to this path, so an alliance of the two will not resolve any of their faults. A useful vote within the framework of the electoral circus and the loaded dice of the parliamentary system of the Fifth Republic will not suffice to overcome these faults. We do not need a super champion to fight in the circus, we want to finish with the circus.

By contrast, the situation opened by the current crisis is new, it is necessary to engage with it. There will surely be a many discussions in the days and weeks to come, of possible frameworks for discussion of activists in the social and political movement. This must be the opportunity not only to defend our ideas, but also to put forward proposals for the social and political rallying of all those who are fighting on all fronts. The Fillon scandal, the destabilization of the PS, all this opens up spaces, reinvigorating the activists of the social movement in a period usually little conducive to this.

Paradoxically, the coming weeks could see a re-emergence of movements “from below” with the demand for an end to delegation, to the parliamentary bureaucracy of leaders and parties, using and abusing privileges while continuing to manage the affairs of the capitalists. Even if this is polarized today around the question of a Mélenchon-Hamon candidacy, we provide another content on the basis of social demands, convergences between activist currents, ceasing to be spectators of the presidential jousts and mechanics and taking our fate in our own hands.

We must not therefore have the attitude that all of this does not concern us, because our [NPA] candidacy, with Philippe Poutou, speaks to a large number of those who want to find a new hope, a new institutional window to the social combats. [8] We are not on that institutional terrain, and especially we stress a perspective of anti-capitalist rupture which is not shared by Hamon or Mélenchon. However, we can, at least locally, give another perspective, and discuss rallying around common social and democratic demands. In this, the new situation can be a breath of fresh air, highlighting all the ruptures necessary and the paths to be taken.

[1] These payments to Penelope Fillon, wife of François Fillon, as his “parliamentary assistant” were revealed by the satirical newspaper Le Canard Enchaîné. Not only is there no trace of any job contract or other presence in the French parliament but in a 2007 interview with the British Sunday Telegraph Penelope Fillon stated she had never worked for her husband. IV

[2] Benoît Hamon won the PS primary for presidential candidate, beating former prime minister Manuel Valls in the run-off. Hamon was a student activist in the 1980s and has since had a career in the PS apparatus. IV

[3] Formally speaking the party founded by Mélenchon the Parti de Gauche (Left Party), the French Communist Party (PCF) and Ensemble!, an organisation formed by the fusion of several smaller groups, are members of the Front de Gauche, Left Front. However Jean-Luc Mélenchon launched his own movement France Insoumise for this presidential campaign, and for the parliamentary elections which will follow, in February 2016. The PCF finally voted, reluctantly, to support Mélenchon rather than stand their own candidate. The decision of Ensemble! to support Mélenchon was also the subject of debate and divergence in that organisation. IV

[4] A former member of the PS, Emmanuel Macron was minister for economy and industry from 2014-16. He founded his own political movement En Marche in early 2016 and resigned from the government in August. He announced in November that he would be a candidate for president; he refused to participate i the “open primary” of the left (essentially the PS and some small parties around it. Richard Ferrand is a PS regiona counsellor in Brittany. Gerard Collomb is also a PS elected representative, senator and mayor of Lyon. IV

[5] Bernard Cazeneuve is the current prime minister. He replaced Manuel Valls when the latter resigned to launch his campaign in the primaries. IV

[6] Nicolas Sarkozy was president from 2007-2012. Alain Juppé, mayor of Bordeaux, started his political career alongside Jacques Chirac in the 1970s. Manuel Valls was prime minister for President François Hollande from March 2014 to December 2016. Arnaud Montebourg is a well-known PS figure, having been deputy, minister, spokesperson at different times since the 1990s. IV

[7] Philippe Poutou, a worker at Ford, Blanquefort near Bordeaux, is the prospective presidential candidate for the NPA (New Anti-Capitalist Party). The NPA has not yet obtained the necessary 500 sponsorships from mayors that would enable Poutou’s presence on the ballot. IV

Leon Crémieux is an activist of the Solidaires trade-union federation and of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA, France). He is a member of the Executive Bureau of the Fourth International.
France - How the National Front Changed France

Marine Le Pen has taken the National Front into the French mainstream without shedding the party’s far-right politics. Over the summer Jean-Marie Le Pen was expelled from the National Front (FN) — the far-right party he cofounded, led for nearly four decades, and is the largest of its kind in Europe. The expulsion, which Le Pen is contesting, was the culmination of a months-long family feud between Jean-Marie and his successor and daughter, Marine Le Pen.

At issue were a series of comments Jean-Marie made in April of this year. First, in an interview on the flagship current affairs show Bourdin Direct, he repeated his claim, made at various junctures in his career, that the Nazi gas chambers were “a detail” of the Second World War. Furthermore, he insisted that all kinds of patriots are welcome in the FN — fervent Pétainists (collaborationists with Vichy France) just as much as fervent Gaullists.

Shortly after, he accepted an interview with Rivarol — a publication that sports a masthead of traditional and antisemitic far-right thinkers that the current FN leadership shuns. Granting an interview with such an outlet would have rankled on its own. But Jean-Marie then doubled down on his earlier claims, reiterating that Pétainists have a place in the FN (as well as defenders of French Algeria, Gaullists, former Communists, and all patriots “who have France at heart”).

The remarks, and the very bitter personal feud that ensued, make excellent copy for gossip columns and shows. But they also offer an excellent point of entry for understanding the recent history and evolution of the FN — which, under Marine, is undergoing a process of “de-demonization,” ostensibly distancing itself from toxic extremism.

The Mariniste Era

After becoming party leader in January 2011, Marine Le Pen passed her first big test. In the 2012 presidential elections, she garnered 17.9 percent — surpassing her father’s personal best of 16.9 percent (in 2002) and putting the party’s disappointing 2007 showing of 10.4 percent (for which she was widely blamed) behind her.

She’s since consolidated that electoral success. The FN won eleven municipalities in last March’s elections, and in the European elections two months later, the party scored a first-place finish with nearly 25 percent of the vote, netting twenty-four seats in the European Parliament. This has scored the FN additional media coverage of its castigation of EU institutions, which it holds responsible for many of France’s current woes.

James Shields, a specialist on the FN, points out that “the FN gained more executive power in March 2014 than at any time in its forty-two-year history.”

Purges of opponents (since the early 2000s) and increasing party membership have further strengthened Marine’s position. The party now has considerable momentum going into December’s regional elections — widely understood to be a barometer for the 2017 presidential elections, in which Marine is seen by many as the leading contender in the first round.

So what are the characteristics of this revamped and revitalized National Front?

Most conspicuous is its brandishing of the republican ideology. Adherents of French republicanism profess an allegiance to the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity; separation of church and state; and liberal democracy and the rule of law. Conventional wisdom in France has long posited an unbridgeable divide between the French Republic and the National Front — its populism, dubious commitment to democracy, and racism putting it beyond the bounds of political respectability.

Marine has set out to prove them wrong. At her inaugural presidential speech, to the evident discomfort of some in the audience, she proclaimed the FN “a great republican political party” and asserted ownership of “liberty, equality, fraternity.” Instead of harking back to pre-Rousseau ideals, she stressed the need to recover the spirit of the Fifth Republic — a mythical golden age in which President de Gaulle’s France prospered domestically and commanded respect internationally — and declared that those around her were the true defenders of the republic.

Like any concept, “the republic” and “republicanism” mean different things in different contexts. But since the rise of neo-republicanism in the 1980s and 1990s, it has increasingly been used as a reference point to insist on the inadequacies of France’s Muslim communities — a tendency which has been reinforced in recent years by both politicians and intellectuals.

In appropriating the idea of republicanism, Marine undercut the very language used to quarantine the FN — to stigmatize it as beyond the pale — and created an effective narrative vehicle to propel its reactionary message. Frontists were no longer rednecks but guardians of secularism (laïcité), the separation of church and state, and defenders of beleaguered European minorities and victimized groups. As Marine put it — alluding to the “Muslim threat” — “in certain districts of cities it’s not good to be a woman, a homosexual, a Jew, or even French or white.”

The success of the party’s renovation was partly due to its opponents — particularly former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has aggressively melded republican language with Frontist-style discourse, even renaming his party, once known as the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), The Republicans. In adopting some of the far right’s rhetoric, Sarkozy helped legitimize the FN, allowing it to enter the select category of respectable “democratic” and “republican” parties.

The victory of François Hollande and the Socialist Party (PS) in the 2012 elections seemed to promise a change, with the center-left party lamenting
the mean-spirited state to which the “republican tradition of secularism” had been reduced.

But their opposition was rather qualified. Hollande vowed, prior to his election, to champion republican values by insisting on unisex timetables in public pools, after outraged reports that one local authority had reserved an hour class per week for a group of obese women, some of whom were Muslim.

And perhaps most striking was Hollande’s reference to “Français de souche” — roughly translated as “ethnic French,” a term that even Marine Le Pen has studiously avoided. Furthermore, Arnaud Montebourg, a key figure in the Socialist Party, has referred to a “consensus” between the Socialists, the UMP, and the FN on immigration. This is something of an exaggeration — no other party matches Marine’s commitment to renege on freedom of movement across Europe’s frontiers, cut net immigration to ten thousand annually, and “encourage” unemployed “foreigners” to leave — but does accurately capture a clear trend in contemporary French politics.

As for France’s prized intellectuals, it is ironic that some have lent ideological legitimacy to the FN while heaping scorn on it. One particularly instructive example is the feminist journalist Caroline Fourest, who has argued in a book and documentary on the FN’s president that Marine Le Pen’s republicanism is inauthentic — that she in fact stands for the negation of its tenets, of which Fourest is a proud adherent.

Yet in addition to her tendentious but award-winning blurring of radical Islamism and French Muslims, Fourest was fined in court last year for her slurs against a young Muslim woman who was attacked in a Paris suburb, suggesting she either made up the story or was beaten up by her own family and then made a false report.

In the same vein, alluding to the Charlie Hebdo attacks, Fourest claimed that a rally against Islamophobia in Paris in March was “spitting on the dead of January 7.” The abyss that Fourest takes for granted between herself and Le Pen seems at least partially illusory.

Apart from this favorable context, what lies behind this refurbishment of the FN’s image and what is its significance?

**De-Demonization**

In a recent interview on BBC Hardtalk, an interviewer asked Jean-Marie Le Pen whether the rift in the party stemmed from jealousy over his daughter’s success and opposition to her efforts to detoxify the party. This explanation didn’t make sense, the elder Le Pen replied, because his daughter had been president of the FN since 2011.

He might have added that this ideological course had been embraced since she first entered the spotlight in the 2002 presidential elections. In the interim, she had climbed to the top echelons of the party, thanks to her father’s machinations, against considerable opposition within the FN ranks.

One reason many in the party disliked Marine was their aversion to Jean-Marie’s patrimonial maneuvering. But they were also more than skeptical about Marine’s promotion of de-demonization. No one in FN circles would deny that the FN is portrayed poorly in the media, or that the party is electorally hobbled as a result. Not a single FN militant would object to de-demonization in this sense — fighting impingements on the party’s ability to circulate its patriotic message.

But de-demonization is a tricky affair. The translation of “dédiaboliser” as “detoxify” in the BBC interview is illuminating. Detoxification connotes that the body in question is toxic and it is this that must be rectified. Dédiabolisation is more slippery — it is unclear whether body has the “devilish” qualities that are to be removed, or whether, it is simply that their enemies’ misrepresentations must be corrected.

It this ambiguity that provokes tension within the party over the term. As the president, Marine Le Pen has to walk a tightrope between burnishing the party’s image and jettisoning or renouncing its substance. The importance of political discourse in the FN — often performative rather than substantive — only makes the question of image rehabilitation more delicate.

Projects looking to improve the FN’s image have always had rigid parameters — appropriate respect and due to the party’s old guard was expected and demanded, above all to Jean-Marie himself, who considers the FN his personal property. Indeed, Marine was delivered to the summit of the party precisely on that basis. Given Jean-Marie’s advanced age, it was considered acceptable that his daughter run the estate on his behalf — and even apply a personal touch while doing so — but never to forget who owned the house.

Another hurdle in the de-demonization project is the FN’s orientation toward political power. Over time, the party has oscillated between aspiring to power and distancing itself from it, but party culture has always dictated that a certain balance be maintained.

At times, this tension has come to a head. In 1999, the party split into two factions, one of whom supported Le Pen senior, the other who favored his number two, Bruno Mégret. The feud turned on Mégret’s conviction that Jean-Marie contented himself with provocation and had turned the FN into his personal patrimony. Mégret wished to rebrand the party, widen its appeal, and draw in supporters from the mainstream right.

The upshot of the contretemps is that de-demonization today risks vindicating Mégret’s position if it doesn’t hew to prescribed norms — an eventuality to which Jean-Marie loyalists are all the more sensitive to given the central role that former Mégretistes occupy in the top echelons of the FN today. There’s some resentment in the party among those who see the high-ranking Mégretistes as dubious renegades, and it is striking that Marine has been at pains to deny any parallel between her trajectory and that of Mégret.

Marine herself is not oblivious to the importance of managing the FN’s precarious balance. She is
prepared to throw a bone to those nostalgic for the days of her father’s leadership, as demonstrated by her calculated remarks in 2010 comparing Muslims praying in the street to the German occupation of France in World War II. (She was charged with incitement to racial hatred for making the comments.) But in at least two ways, her leadership has failed to convince Jean-Marie and the party’s old guard that she is giving sufficient weight to their expectations, priorities, and preoccupations. Some pockets of the FN, particularly longtime members, think Jean-Marie’s daughter has moved the party line too far toward integration with the mainstream and too far away from opposition or provocation. One former secretary general, for instance, has complained that the FN has today become a vote-catching party, an electioneering pigsty. Like all the other parties . . . within the FN, everyone takes their position according to the state of opinion. That’s exactly the opposite of Jean-Marie Le Pen. He was capable of defending his ideas even if they weren’t popular. His daughter defends what is popular whatever the ideas. Marine’s ambition to transform the FN into a formation capable of taking power is a path that arguably carries a burden of justification within the party; after all, those who prefer outsider status and resist modification and possible dilution of the Front’s axioms and loyal personnel can point to the achievement of the Lepenization of the political mainstream from without. Indeed, it would be difficult to come up with another European political party that has exerted so much weight on public discourse from a position of perennial opposition. And as Shields argues, “it is a fact insufficiently acknowledged that Le Pen voters have been critical in determining the outcome of every presidential election in France since 1988.” Tellingly, in the notorious April interview, Jean-Marie also pronounced himself in “total disagreement” with Marine’s claim that Lepenist controversies and provocations overshadowed the work of the FN. He insisted that, on the contrary, it was a means to get its ideas exposure, intervene in debates, and shape public opinion. The stakes involved in proving FN’s respectable, republican credentials are particularly high when it comes to antisemitism. As FN vice-president Louis Aliot explained: De-demonization only relates to antisemitism . . . When distributing leaflets in the street, the only glass ceiling I saw, it wasn’t immigration or Islam. It’s antisemitism that stops people voting for us. There’s only that. From the moment you get rid of this ideological barrier you free up the rest. Ever since I’ve known her, Marine Le Pen agrees with that. She can’t understand why and how her father and the others can’t see that that’s the obstacle. Key party figures like FN National Treasurer Wallerand de Saint-Just have also stressed the undesirability of this far-right tendency and accepted that “French people of the Jewish faith are perfectly integrated into our society.” Conversely, the FN has advertised itself to French Jews as their “best shield against Islamic fundamentalism.” Such overtures create a problem, however. Had the new FN leadership simply abstained from antisemitism, even proscribed it within the party’s ranks, they would have been unmolested in doing so. That is to say, they would not have come under internal party pressure to increase antisemitic gestures. However, publicly eschewing such bigotry, rather than discreetly letting it go by the wayside, essentially meant deeming Jean-Marie a hindrance if not an embarrassment — acknowledging that his honorary presidential role (which he unfailingly mentions) was in fact doled out to humor him while putting him out to pasture, rather than invest him with any power. Seen in this light, appearing in the pages of Rivarol and discussing Pétain and the Nazi gas chambers was no coincidence. Another pivotal figure in the Le Pen family feud is the thirty-four-year-old Florian Philippot, the FN’s vice-president and the brains behind the party’s strategy and communications. Philippot has been a particular target of Jean-Marie — who has leveled homophobic insults at Philippot and besmirched him as a socialist, a Chevènementist, a Gaullist, a provocateur — and the founder’s senior loyalists. Some have even mobilized to get rid of him, believing Philippot has manipulated Marine into veering leftwards. Indeed, Philippot is the figurehead of a group of Chevenêmentistes within the party — people whose worldview was molded by the politics of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the former education minister, defense minister, and interior minister who by the 1990s was a dissident Socialist and the personification of neo-republicanism. If the republican turn within the FN can’t be laid solely at the feet of its ex-Chevènementiste recruits, they considerably added to its momentum. More precisely, there are several ways in which Philippot contravenes the acceptable bounds of de-demonization. First and foremost, he has ignored the unwritten understanding that appropriate dues be paid to the party — especially its elders. Conspicuously bypassing any time in bread-and-butter party work, Philippot shot to the front of the party line, a move that was concocted by his introduction to MLP by Paul-Marie Coûteaux, another Chevènementiste to whom she was close. When he joined the FN in October 2011, Philippot made a point of stressing that he had never voted for Jean-Marie, and that he wouldn’t have worked for the FN with the party’s founder at the helm, particularly because of its economic program. To top it off, there is a widely perceived sense, expressed by Jean-Marie himself, that he would only have received a light
punishment for his comments earlier this year but for Philippot’s power in the party.

Even before this, Philippot’s perceived arrogance was accentuated by his profile as the archetypal technocratic elite against which the party had always railed. He is a graduate of the highly selective École Normale d’Administration — a breeding ground for the country’s administrative and political top brass. If in leapfrogging to the number two spot Philippot is seen not to have paid his dues, the same goes for his circle, which is regarded as having been granted an excessive number of top positions.

While Jean-Marie may say that Gaullists have a place in the FN, Philippot’s outspoken admiration for de Gaulle does not sit well — again, an affront that is perceived along generational lines. A core, founding element of the FN revolved around right-wing activists whose political teeth were cut on the Algerian war of decolonization, and who hold de Gaulle in contempt, seeing him as the liquidator of the French empire. As Roger Holeindre, a cofounder of the FN, remarked in May, “for a guy like me who served in Algeria, being represented by a Gaullist faggot is a bit much.”

The Party of Its Founder

Marine Le Pen’s FN has had significant success recasting itself as a regular political party. Polls in 2012 showed 51 percent of respondents judging the FN to be “a party like the others”; a sharp drop in the share of respondents who considered the FN “a danger” (53 percent); and a rise in the percentage of those with a “good opinion” of the FN leader (35 percent). The party has had particular success in attracting a female electorate that had been turned off by Jean-Marie’s leadership.

Part of this improvement is a result of the party’s careful tendency to its image; these days disappointed skinheads are turned away at public FN demonstrations and gatherings, and militants caught expounding racist, antisemitic, or homophobic comments are strictly disciplined. Two of the best-known expulsions are Yvan Benedetti — who pronounced himself (jokingly, he claimed) as “anti-Zionist, antisemitic, and anti-Jew” — and Alexandre Gabriac, photographed doing a Nazi salute.

The growth of social media has made people like Benedetti and Gabriac a major headache for modernizing far-right party leaders. Benedetti and Gabriac, for their part, say their ouster was really about purging loyalists to Bruno Gollnisch — a resolute acolyte of the senior Le Pen who is bitterly opposed to de-demonization. Though, of course, the two rationales are not mutually exclusive.

The Front hasn’t made a clean break with its old guard — figures like Gollnisch are still represented in the top ranks — but Shields points out, they are now surrounded by a host of younger delegates for whom the past does not have the same significance.

In addition, it’s important not to exaggerate these divisions at the political level, regardless of how fraught they may be at the personal level. A recent quantitative and qualitative study by Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich examined five hundred speeches, texts, declarations, and interviews with Jean-Marie and Marine between 1987 and 2013. They conclude that for all the refurbishments and additions to the FN repertoire, it remains the party of its founder. Marine’s deft semantic strategies — which at once reach out to new voters and appeal to the predilections of the existing electorate — simply conceal this continuity.

Furthermore, the removal of especially extremist figures from official positions does not mean the informal external connections don’t remain — the culture of the far right is distinctly porous. Purges can only go so far without collapsing the party’s entire infrastructure. In other words, one misses vital aspects of the FN if one restricts examination to its formal members and structures.

Of all the pressure groups outside the party apparatus trying to influence the FN’s political line, the most active at the moment is Bloc identitaire (BI). This organization includes both unknown young entryists and high-profile figures like Philippe Vardon, an unofficial leader of BI. Kept at arms length by Le Pen senior, BI differs from the FN in promoting French regional identities as part of a broader ethnically based European civilization (in contrast to the FN’s centralized nation-state line). But it converges with the Front in its critique of globalization, and its rejection of immigration and “Islamization.”

Though the number of its adherents is unremarkable, BI punches above its weight through agit-prop operations devised for media impact — a 2012 occupation of a mosque roof in Poitiers, public distribution of soups containing pork, and providing unsolicited “anti-scum” security on the metro.

BI is also closely associated with the apocalyptic “great replacement” theory. Ethnic Frenchmen and women, the thinking goes, are being submerged under the demographic weight of non-European immigrants. Suggested solutions usually include expelling unacceptably dark sections of French society.

While sympathizing with their concerns, Marine Le Pen distances herself from the ideas of the identitaires even as she welcomes their participation in the FN on an individual basis.

Although Philippot has criticized the racist basis of “the great replacement,” other party bigwigs are influenced to varying degrees by the outlook of the identitaires. For her part, twenty-five-year-old party star Marion Maréchal-Le Pen — the granddaughter of Jean-Marie and the Fifth Republic’s youngest-ever deputy — takes a compromise position, allowing that a population replacement is under way, but arguing it can be resolved by sealing the borders and assimilating immigrants.

In fact, there are distinct echoes of “the great replacement” rhetoric in recent FN language regarding the refugee crisis, which has provided a
useful rallying point and distraction for the party from the demoralizing Le Pen family feud.

The humanitarian pretenses of the new FN — Marine positions herself in the lineage of the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, for instance — were dropped in an instant. Instead MLP expressed her physical disgust at the inhabitants of the infamously dire refugee camp Le Jungle, reserving her concern for the local police, who regularly harass the camp’s refugees.

In addition to the identitaires, there are other elements, either within the FN or connected to it, that belie the party’s claim to squeaky-clean respectability. For instance, the revolutionary nationalists, represented by the likes of Christian Bouchet — a sort of éminence grise of the tendency’s thought and historiography, who the FN selected in 2013 to lead its list for municipal elections in Nantes, France’s sixth largest city. So too with David Rachline — one of the current FN stars as the twenty-seven-year-old mayor of Fréjus and senator for the Var département in southeast France.

The revolutionary nationalist current subscribes to a differentialist variant of racism, stressing the importance of separation and purity rather than supremacy, exalting Arab nationalism, and vociferously railing against American imperialism and “Zionism.”

The latter signifies here not a principled rejection of settler colonialism, racism, and human rights abuses, but rather a shorthand for rehashed antisemitic notions of a worldwide Jewish plot. In this, they are closely aligned with figures like Alain Soral and famous comedian turned full-time racist Dieudonné M’bala M’bala, one of whose daughters is godfathered by none other than Jean-Marie.

A sub-strata of revolutionary nationalists who also have a home in the FN are those militants who emerged from the GUD student movement (Groupe union défense), which was launched in 1968. Its former leader, Frédéric Chatillon, is a childhood friend of Marine Le Pen and has recently landed in legal trouble, accused in his capacity as head of the communications agency Riwal of filing fraudulent claims for election campaign materials given to FN candidates.

An intimate of Chatillon and fellow GUDiste from the 1990s, Axel Loustau, is also a stakeholder in Riwal and a treasurer of Jeanne — a micro-party that has also come under investigation. Loustau’s far-right credentials include violent actions during the 2013 Manif pour tous demonstration against gay marriage and threats against journalists. To say the least, the alleged financial improprieties, dubbed “GUD business,” are decidedly inconsistent with the FN’s constant railing against venal, self-interested political elites.

Gauchisation

As part of his continual denunciations of Philippot and his socio-gaullisme, Jean-Marie never misses a chance to decry the gauchisation (leftward drift) of the FN’s discourse. FN representatives are also constantly tarred with comparisons to the Parti de Gauche’s Jean-Luc Mélenchon, considered to be at the far left of the electoral political spectrum.

The charge of a left turn is not restricted to polemical assaults on the party; it also informs the analysis of many journalists and scholars. James Shields notably argues that the party has developed “a left-leaning agenda of anticapitalism and social welfare provision.”

But this characterization is a misconception.

There is certainly plenty in the party’s discourse that would not look out of place in a left program. Rising inequality, precarity, sustained high unemployment levels, a financial system unmoored from the needs of the general population — all are topics that appear in Marine’s public addresses (to be solved by protectionism and a strong state supporting reindustrialization, employment, and growth). Particular scorn is reserved for the neoliberalism of Socialist and conservative governments alike.

Moreover, Marine’s book outlining her political vision is peppered with references to left or progressive figures: FDR, Paul Krugman, Jacques Sapir (who has recently recommended that all anti-euro forces join with the FN, which, he assures us, has undeniably changed), Serge Halimi, Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Polanyi, Lenin, Marx.

There’s additional ammunition for those positing a leftward shift. Various figures in the party have left backgrounds. And the FN has scored well among demographic groups who historically support left parties. In the 2012 presidential election, Marine received 33 percent of the working-class vote, and in the 2014 European elections, the FN’s 25 percent first-place tally broke down as follows: 43 percent among manual workers, 38 percent among low-skilled non-manual workers, 37 percent among unemployed voters, and 30 percent of those from low-income households.

But winning traditional left constituencies is not the same as being left-wing. Nonna Mayer notes the low number of FN voters who self-identify as left-wing and argues that the strongest characteristics of FN voters remain ethnocentrism and authoritarian attitudes. Like her father, Marine’s supporters are least concerned about social inequalities and injustices, which they see contemptuously as left-wing causes mainly benefiting immigrants.

And for all the comparisons to Mélenchon, he and the FN could not have differed more over the recent Air France layoffs and subsequent workers’ reaction. For his part, Mélenchon assailed the media’s outrage at the ripping of an Air France executive’s shirt rather than the violence of laying off 2,900 workers. In contrast, the FN mumbled about government irresponsibility in letting the situation arise, whilst Philippot complained about unions politicizing the situation.

The FN itself, of course, does not claim to be left-wing, but instead neither left nor right. A more
precise way of putting it is that the FN has adopted a two-track economic policy in an attempt to appeal to two core elements of its base at once.

Marine articulates the statist protectionist track aimed at declining industrial areas, particularly in the north and east. And Marion Maréchal-Le Pen — viewed, in contrast to most of the youth figures in today’s FN, as a potential Trojan horse for Jean-Marie — is the spokesperson for the low tax, minimal-state liberalism that appeals to the party’s middle-class demographic in the southeast.

In recent weeks, with attacks on its purported leftism (particularly from Sarkozy’s Republicans) taking a toll, FN discourse has been leaning hard toward the latter line in an attempt to reassure bosses and management.

Looking Ahead

“This,” Marine Le Pen declared earlier this year, “is the Front’s moment.” And indeed, both Marine and the party as a whole are in a strong position ahead of regional elections next month and presidential elections in 2017.

Yet it remains to be seen how much energy will be expended on the protracted Le Pen feud, and how it will impact the FN’s electoral strength and political culture. It may be that the party continues to triumph in a political environment that — in light of the gloomy economic picture in France and Europe, as well as the renewed impetus for the language of war and suspicion the tragic attacks in Paris have provided — now accepts many of its presuppositions.

On the other hand, de-demonization could deliver sharply declining returns, the FN could come up against the limits of insurgent populist parties, or seemingly slight internal fractures could develop into noticeable gulfs.

But uncertainty is no reason for complacency. Even in the nadir of its electoral fortunes, even when its momentum was seemingly neutralized or reversed, the FN has still shown itself adept at shaping French public life for the worse.

Britain - World Politics after Trump and Brexit

The vote in Britain for leaving the European Union and the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election are part of the same process and not coincidental events. What we are witnessing is a worldwide shift to the right, represented by Trump, the rise of the so-called ‘populist’ right in Europe, by Modi in India, by the decline and semi-collapse of ‘socialism for the 21st century’ in Latin America and by morbid phenomena like the rise of Isis and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, an openly death squad government.

As in all periods of intense crisis there is a political polarisation and the emergence also of significant forces to the left, represented in Europe by the Corbyn trend in the Labour Party, Podemos in Spain, the continued strength of the Portuguese Left Bloc and Communist Party, Syriza in Greece and in a different way Bernie Sanders in the United States. Beyond those forces organised in political parties of the left, we have also seen the emergence of significant social movements fighting on particular themes. Probably the most important of these internationally is the environmental movement — focused particularly on opposition to climate change. This has different manifestations in different parts of the globe — often with strong links to indigenous movements traditionally in Latin America and Asia, but increasingly so in North America.

We have also seen the massive regrowth of mobilisations in defence of migrants — with Greece and Italy playing central roles and against state racism; with the explosion of the Black Lives matter movement in the USA.

The women’s liberation movement internationally has seen a massive boost and consolidation as a result of the vast mobilisations against Trump over recent weeks. And given that attacks on women’s rights are at the centre of Trump’s agenda — and indeed of other right wing leaders across the globe, this is likely to continue as re-strengthened movement rather than merely a moment.

We are clearly in favour of the parties of the left, of which we spoke earlier, intervening into these movements and championing their demands. We are not in favour however of subordinating the movements to the electoral or tactical needs of those parties.

And polarisation doesn’t necessarily mean equivalence. Today the polarisation is heavily to the right and poses major threats to the working class and oppressed.

In Europe there is virtually a simultaneous rise of the reactionary right across the board. The Theresa May government represents a right-wing coup inside the Conservative Party and the victory of the Eurosceptics. In Austria, Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party narrowly missed winning the presidency; Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party in The Netherlands is strongly in the ascendency; the Alternative for Germany is making strong headway and there are already right wing authoritarian governments in Poland and Hungary.

Francois Fillon, Catholic reactionary candidate for the Republican right in France says “France has never been so right wing”. Even if he or Emmanuel Macron wind up winning the French presidential in May, it is likely that Marine Le Pen will put up an extremely strong showing and come close to winning.

Some sections of the left and the labour movement recognised these dangers. The launch of Another Europe is Possible was an important and positive step. Corbyn and McDonnell, Momentum, Left Unity and Ken Loach, most Greens and especially Caroline Lucas worked hard to stem the racist bile. The majority of trade union leaders took the correct view— both UNITE and UNISON put out important material against racism and defending migrant workers. Matt Wrack of the FBU and Manuel Cortez
The effects of that crash were born most harshly by the ideologues of neoliberal globalisation and collapse in 2007-2008, which was not foreseen. The state funds shovelled into the banks have simply blown away and replaced by the populist but not neoliberal work regimes like zero hour contracts.

The post-crisis recession was compounded by the effects of globalisation which shunted jobs out of former industrial areas, often to low-pay regions of Asia and Latin America. At the same time neoliberal capitalism, faced with the crisis of financialisation and the negative effects of globalism, was unable to forge a new post-neoliberal capitalism consensus. Speculation in the mid noughties about the possibility of a resurgence of Keynesianism proved unfounded. All that the political leaders of the world capitalist class could do was organise a monster bail-out of the banks and hammer down on the working class through tight wage controls and a deepening of neoliberal work regimes like zero hour contracts.

As Thomas Picketty pointed out [2], in this era there is a massive shift of reward towards the ownership of wealth rather than income. And this results in ever-increasing polarisation between the rich and the poor, especially in former industrialised areas where manufacturing decline has left little alternative work and hugely 'hollowed out' communities with collapsing infrastructure, ageing populations and poor or non-existent social services.

The pumping of unprecedented amounts of state capital into private banks stabilised the global financial system Profits remained private, but losses were 'nationalised'. Speculators continued to sweep up the winning chips, but taxpayers had to cover the bad bets.

This has not solved the crisis. The 2008 Crash, unprecedented in scale, has shrunk the financial reserves of states, corporations, and households, and pitched the world economy into another looming recession.

The state funds shovelled into the banks have simply disappeared into a black hole of bad debt. Since 2008, moreover, the rich have been getting richer even faster than before. The casino-economy is again in full swing. The next bubble is inflating fast and the world is on the brink of another crash. The real economy is mired in long-term stagnation. Instead of investment for human need and a green transition, we have an economy based on debt, speculation, and the further enrichment of the 1%.

Yet the entire political establishment – from traditional conservatives to social-democrats – continues to mouth neoliberal mantras and impose the austerity demanded by the bankers. No-one has the vision or the courage to propose an alternative economy strategy appropriate to the scale and character of the crisis. Everyone collaborates to prop up a bankrupt system by bailing out the rich and dumping on the poor.
It should be noted that after 2011 there were a series of defeats which dealt hammer blows to the anti-austerity resistance. First and foremost was the derailing of the Arab Spring, by a combination of reactionary Islamism, repression and imperialist intervention [3]. Also the defeat of anti-austerity insurgency in Greece was a major blow: even if we think that the leadership of Syriza adopted a false strategy, the main factor was the absolute determination of the EU leaders not to allow an anti-austerity government to win major concessions, which could have propelled force like Podemos into power elsewhere on the continent. And the Occupy movement, despite its élan and geographical spread was eventually faced with the strategic question – how do you now go beyond protest towards building an overarching political alternative, a question that was not successfully answered by the radical independence forces in Scotland.

It is this process that created the basis for Trump’s victory and for Brexit. But how was this achieved? How is it that in countries like the US, France and Britain economic decline and falling working class living standards have mainly favoured the right?

**Constructing reactionary alliances**

Rising authoritarian right-wing movements have often initially been based inside right-wing sections of the petty bourgeoisie or even the bourgeoisie itself (cf Aaron Banks and UKIP). However UKIP, Trump and the Front National all show the line of march for the building of really national movements – putting together a coalition of the more traditional right reactionaries from the comfortable petty bourgeoisie with sections of the dispossessed working class. How is that done? Through shifting the ideological discourse of the radical right away from purely economic or cultural nationalism, towards a sharp xenophobic, anti-foreigner, anti-immigrant, racism. It was UKIP’s turn in 2009-11 to prioritising anti-immigrant racism rather than just anti-EUism that made it a contender in formerly rock solid Labour areas.

Some of the ‘new’ right-wing forces are fascist or have a fascist component, the majority of them are not, or at least not yet. But they have strong similarities in their anti-foreigner, anti-ethnic minority racism, and their class alliances with fascist and semi-fascist movements in the 1930s.

In addition most of the new right-wing authoritarian parties and movements have an anti-establishment discourse, posing as champions of the people (at least the white people) against liberal, metropolitan elites. Of course this is just demagogy, as Trumps almost exclusively billionaire cabinet shows. But it does play to the feeling among sections of the working class that the traditional parties of both left and right have abandoned them. Once again this is a feature that the new right ‘populism’ shares with the fascism of the 1930s.

We have to note here that there is unfortunately a symbiotic relationship between the reactionary right and terrorist groups like Isis. Each terrorist act killing hundreds of civilians in France, Germany and Spain especially in the last 10 years, drives more people into the arms of the right and facilitates the deepening of Islamophobia, the main ideological cutting edge of racism today, with strong parallels to anti-Semitism in the 1930s. We know of course that the number of civilians in the imperialist countries killed or maimed by terrorists in tiny in relation to the near-genocidal carnage in Iraq, Syria and Libya. But the anti-migrant ideological message presented by the mass media is fantastically facilitated by dead bodies in Paris, Nice and Berlin. Coming at the same time as the refugee crisis presents reactionary politicians and the right-wing media with untold opportunities to push the racist, xenophobic line.

We should never stop pointing out that the refugee crisis has been caused by the imperialist states themselves, through their economic policies and especially wars that have occurred in the last 15 years. Focal points for the refugee exodus have been Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, all countries torn to shreds by the direct and indirect effects of Western invasion and aerial bombardment. In the light of this, the utterly cruel attitude to the refugees, allowing what is now tens of thousands to drown in the Mediterranean, is one of the biggest moral failures by European since the Holocaust. Socialists should never allow themselves or the workers’ movement in general to be pressurised by the anti-immigrant right.

But it is unlikely that the authoritarian right could have had such success were it not for the defeats suffered by the working class and its organisations from the 1980s onwards. In retrospect the most important of these defeats was the miners’ strike in the UK of 1984-5. Britain and the US were the two key countries in imposing neoliberalism and a defeat of Thatcher over the miners could have brought down her government and changed things Europe-wide and even world-wide.

But it is also the major ideological crisis of the labour movement, in particular the utter prostration of social democracy that has left the field open for the radical right.

The austerity and stagnation of a busted economic model are fuelling a wider crisis of the global system as a whole. Inequality and injustice are tearing apart the social fabric. The international order is breaking down. War has engulfed entire societies and displaced tens of millions. Democracy is being hollowed out and civil liberties eroded. Global warming threatens the planet and the whole of humanity with climate catastrophe.

In the face of all this international social democracy has little to say. It is an appalling collapse, lightened only by the emergence of the Corbyn trend in Britain, although that much better fits in analytically with the new Podemos-type left than contemporary social democracy.

**Trump’s Project – Post-Neoliberalism?**

The 2007-8 crash showed the bankruptcy of neoliberalism, the new regime of accumulations that
emerged (gradually) out of the crisis of Keynesianism in the mid-1970s. Many people speculated in the mid-noughties that there might be a return to Keynesianism, but this was blocked, especially by the financial bourgeoisie, which awash with ‘quantitative easing’ cash had no intention of killing the golden goose for the sake of the masses. So they decreed just more austerity, deepening neoliberalism that resulted in impoverishing millions, as the succeeding years showed, especially in Greece, Spain and amongst the black population in the US.

The question that now arises is whether Trump does indeed have a new political-economic project, name a return to 1930s protectionism – something that would certainly lead to a slowdown in world trade and disaster for many working class communities. Although Trump declared in favour of ‘protection’ at his inauguration, opposition to any substantial repudiation of neoliberal globalisation would be ferocious among major sections of the American capitalist class. For corporations like Apple, Amazon, Microsoft and Nike – among the most profitable in the world – access to cheap Asian and Latin American labour is an absolutely crucial part of their business models. The same is true for hundreds of US, European, Japanese – and of course Chinese – companies.

But here we come to something crucial to understanding the rise of the radical right. You cannot read off directly from Trump, Marine Le Pen or the Alternative for Germany the direct interests of their own national capitals, let alone the world bourgeoisie as a whole. These hard right forces are in many ways the eruption of irrationality into politics, which always has its own dynamic far removed from formal logic.

If a reversion to all out protectionism worldwide should be doubted, there is no doubt that Trump intends to push forward strong elements of protection and ‘America First’ for some industries. Going along with economic protectionism is strident nationalism, which in the present situation presents itself as in particular anti-Chinese rhetoric. Probably the most dangerous thing that any of Trump’s nominees for his cabinet have said, is Rex Tillerson’s remark that Chinese access to the Spratly islands will be ‘not allowed’ by the incoming government. Probably this was bombast, but any such attempt could easily lead to a military clash with China. They will not accept being ejected from the South China Sea, despite the fact that most of their territorial claims are far-fetched.

What Tillerson’s remark shows is that strident economic and political nationalism usually goes together with rising militarism. Trump’s inauguration speech repeated his pledge to build up the military. Defence spending in 2010/11 reached nearly $700 billion, but is now languishing at an estimated measly $587 billion for 2016. It is extremely unlikely that a beefed up military is not going to be used, and immediately on taking office Trump has asked the Joint Chiefs to draw up a plan to rapidly smash Isis. This means probably a massive USD intervention in Iraq and maybe Syria. This especially is very bad news for the Kurdish liberated areas of Rojava in northern Syria. Far from US forces co-operating with Kurdish fighters, the US is now likely to facilitate Turkey’s attack on them.

Internationally Trump’s victory is seen as a victory for reactionary forces everywhere, and he is most likely to support all of them. In addition to strong backing for Erdogan in Turkey, we know already he intends to strengthen the US support for Israel, symbolically move the US embassy to Jerusalem and ditching US opposition to new Israeli settlements on the West Bank. It is likely that Obama’s new opening towards Cuba will be reversed. In addition the US is likely to be even more active in supporting reactionary forces elsewhere in Latin America, especially in Venezuela and Bolivia, and developing warm relations with the new right-wing government in Brazil.

To stop this text becoming too long here we are just summarising the likely plans of the first stage of the Trump presidency, which are now well-known.

- First on the Trump menu is the wall with Mexico and a harsh clampdown on ‘illegal’ immigrants. Already under Obama huge number so deportations occurred. Between 2009 and 2015 his administration removed more than 2.5 million people through immigration orders, which doesn’t include the number of people who “self-deported” or were turned away and/or returned to their home country at the border by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Now Trump claims he will deport another 3 million. Whatever the precise number is will most likely fuel and witch hunt and constant harassment of Latino communities. Most likely the new administration will abolish the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme that enables people who arrived as undocumented children to get renewable two-year residency and work permit. Around 1.7 million people have claimed this status, and are now very vulnerable to deportation if DACA is abolished.

- Trump intends a huge turn towards fossil fuels, and this means rebuilding the coal industry and coal-fired power stations, as well as pressing ahead with the Dakota Access pipeline and the Keystone XL pipeline that aims to bring shale oil from Canada to refineries on the Gulf coast. At the same time the US is likely to play an obstructive role in international climate change negotiations.

- The new administration will proceed to try to limit abortion and reproductive rights access, already very limited in some states. Trump will replace some of the outgoing Supreme Court judges with more right-wing anti-abortion replacements. Ideologically the Trump administration is bad news for women’s rights across the board. Women’s push for equality and equal rights will be broadly resisted. And the ideological effects of having a self-advertised
abuser of women in the presidency will be immensely negative.

- Trump plans a major cut in taxes for corporations and the rich, which can only result in cutbacks in state spending on social services. Part of that will of course be the replacement of Obamacare, itself a very limited health insurance plan for the poor.

- The advent of Trump and Trumpism is likely to encourage and bolster the semi-militarised US police forces, bolstered with $4bn worth of surplus military hardware from the Iraq war. This will be part of an attack on civil rights and the Black communities across the board. Already, de facto the right to demonstrate and organise protests is severely restricted.

The election of Trump has, like Brexit in the UK, given rise to a surge of racist attacks and incidents. During the election campaign there was significant harassment and intimidation of the Black voters. Official support for affirmative action will be withdrawn. In line with the idea of a new clampdown on the ‘carnage’ in American cities, the number of prisoners, especially Black prisoners, is likely to rise substantially.

The weakness of the Trump project is whether it can deliver any significant economic improvements for the white working class voters in the de-industrialised areas who supported him. Approval ratings for Trump are at a historical low for an incoming president, and he has already taken a political hit in the size and scope of the women’s marches on 21 January. But Trump retains immense reactionary political capital. Most likely the banging of the nationalist-military drum will be used to rally right-wing voters. Let us not forget that before the Falklands war Thatcher was immensely unpopular and way behind Michel Foot in the polls. It was the nationalism whipped up around the war, (plus the intervention by the SDP/Liberal Alliance) that robbed Foot of victory.

The coming fightback

The mobilisations in Washington and around the United States – and worldwide – represent a historic events which presages the coming fightback. The extent of the mobilisation exceeded all expectations, in the US, the UK and elsewhere. Probably the only worldwide mobilisation that can compare with it was February 15 2003 anti-war demonstrations. And the consequences will be immense, for the anti-Trump movement as a whole and for the rebuilding and strengthening of the women’s movement worldwide.

Very noticeable among American demonstrators, and speakers at the rallies, is a widespread understanding that the Trump agenda is across the board and threatens multiple communities. The film actress America Ferrara articulated this well; “Mr. Trump, we refuse. We reject the demonization of our Muslim brothers and sisters. We demand an end to the systemic murder and incarceration of our black brothers and sisters. We will not give up our right to safe and legal abortions. We will not ask our LGBTQ families to go backwards. We will not go from being a nation of immigrants, to a nation of ignorance.”

The extent of January 21 testifies to the extent of the polarisation of American society. Numerous anecdotal reports talk about the determination and high morale of radical forces in the US.

On the other hand, while all perspectives are provisional, a rapid unravelling of the Trump presidency is extremely unlikely: US administrations are possessed of huge resources – political, material, financial, military, ideological – that makes it certain that what will play out in the United States is a prolonged and harsh political battle. However, it is now next to certain that victimised communities and the diverse forces of radicalisation in the United States will not roll over and take it. On the contrary a sustained fightback is likely, particularly among women, Black communities and immigrants.

The problem remains that of political coherence and leadership: as always the main obstacle is the Democratic Party itself. It remains to be seen whether any radical political alternative with staying power emerges from the forces around Bernie Sanders.

In the fightback an understanding of the role of the mass media and alternative media is essential. Capitalist society is always suffused with bourgeois ideology which becomes part of daily ‘common sense’. But control of the mass media – partial or complete – is always an active policy of bourgeois politicians and their ideologues. In times of crisis and acute political polarisation, dictatorial politicians try to shout down or intimidate all centres of opposition and critical thought. Two blatant examples today are Egypt, where the al-Sisi military dictatorship tortures, imprisons and murders critical journalists and opposition activists in general, and the Turkish Islamic-police dictatorship where in Erdogan’s counter-coup and after newspapers and TV stations have been closed down, hundreds or journalists sacked or imprisoned and widespread attacks on academics and critical intellectuals made.

While nothing like these two egregious examples, the mood in the United States vis-à-vis the mass media is threatening. When Steve Bannon tells the US media to ‘shut up’, when Trump calls journalists ‘some of the biggest liars on the planet’ and there is much concern with providing ‘alt facts’, you can tell the administration wants to control and intimate critical mass media. (Ironically of course there are some journalists who are the biggest liars on the planet, and most of them are pro-Trump). In the US we now have the case of journalists arrested just for covering the anti-Trump riots in Washington and potentially facing long prison sentences. This follows the attempt to prosecute Amy Goodman and others for their coverage of the Dakota Access pipeline conflict.

Right wing concern with critical journalism extends to social media, which in open dictatorships is regularly shut down. In the imperialist countries the hard right
has a massive social media presence, but left-liberal and left wing forces also have an important presence. In the next period we can be sure that big social networks will come under pressure the censor the left and there remains the danger of the imposition of a ‘two tier’ Internet where corporations and ‘trusted sources’ get even more priority than they currently do. A left wing and critical online and social media presence is not merely entertainment, but part of an active ideological fight.

The mass media is just one area where the present crisis has generated a massive attacks on human and democratic rights across the board. Renewed talk about torture, extraordinary rendition and secret ‘black site’ prisons is just one sign of this. Today the Universal Declaration of Human rights is mainly ignored and reads like a revolutionary document, proclaiming as it does the rights of all people to freedom for arbitrary arrest and punishment, to have a job and somewhere to live, to enjoy free movement and to seek asylum in another country, to be treated equally “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”, to not be subject to cruel and unusual punishments such as torture, not to be subject of forced marriage and so on and so forth. Neoliberal capitalism is increasingly incompatible not only with democracy, but the slightest respect for human rights.

World Impact

The first thing to be said is that the election of Donald Trump is in many ways an ideological defeat for American capitalism. It is a terrible blow to the prestige of the United States that such a person could become US president. It is likely to engender massive public hostility worldwide to US plans on climate change, militarism and economic nationalism. While no doubt many rightwing and reactionary forces were encouraged by Trump’s victory, his international profile makes his patronage a distinctly mixed blessing: Nigel Farage may come to regret his unqualified praise for Trump. In addition to clashing with sections of the American bourgeoisie, Trump’s ‘America First’ line is bound to result in massive political tension with the leaders of European capitalism. We are likely to see a period of major political and economic turbulence, the precise outcome and scope of which we cannot exactly predict. Major variables include whether the extreme right in Europe makes further major gains, the extent of the US clash with China, whether there is a rapprochement with Vladimir Putin and whether, and at what speed, the world economy stumbles.

It should be noticed that part of the worldwide move to the right is the probably terminal crisis of ‘socialism for the 21st century’ in Latin America. The PT government has fallen, the Maduro government in Venezuela is in dire crisis and Evo Morales in under siege in Bolivia. The collapse of these radical reformist projects will be a significant demoralising factor for the left internationally, and in Latin America especially. We should commission a serious document on the Latin American left and have a discussion throughout the organisation before any hasty and simplistic judgements are made.

Trump’s accession to power is part of the process of the emergence of right-wing, authoritarian strong-men (mainly men) worldwide, an obvious feature of this situation – Modi In India, Erdogan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines and al-Sisi in Egypt are obvious examples. What Gilbert Achcar (after Gramsci) calls Morbid Symptoms’ abound and talk about capitalist barbarism is no longer an exaggeration, but here and now.

We must follow the fightback in the United States in detail and mobilise in solidarity. But in the last analysis there will be no end of crisis and reaction without the building of a radical, anti-capitalist alternative in the United States and around the world. Despite the difficulty of this task, we know from January 21st that there is a massive worldwide audience for this project.

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Socialist Resistance was founded in 2002 by British Marxists who supported the recomposition reflected by the Scottish Socialist Party, the Socialist Alliance and the Respect party. In July 2009 its supporters refounded it as the British section of the Fourth International.

Germany- International Socialist Organization (ISO) a step forward to overcome the fragmentation of the left

It is often said that Trotskyists love to split. The RSB (Revolutionär Sozialistischer Bund – Revolutionary Socialist League) and the isl (internationale sozialistische linke – international socialist left) have proved that this is not always true by unifying to form the ISO. [1] Die Freiheitsliebe spoke with Manuel Kellner, the editor of the monthly Sozialistische Zeitung – SoZ. This interview was published on December 6, 2016 by Die Freiheitsliebe, a “portal for critical journalism” in Germany.

What do you expect of the new organization?

It will certainly be a framework for exchanges based on solidarity between comrades, which will allow a rigorous discussion of the political situation and the responses that the left must make to the current challenges. For this, the participation in the life of the Fourth International and its debates is an asset. For the activists, this framework will be even more helpful than in their former organizations. For us, a key task for such an organization is to do everything to ensure that its members acquire a culture and political education which is their own – a structure which dictates to its activists what they have to think and do, conEIF ICT by a few leaders, has no interest for us.
The creation of the ISO is also a small sign of encouragement precisely at this time when the workers’ movement and the political left are so deeply and so permanently on the defensive, because it is a step in the direction of the overcoming of the fragmentation of the radical left, even when this is done on such a modest scale.

During the period when we prepared this unification, we have learned to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of both organisations involved. The RSB has more consistency and requirements in its organizational life, the isl has more of opening and influence in wider circles. We will try to bring together the strengths of each.

What will be decisive is our ability to collaborate and interact with the young people who are politicizing today in an emancipatory sense. In this field we have made progress but these are still fragile shoots. We are confident of our own strengths to think that we can make a useful contribution to the debate about socialism of the 21st century. We are also modest enough to know that we have much to learn from the other components of the radical left. If however the older ones among us, many of whom have been active since the end of the 1960s or the early 1970s, all disappear without having passed their knowledge and experience on to a sufficient number of younger people so that they appropriate them in their own way, this would be really very unfortunate.

**According to our information, this regroupment is taking place in the context of the discussions around the New Anti-capitalist Organization [2]. Do you share this point of view? What is your opinion? What balance sheet do you draw of this experience?**

We, the activists of the isl, have been able to see that the activists of the RSB are no longer content to explain where the other groups of the left are wrong and where they are right. Even more, in the course of these discussions, the RSB has demonstrated that it was ready to discuss on an equal footing with others, and to include its own organization in a broader framework if this could allow the construction of a more significant revolutionary socialist force.

Thus we have had more and more confidence in the possibility of the unity of our isl with the RSB, without damaging ourselves. During these three years where there have been many meetings of reflection, conferences, leadership meetings, participation in movements and actions – work in common in the framework of the trade union left already existed before – this impression was constantly reinforced. And more and more, in the discussions, the same positions and divergences could appear among the activists of the two groups.

As for the NaO, the process has failed due to various problems which were unresolved. One of them was the lack of proportion between the modest size of the participating forces and the large size of the trumpet in which they wanted to blow. The model, the NPA, in France has already undergone a serious crisis. In Germany, there is no sign of a revolution, but in the process of the NaO there was a competition as to who would have the the more radical revolutionary position. This could not end well.

From our point of view, as the isl, the objective of unifying the anti-capitalist forces could not exclude on the one hand those who define themselves thus within Die Linke, nor on the other hand the Interventionistische Linke. [3] Given that the small NaO, next to them, could not have a lot of authority, the process that it wanted to initiate should in fact have kept an open character over the long term. But in the NaO, there were too many people who preferred to declaim slogans. And for some components of the NaO, the process was of interest only to the extent that it allowed them to strengthen their current. The worm was thus already in the fruit and after some time it was no longer possible to continue.

**The isl and the RSB are both members of the Fourth International. There are however significant differences. How do you settle them? Will the ex-activists of the RSB be active within Die Linke or will the members of the isl leave it?**

The currents from which the RSB and the isl originate were certainly members of the Fourth International, but for decades they had different positions. While the isl was part of the large majority which has always sought rapprochement with other currents of the radical left, the RSB supported a minority, who saw rather in these attempts (which at the end of the account have often failed) a harmful propensity to self-destruction.

In connection with this, the internal life and the political culture were quite different in the RSB and the isl. During the years which preceded the unification we have discussed this a lot. We at the isl have been very surprised to see to what point rapprochement has been possible on this level also. While we had to agree on our organizational weaknesses, the members of the RSB could see the interest in being actors in a process of refoundation of the radical left, which has led them much closer to our conceptions.

We were thus able not only to formulate the same view on our programmatic positions, but also a document of definition of what we are, as well as to establish a simple operating mode suitable for a small organization. The RSB has agreed, among other things, that members of the organization are active in Die Linke and its left wing, in particular in the AKL. [4] The discussion has also had the effect that our activists question themselves more (and continue the reflection) on the definition of the objectives of this work, and the ISO as a whole has absorbed this reflection and this discussion and will continue.

**On what basis is the reunification taking place?**

On the basis of a common programmatic statement, a document that describes what we are and what we want, statutes and a resolution on the political situation and the tasks that are before us.
After the integration of the latest changes, these texts will be published and proposed for discussion. From our point of view these texts are not engraved in marble but are rather of proposals to extend reflection in common with other components of the radical left, so as to develop our own positions in liaison with the knowledge, the experiences, the intellectual traditions of these other forces.

The ISO will support Sozialistische Zeitung as an independent journal and will publish new publications like a paper magazine of the organization and an Internet site. Up to now the isl and the RSB have published Inprekorr together with contributions from members of the Fourth International from around the world. Now we have the ambition to combine this existing publication with a magazine of the organization more focused on the issues that are debated in Germany.

**What are your projects and priorities for the future?**

We consider the development of the forces of the right and of the extreme right as the major challenge which is closely related to the continuation of the capitalist offensive and current trends towards the destruction of solidarities. For us the anti-fascist struggle in the framework of the widest possible alliances is very important but also the development of a radical critique (which goes to the roots of the issue of power and of property) of the political system in the service of capital.

Activity in the workplaces and the unions remains for us a crucial axis and in this area we want to broaden our field of reflection and action, developing an orientation of class struggle, with new experiences of organization and union work among the precarious which are particularly difficult to organize.

Furthermore we consider ourselves as an integral part of the movement for the defense of the environment and we participate in particular to the mobilization against the use of fossil fuels, with priority given to the extraction of lignite. In this movement, we advance our ecosocialist ideas. The powerful interests of trusts and capitalist groups oppose protection of the climate. From our point of view, this fight can be won only if the interests of the employees for useful jobs and well-paid employment are related to ecological requirements.

This is of course also valid on the international plane. Climate justice is today an integral part of the fight against planetary social injustice and without connecting the environmental and social problems, without redistribution from the top to the bottom, without advancing the issues of ownership and authority, these problems which are so oppressive will not be resolved.

International solidarity with all those who rise up against the oppression, against pillage and war is an essential task. And we begin by sweeping before our own (Western) door, but we do not cede to the growing pressures to choose one camp against the other and before this fatal logic that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”.

We also want to strengthen the work of internal education through organizations and training associations like the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS), local Rosa Luxemburg clubs and SALZ e.V. [5]

[2] The process of constitution of the Neue antikapitalistische Organisation (NaO) began in 2011 at the initiative of left activists in Berlin. It took a few successful initiatives but has not been able to count on the dynamic hoped for. It was dissolved in 2015

[3] “Interventionistische Linke” (IL) is a national “post-autonomist” network. Among those involved are some former members of the KB, a non-dogmatic Maoist group of the 1970s and 1980s. It is based in part on the conceptions of the social centers in Italy. This network places the “social question” at the center of its concerns (not only antifascism and anti-racism), and is ready to participate in broad alliances. It played an important role in the mobilizations against the G8 Summit in 2007, the NATO Summit in Strasbourg in 2009, the transportation of nuclear waste in 2010, and against the European Central Bank: ”Blockupy”.

[5] The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an emanation of Die Linke. All parties present in the parliament have their own Training and Study Institute, with state subsidies. The Bildungsgemeinschaft Salz e.V (Soziales, Arbeit, Leben & Zukunft) is a training organization that also has official support, but is at the same time an independent association which works with currents the more to the left. Manuel Kellner is one of its facilitators.

**Poland- #czarnyprotest**

In Poland the law on abortion is one of the most restrictive in the European Union, sex education does not exist, and contraception is both expensive and hard to obtain because a medical prescription is often needed.

Katarzyna Bielińska-Kowalewska, PhD, is a philosopher and political scientist in Warsaw. She can be reached at mkatarzyna.bielsinska@gmail.com.

According to a 1993 law, abortion is allowed only in three cases: when pregnancy is a threat to a woman’s life or health; when there is a high possibility of severe malformation or illness of a fetus, confirmed by a prenatal exam; or when a pregnancy is the result of a crime (rape, incest, or pedophilia). [1] In other cases it is criminalized. A doctor or anyone else who helps a woman to perform an abortion, including a partner, a family member, or a friend, may be punished with three years of imprisonment. A woman who has aborted is not prosecuted. For more than 20 years this very restrictive law has been called a compromise by conservative, liberal, and social-democratic politicians.

In practice, even in these three cases of technically allowable abortion, it is almost unavailable. A recent study, conducted by the feminist organization Federation for Women and Family Planning, found that due to a lack of official ministerial guidelines...
and the chilling effects of the law, hospitals either do not have any procedures for abortion (the majority) or they have procedures that are unnecessarily complicated. Moreover, some hospitals told the Federation that, contrary to their financial reports, they do not do abortions. The “conscience clause,” that is, the right to refuse to perform abortion because of religious beliefs, is often invoked. [2]

Due to these circumstances, the abortion underground is thriving. According to the estimates of the Federation for Women and Family Planning, in Poland 80,000 to 100,000 abortions are performed per year, [3] with only some hundreds of these done legally.

There are underground clinics that provide abortions, which are often performed by the same doctors who in public hospitals cite the “conscience clause” in refusing to perform the procedure legally. [4] Abortion pills are obtained from Women on Waves, an international organization that provides pills in countries where abortions are illegal; or they are obtained on the black market, though in the latter case women run the risk of receiving fake or adulterated pills. Women also take some legal medicines that in high doses can induce abortion, such as Cytotec, which is meant for peptic ulcers. Abortion migration is flourishing: Poles travel to Great Britain, Germany, Holland, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Some clinics abroad have even developed special facilities for Polish patients, organizing trips and hotels for women seeking abortions. [5] There is a sharp social division between those women who have access to the information and resources to obtain safe abortions despite the restrictive law and those women who don’t have access to such resources and therefore use the most dangerous home methods, making them victims of the “compromise.” [6]

The Left and Abortion

In 1993 a mass movement against an anti-abortion law was crushed when a 1.7 million-signature appeal for a referendum on abortion was rejected by Parliament. Neoliberal social democracy was not helpful: The “post-Communist” Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which held power from 2001-2005, worked to obtain parliamentary support for introducing neoliberal reforms and sending Polish troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and it also openly accepted the restrictive abortion law. [7]

Feminist and left organizations have struggled for women’s rights but they have not succeeded in mobilizing the masses. In March 2016, for example, a traditional Manifa—an annual feminist demonstration held in Warsaw for 17 years—was organized under the slogan “Abortion in Defense of Life” and gathered no more than a thousand participants.

Moreover, some left circles tried to tone down the demand for the right to abortion, or even tried to eliminate it from their discourse, out of adherence to conservative views or to a belief that only well-educated and affluent women from big cities supported abortion rights.

Another example of left ambivalence about abortion arose during the electoral campaign [8] conducted by the Partia Razem (Together Party), a left party formed in 2015 and now one of the leaders of the Black Protest. Two women activists interviewed by a right-wing web site about their program for poor women spoke about social support for women and families but did not say a word about reproductive rights. [9] Although the electoral program of Razem had points on sex education, the funding of contraception, and in vitro fertilization, it did not mention abortion. In the party’s programmatic declaration there is a section on abortion, but it is formulated in a very indirect manner, presenting abortion not as a right but as involving a question of worldview; opposition to existing law is expressed, but the open demand for legalization is not. [10]

The Ordo Iuris Bill

In spring 2016, ultraconservative groups launched a citizens’ legislative committee called Stop Aborcji (Stop Abortion) and started collecting signatures in support of a total ban on abortion. According to the project, which was led by Ordo Iuris, a conservative Christian legal group opposing abortion, all those involved in an abortion, from the woman who has the abortion to all those helping her, would face five years of imprisonment. In the case of unintentional abortion they would face a penalty of three years of imprisonment. [11] The ban would lead to the criminalization of miscarriage, subjecting miscarriages to a prosecutor’s investigations, [12] and would make it impossible to provide safe early termination of ectopic pregnancies.

Termination of a pregnancy would be decriminalized only in situations of direct threat to women’s lives, and prenatal investigations of fetal health would be blocked or hindered. [13] A gynecologist, Professor Romuald Dębksi, saw the bill as the end to prenatal diagnostics and therapy: “It will be a ban on touching a baby [fetus] with a needle because I could be liable for three years for that.” [14] He also commented, “When the law is changed, I’ll not be allowed to do laparoscopy to a patient with ectopic pregnancy in order to prevent that threat to life because it will not be an action occurring in a life-threatening state. It is absurd!” [15]

The bill banning abortion was supported by the Catholic Church and the politicians of the conservative ruling party Law and Justice (PiS), including Prime Minister Beata Szydło, who said that she personally supported a total ban on abortion. [16] The Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a communication calling for support for the bill, claiming that “on the question of the protection of life of the unborn, one should not stop at the present compromise” and appealed for “full legal protection of life of the unborn.” [17] On April 3, 2016, the communication was read in churches across the country during Sunday services.
Reactions: Protests and the Save the Women Bill

This fundamentalist offensive provoked intense social reactions. On April 3, 2016, in big cities all over Poland, demonstrations against the project were held. They were organized by Razem, and they spontaneously attracted many people. In Warsaw several thousand protesters gathered in front of the Parliament. A Facebook group, Dziewuchy dziewuchom (Girls for Girls), was launched on April 1 and gained 100,000 fans in ten days. [18]

On May 12, a citizens’ legislative committee called Save the Women (Ratujmy kobietę) was launched and began collecting signatures for a bill liberalizing the existing law. The leader of the committee was Barbara Nowacka, a young social-democratic activist. The bill was modeled on laws adopted by the majority of EU states. It would legalize abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy; if a pregnancy was the result of a crime, the term would be prolonged to 18 weeks, and if a fetus was severely malformed or sick, to 24 weeks. Another aim of the bill was to introduce sex education and make contraception available: Contraception would be subsidized by the state and free for the poor, and it would also be made available for people under 18 without requiring the permission of a parent. [19]

The Save the Women initiative collected 215,000 signatures and Stop Abortion, around 450,000. In Poland, a citizens’ legislative initiative needs 100,000 signatures to advance; both bills were successful and reached the Parliament.

In September, when the Parliament was soon to debate the bills, the political atmosphere became heated. "Black Protest" arose as a hashtag and slogan. At the beginning, it seemed to be just another “clicktivist” practice that would produce no effect beyond an additional way of posting selfies to social media, this time with those posting dressed in black. However, on September 22, when the parliamentary debate on both bills was held, a few thousand people gathered outside the Parliament building under this slogan, along with protesters gathered in two different demonstrations, organized respectively by Save the Women and Razem.

On September 23 the ultraconservative Ordo Iuris bill advanced to the second reading stage, while the Save the Women bill was rejected—this despite PiS’s having declared that it never would reject a citizens’ bill in the first reading, a practice that the public generally perceives as a manifestation of arrogance of power.

The Right to Abortion Is Not an Idea of Spoiled Elites

A telephone survey of a representative sample of 1,001 respondents, conducted by IPSOS for Oko.press just after the parliamentary voting, revealed that support for liberalization had significantly increased, going from 25 percent of respondents in September 2015, to 29 percent in April 2016, and then to 37 percent in September 2016. Concerning liberalization in the September survey, 39 percent of women respondents and 35 percent of male respondents said they supported the right to abortion for socio-economic reasons. Moreover, the survey data smashed the myth that the demand for abortion rights comes largely from privileged, affluent, well-educated women from big cities. The idea of liberalizing existing law was supported by 39 percent of respondents with elementary and junior high school education, 43 percent of respondents with basic vocational education, 37 percent of respondents with a high school education, and only 27 percent of respondents with university degrees. Fully 64 percent of those with university degrees supported the existing law. This could be explained by the fact that the abortion underground and migration are much more available to more educated women because of their higher incomes. [20]

Another one of the numerous demonstrations of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD) was planned for September 24. KOD is a multiclass movement, defending democratic rights and freedoms, that emerged from the opposition to authoritarian moves of the PiS government in December 2015. Because of KOD, Poland has become an arena of anti-governmental protests whose intensity has had no parallel over the preceding 20 years. KOD demonstrations regularly turn out tens of thousands of protesters.

An appeal for a Black Protest at the KOD march was issued. The "Black Bloc" was formed by around 200 people but many other participants at the KOD demonstration also dressed in black. Although it is hard to judge how many of them wore black for political reasons (it was cold, and black clothes are very popular in Poland), women dressed in black led the crowd in chanting slogans against tightening the law on abortion.

The KOD leader, Mateusz Kijowski, spoke on the vote against the Save the Women project in its first reading: “Yesterday the parliamentary majority showed deep contempt for hundreds of thousands of Poles. They did not allow debate on the bill on human rights, which was signed by more than 200,000 Polish women and men.” He read a letter from Agnieszka Holland, a film director, who wrote, “Today the PiS government wants to deprive women of freedom and equality. They want to take away from women the right and freedom to decide about their own lives, to take away their dignity, decreeing that a woman’s life is worth less than the life of an embryo.” [21]

Black Monday

On October 1, a demonstration was held in Warsaw; as many as ten thousand people gathered in front of Parliament. It was clear that mobilization was intensifying, but the high point came on Monday, October 3, with the call for a women’s strike.

That day demonstrations were held in 143 cities, towns, and municipalities. The slogans were typically feminist like “My Body, My Choice”, “I Think, I Feel, I Decide”, “We Have Brains, Not Only Uteruses,” but also “Poland Is a Woman” and directly anti-government like “Beata, Sorry, Your Government Will
Be Overthrown by Women”; “Jarosław, Hands Off Women”; and “Abortion of the Government.”

In Warsaw tens of thousands of women gathered in Castle Square in the Old Town. For many participants it was the first demonstration of their lives. Its success was completely unexpected, which was confirmed even by the choice of the place for the mobilization: Castle Square is too small for such a massive gathering. The crowd was so big, the square was so small, the mass pressure so strong, and the situation so risky that people were even told by organizers not to move under the threat of dissolving the demonstration.

One of the women for whom the Black Protest was their first demonstration was Anna Nowak (name changed), a young gynecologist from a village in Western Pomerania. “It was my duty to go to the protest. If this bill was adopted, my patients would have no access to prenatal exams and no choice but to give birth to disabled babies. That often means, for a woman, exclusion from the labor market and a breakdown of a relationship because they are often left by their partners.” Dr. Nowak recollects, “I remember a girl whose fetus was malformed and she was refused legal abortion. The fetus was big and allegedly the pregnancy was too advanced. It was not true—malformed fetuses are often very big. She was forced to continue the pregnancy. In the forty-fifth week she gave birth to a baby who died after three minutes. I delivered that baby.” Dr. Nowak supports the idea of liberalizing existing law: “Everybody must have a choice.”

In the response to the call, some women did not go to work and were replaced by their male colleagues. Some higher officials openly supported the strike. Robert Biedroń, mayor of the city of Słupsk in Western Pomerania and an LGBTQ activist, said before the demonstration on Monday, “I have received lots of declarations that women will not come to work. There are whole departments [in the Słupsk town hall] that will not come to work. It can paralyze the functioning of the town hall, but I totally understand it. I believe that women have to show what the world will look like when women get pissed off and when they show that they also want to decide on democracy.”

At numerous universities it was announced that students who were not in class on October 3 would not be marked absent. Some private entrepreneurs closed their shops or facilities, such as Radosław Olszewski, an owner of a chain of restaurants in Wroclaw. He closed all his restaurants, which employ 100 people, 80 of them women.

Many women came to work dressed in black, such as the majority of female employees in the Indesit factory in Łódź. In many workplaces some women limited their duties, with secretaries, for example, not answering their office phones.

Because of the variety of forms of participation in the Black Protest it is hard to evaluate its scope, but it is clear that it was massive. According to police estimates, around 100,000 people took part in street demonstrations alone. And in the survey conducted just after Black Monday, 67 percent of respondents declared that they supported the Black Protest.

**Success**

The effect of the unexpected mass protest was also unexpected: PiS withdrew its support for the fundamentalist project, and on October 6 it was rejected by Parliament. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the party, whose real role much exceeds his formal position, admitted during the parliamentary debate that it was “a giant misunderstanding,” and “they came to the conclusion” that the Ordo Iuris project “is not a proper thing, and its result would be opposite [to the expected one].” He assured the public that PiS was “supporting the idea of protecting life,” but said it needed a well-considered action, which that project was not. Beata Szydło, the prime minister, announced new social support to encourage women to bear and raise disabled children. Even the Bishops’ Conference withdrew its active support for the project, declaring that it did not support the idea of punishing women for abortion.

**Aftermath: The Struggle Continues**

The sudden governmental withdrawal was not necessarily definitive, because the government and the ruling party are also under pressure from disappointed ultraconservatives. The idea of a new bill tightening the existing law, with this one sponsored by the government, has emerged very quickly. Such a new bill would criminalize abortion in the case of fetal malformation or illness, but it is not clear if the government actually intends to proceed with this or whether it is a sort of discursive play to calm down ultraconservatives who accuse PiS of a betrayal. At the moment a new law, For Life, has been adopted, which provides around a thousand euros to a woman who decides to continue a pregnancy and give birth when the fetus is malformed or sick. This law is in the spirit of the earlier words of Kaczyński: “We will aspire to assure that even cases of very difficult pregnancies, when a baby is condemned to death or severely malformed, will end up with a delivery to let the baby be baptised, buried, given a name.”

In October, the first abortion coming-out event by a young female celebrity took place in Poland, with pop singer Natalia Przybysz recording a song about her own abortion. The song is about taking 42 pills of Cytotec, which did not help, and about her trip to Slovakia to get medical attention to end her pregnancy. She also gave an interview in which she described her story in detail. The interview sparked a wave of attacks on her: She was called a “bitch” and a “murderer,” with the tabloid Super Express providing the headline, “She killed the baby to make room for books.” In the small town of Nadarzyn, in Mazovia, a protest was organized against a concert by Przybysz. On the other hand, her openness about her abortion was enthusiastically welcomed by feminists and by left-wing and even some liberal circles. Women immediately organized
an online collection of anonymous posts on their own abortion experiences. [34] However, the critics of Przybysz included some participants in the Black Protest who opposed tightening the existing law but supported the status quo “compromise.”

In that context, new protests were organized, especially on October 23 and 24. In numerous cities and towns, actions and demonstrations took place, although they were much smaller than on Black Monday. The division in the movement became more visible not only because the different stands on the pro-choice position became evident, but also because some left-wing circles started to attack KOD, claiming, for instance, that “KOD is appropriating the Black Protest.” [35] In Poland, supporters of the old regime as well as followers of Antonio Negri’s theories tended to disavow KOD from the very beginning as a movement in the service of liberal opposition, which aimed “to mask the exploitation,” and in this sense not different from PiS, [36] as described by a prominent Razem supporter and Negri follower, Professor Jan Sowa.

Małgorzata Tracz, a president of the Greens, which has supported KOD from the very beginning, confirms that many KOD women were engaged in the Black Protest. She also admits that lots of participants in the movement were women who were against the attack on the “compromise” but did not support the liberalization of abortion laws. She says, “The myth of compromise has blocked the possibility of debate. But as a participant and an organizer, I see the change; lots of women are changing their mind in the course of the events. The protests were against tightening the law on abortion, and our job is to stimulate the debate on liberalization. Now it is time for the next step.” She appreciates the abortion coming-out of Natalia Przybysz and sees a desperate need for further abortion coming-outs. At the same time she is critical about comments like “They did not know where they were and what they took part in,” as some Black Protesters said of those participants who are satisfied with the status quo and who attack Przybysz. Tracz emphasizes that “this is the effect of the myth of compromise, which we have to struggle against.” [37]

Conclusions

Although it is very tempting to look at the Black Protest through idealistic glasses and see it as a new social movement spontaneously emerging from the grassroots, to understand this phenomenon a more materialist and classically Marxist approach is needed.

During the last year in Poland, after PiS gained power, a political reconfiguration occurred. Poland had many years of social peace, when most radical neoliberal reforms did not result in mobilization against the government, even after a dramatic pension reform in 2012 that increased the age of pension eligibility from 60 years for women and 65 years for men to 67 years for both. In December 2015, though, people suddenly took to the streets because of PiS’s attempt to take control of the Constitutional Tribunal, which had not previously been an institution of special popular interest. This movement is KOD, which was at one moment able to organize a demonstration of 100,000 people in Warsaw (which is an extraordinary number for Poland) under pro-democracy slogans. This movement has played an enormous role in the rebirth of the culture of protest. It has become clear that in Poland democratic political demands have much more potential for mobilizing masses than do social demands.

It seems that this mobilizing potential of political demands also played a role in the Black Protest, and that this at least partly explains its success. In a very short time the right to abortion—even when understood very narrowly as a right to terminate pregnancy resulting from rape or when a fetus is malformed—was raised from a social or even ideological question to the level of one of fundamental rights and civic freedoms. The struggle for the right to abortion was linked to other struggles for democratic freedoms, and the attempt of PiS to tighten the abortion law was understood as another attack on democracy. It is at least somewhat symbolic that one of most visible celebrities who stood against tightening the abortion law was Krystyna Janda, who had played the main role in Man of Marble and Man of Iron by Andrzej Wajda—movies that symbolize the struggle against the suppression of democratic and workers’ rights under Stalinism. When Janda posted about the 1975 Women’s Strike in Iceland on her Facebook profile, it was broadly interpreted as a call for a women’s strike in Poland (although she did not intend this).

All in all, in Poland mass women’s protests, which have no precedent, immediately forced the Parliament to give up the idea of tightening the law on abortion. The governing party capitulated publicly in the face of the explosion of mass discontent. The scale and force of the protest astonished everybody. The Black Protest is an important confirmation that the tradition and culture of mass political protest is being reborn in Poland at the moment.


[8] In the Twenty-First century Razem has been the first left-wing extra-parliamentary party that managed to achieve 3 percent threshold at the parliamentary election, which provides the state subvention and lets the party enter the political mainstream.

[9] “What can feminists who joined the Together Party offer to mothers from families struggling to make ends meet and young women who earn very little working at a checkout counter in a little shop in a small town?
"K.P.: Women earn less in general. Additionally they have much longer breaks in their professional life, because they usually take care of children. Women more often bear the consequences of the breakdown of marriage and of unwanted pregnancy, and with their children they have to leave their homes because of violence. Finally, it is more difficult for them to find a job just because they can become mothers. The state has to intervene here. Otherwise, women will always be at risk in the labor market.

“The state must provide support. Therefore we want to change the rules of functioning of the Alimentary Fund. Our priority is development of the network of nurseries and kindergartens to make space in free facilities for all children in need. Because of today’s labor market we must provide the facilities that operate in the afternoons and during weekends. We want to introduce — along the pattern of Sweden — a 480-days single parental leave shared equally between parents. Thanks to that, children will get longer care at home and women will have fewer problems with finding a job.” — K. Wołodźko, K. Paprota, M. Zawisza, “Millera odsyłamy do prokuratora” - coś nie tak z tym zjednoczeniem lewicy.

Almost all the media and the parties linked to the regime have accepted the official explanation of what has happened, that of “manipulation and conspiracy”, “the internal hand” and “the external menace”. These are the tricks the regime has used for decades to demonise all social movements, displaying the contempt and paternalism intrinsic to it. The Algerian system does not wish to start on the political and social changes that the country obviously needs. A phobia of social networks has been an obsession since 2011 since these networks were behind the rise of the popular movements in the countries of the Arab region, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt.

For those who observe attentively what has happened in this multiform popular movement, the events are rich in lessons. The dynamic of the Arab spring has shown its limits through the various Arab countries, and finally the role of social networks in the movements of mass revolt has been grasped. The social networks have surfed on a social movement and put in place mediations which can serve this movement downstream, but they are incapable of substituting themselves for the social forces put in movement. The experience of the Egyptian revolution has shown the political and social inconsistency which characterizes them. Why then this demonization of social networks?

The information revolution and the techniques of modern communication were key to the social and political movements which characterised what became known as the “Arab spring”. Since then politics has been convulsed by the appearance of new techniques and applications, electronic exchange on the internet, email with dialogue boxes and the sending of texts, the programming of direct contact up to new formulas of electronic press and the various supplementary sites of different media, all this with the development of “alternative journalism”, individual sites and blogs, all of which have expanded at a dizzying pace since 1997.

Weblogs have become a social reality escaping the constraints of censorship and surveillance which
The institutions “will favour the trap of permanent market parallel to the smugglers”. The atrophy of an official mafia, “which will dominate the hoarding”. All this being aggravated by “improvised system, by a logic of corruption and institutionalised consumption”.

There is, he said, “a division of the economic base by developing “corruption and widespread speculation” lower than that of wealthier layers. Speculation proportionally to their consumption per head, much more than the poorest and have become rents distributed to political clienteles rather than the needy. The spiral of impoverishment is established by the logic of the system: at less than 70 dollars a barrel, there are no dinars left to finance the capital budget. Meanwhile, “the greed aroused by massive profits is accompanied by terrorist violence, kidnappings, gangs and theft”. In 2011, ordinary taxation only covered 35.9% of operating costs.

The abundance of resources expresses the nature of the regime and the mechanisms which preside at its accession and determine the clientélist networks. Our bourgeois liberal economist author has a perspective of erosion of profit. All this means that “the system is no longer to be reformed, but to be changed completely” by launching a consistent transition.

The regime has progressively been stripped of its attributes of sovereignty and freedom of action. It has taken a beating at the hands of the international financial institutions, with the shameful rescheduling of the IMF debt from the 1990s, which completed the dismantling of the national economy. Today, it appeals to these same institutions and their consultants to learn from them how to apply the provisions of the finance law, austerity measures and the rules of unrestrained neoliberalism to the popular classes.

This policy, begun in the 1980s and 1990s, has been characterized by a change in the country’s energy policy. It led first to a catastrophic rescheduling and a mortgaging of the future generations through deep cuts in development projects in the areas of petrochemicals and refined products.

In a recent work, Boumediene’s former minister of energy and industry, Belaïd Abdessalem, has estimated the failure to win contracts for gas and above all liquefied natural gas (GNL) cost billions of dollars in lost income in the 1980s and 1990s [2]. This income would have avoided the rescheduling and allowed development of the petrochemical and oil refining industries in conditions much more advantageous than those of today. Projects in the energy and refined oil fields would have made Algeria an exporter of more than unprocessed raw materials. Today, refined oil products are imported and lie at the heart of the government’s problems in reducing public expenditure.

Since the 1980s, the public sector has been dismantled and, to help the barons of import-import, a consumption system has been put in place to replace the production system which characterized the development project of the 1970s. The volume of social transfers has now become an important issue for budget policy along with subsidies to basic products like bread and milk, the right to access to housing, support for transport prices, fuel, education and health. Social protection has drifted towards populism and badly targeted transfers no longer help the poorest and have become rents distributed to political clienteles rather than the needy. The poorer classes benefit from price support proportionally to their consumption per head, much lower than that of wealthier layers. Speculation...
in housing supported by the state has reached unimaginable levels. The informal economy affects the whole economy and the absence of taxes – on patrimony often constituted from situations of rent or financial income – aggravates growing inequality.

According to official figures, the informal market accounts for 60% of overall activity and nearly 50% of employment. Taking account of these aspects, ordinary taxation is not able to cover all the costs of the operating budget, it barely covers the wage mass or 58% of expenditure. It is oil taxation, which represents 2/3 of state revenue, which covers the operating costs and social transfers. Transfers and subsidies from the state budget are combined with added implicit subsidies paid to companies, the administration and citizens through water, fuel, electricity and gas prices.

According to a recent study by the PNUD, the volume of subsidies of energy products represents 11 billion dollars per year, or 6% of GDP, whereas the share of the budget for education and teaching only represented 8% and health 5% [3].

The general total of subsidies for 2013 was 26.4% of GDP or 4,473 billion dinars – more than 120% of the oil tax collected in 2013, which was 3,618 billion dinars. The oil income was largely consumed rather than being invested, a long way from the vision of development of the first years of independence. The implicit transfers, as important as those budgeted, illustrate perfectly the crisis of the Algerian model of accumulation. The oil money which should serve to develop the country and increase employment goes to massive consumption, boosted by the Algerian social model, which conceals social disparities.

The economist Abdellatif Benachenhou, former finance minister and presidential economic advisor, cited in his last work the results of a national investigation by the National Statistics Office showing that “Algerian households devote 41.8% of their expenditure to food, 20% to housing and 8% to clothes” [4]. The investigation showed that “the poorest households devote 54.1% of their income to food and the richest devote 24% of their expenditure to transport and communications”. The author shows that with “the exception of frontal aid to rural housing, budget transfers (higher education and frontal aid to housing in particular) and most implicit subsidies (water, electricity, fuel, infrastructure and transport companies) benefit massively the better off layers because of the new distribution of incomes and the structure of social demand in the towns”. For example, in Oran and Algiers, the two biggest cities in the country, it is estimated that more than 45% of water is consumed by 10% of subscribers. 40% of private vehicles circulate in or around greater Algiers. Whereas the public debate tends to focus incorrectly on households, insofar as subsidies to gas and electric consumption are concerned, the investigation shows that “the overall subsidy of 2,129 billion dinars, or 13.4% of the GDP of 2013, goes half to households and half to enterprises and administrations”. The subsidy allocated to households for gas consumption “goes to poor households at a proportion of 9% and that for electricity at 5% of the overall subsidy to households”. This latter “goes for 15% to the poorest households and for 85% to those of higher incomes and expenditure”. The subsidy allocated to “water distribution goes to poor households at a proportion of 19% of the overall subsidy to households. It is the subsidy which benefits them the most because of a very low tariff for the first level of consumption: 8.5 Dinars/m³ for an economic value of more than one hundred dinars”.

The author concludes that “if we relate it to the total of implicit subsidies, the subsidy to the poorest households only represents 8%, or a little less than 1% of GDP”. The most likely hypothesis is that the richest half of the population benefits from 80% of the subsidies to households. As always in the area of subsidies, “the better off layers hide behind the poorest”. Among the better off those with incomes from the informal economy are numerous. The injustice is consequently unlimited. In one sense, this work highlights an infernal logic which completely inverts the aim of redistribution. Those who do not pay tax and avoid social security contributions benefit the most from public transfers. Such is the reality of the Algerian social model.

The 2017 finance law: a new economic model?

Early 2017 was marked by a social revolt against the provisions of the 2017 finance law, which in the view of several daily newspapers inaugurated “a veritable war against the people”. In an acerbic and critical article, Abed Charef of the Quotidien d’Oran asks: “Who called the strike? Nobody knows. The government itself is unable to identify this source of potential destabilization” [5]. The journalist, representative of the liberal media, quickly adopts the official explanation of “conspiracy and foreign hands”. Almost all the political class and the opposition parties have accepted this explanation, indissociable from the nature of the Algerian regime.

And yet, it should be remembered that on September 27, 2016 in the town of Bejaia a strike of several sectors took place, followed by a big march against the high cost of living, austerity and the draft 2017 finance law. The march, which mobilized hundreds of public sector workers in health and education, was not repressed and made the front pages of several daily newspapers. In Tizi Ouzou on October 31, 2016, several hundred workers took part in a protest march demanding decent wages and the maintenance of their pension systems and denouncing austerity. We are seeing a real recomposition of the social movement characterised by the resumption of workers’ struggles, first in the traditional sectors of the Algerian proletariat, then in the peripheral sectors which have waged tough and emblematic struggles.

In November 2017 workers in all the subsidiaries of the industrial vehicles complex (SNVI) launched a general strike to demand their wages for October, the resumption of production and the maintenance of their pension rights. This is the centre of Algerian mechanical industry and is located in Rouiba, 20 km
east of Algiers. It employs 7,000 workers and has been the subject of a rescue plan – the workers accuse the government of favouring a takeover by the Emirates-based Aabar group and the German company Daimler/Mercedes-Benz, so as to privatise the complex. The workers ultimately won all their demands.

Subsequently a massive hunger strike developed from December 11, 2016, involving more than 10,000 security workers for the oil company Sonatrach, in several production sites. This movement demands better wages and working conditions and the recognition of trade union rights. The hunger strike continued for several days and developed into sit-ins at the regional directorates of Sonatrach in several towns. It ended with a significant rally in Hassi Messaoud.

A social context marked by such a radicalisation cannot be reduced to manipulation and conspiracy. It is this climate of scepticism, when all the indicators are in the red (trade deficit, huge budget deficit, big fall in currency reserves, increased inflation), that the draft finance law, which is supposed to implement a new model of growth, was passed at the end of 2016. It will subject the population to severe austerity and the purchasing power of most households will be seriously affected.

Since January 2017 the price of all products has begun to rise. According to the first indicators, subsidised products like semolina (+10 %) and flour (+15 %) have risen in price. The barons of the informal market have stored significant volumes of products bought in 2016 for resale in 2017. The large rise in consumer prices in January has been brought about by the increase in VAT and the speculative practices of the dominant informal market. Prices have also been swelled by the obvious anticipation of a devaluation of the dinar in 2017 and restrictions on imports. The fall of the price of cereals on the world market has not prevented the rise in the prices of semolina, flour and pasta. All this, combined with a major financial crisis, a worsening of budget deficits and a decline in the value of the dinar is feeding an inflation rate close to double figures (9 %).

**Against the crisis, society must organise itself**

Since the 1980s, the Algerian bourgeoisie has tried by every means to stabilize a coherent capitalist project. It has not succeeded, first because of the radical relationship of forces inherited from the war of liberation and also because of its structural weakness, which confines its political horizon by a strongly marked populist tradition. The shameful rescheduling of the debt with the IMF in the 1990s allowed the dismantling of the bulk of the national economy and the liquidation of what remained of the project of national development, and the adoption of neoliberal theses. The informal economy has prospered and the refusal to tax the wealthy instead of imposing austerity on the weakest has favoured the rapid growth of inequality. Through society there has been a move away from the collective and an individualistic turning inwards, which undermines social solidarity.

The mass movement continues to leave its mark. In recent years, since the wave of revolts of 2011 against the high cost of living and the decline in purchasing power, struggles and social demands have continued. Sources close to the regime say that every year there have been more than 11,000 social conflicts. The recommencement of workers’ struggles, around the stable nuclei of the Algerian proletariat, prefigures this process of recomposition of the working class's ability to fight.

Before the evident failure of the economic reforms and the bankruptcy of the public enterprises which had enjoyed managerial autonomy in 1988, the workers must organise their mobilisations for the construction of an independent and democratic UGTA, through its transformation into a combative union, the indispensable instrument of self-defence of workers against the anti-social projects of the regime [6].

A wave of discontent is progressively spreading to sectors which until now were not characterised by their rejection of the government’s anti-social policies. The government has ordered a team of experts to elaborate an anti-crisis plan which it bizarrely calls a “new economic model”. Much mystery surrounds this model, which involves a plan of restrictions to confront the financial crisis, making deep cuts in operating costs, freezing salaries and recruitment in the civil service and establishing conditions for the progressive suppression of subsidies.

In Tizi-Ouzou, Bouira, and Batna traders launched a general strike against the repression of the price controllers and the pressures of the administration services (taxes, insurance fund). The political debate around levies and taxation and the social mobilisation against the restrictive provisions of the 2017 finance law, against the high cost of living and austerity has already marked the social climate in the country.

Society is learning to organise, to defend its right to a decent life. Citizens are learning to mobilise to fight speculation which in the area of housing has led to a real estate bubble which will explode one day. The informal economy prospers and the absence of taxes on patrimony or financial incomes favours the rapid growth of inequality. The mobilisation of the movement of contract staff members in national education has shown the way.

The Parti socialiste des travailleurs (PST – Socialist Workers’ Party, Algerian section of the Fourth International) has participated in supporting and popularising this important action, to mark its active solidarity with this movement of the future. It is of course necessary to boost growth through productive investment and this choice should be imposed on the import-import lobbies who have sapped the productive system and benefit from exemptions which have no impact on the national economy and on the contrary enrich foreign
producers (more than 14 billion dollars in 2011). The PST fights for the expansion of employment, the mobilisation of national skills and a consistent fight against corruption by imposing more transparency in management, hence more democracy. The report of the audit office for 2011 indicates that 7,937 billion dinars have not been recovered and tax evasion amounts to 300 billion dinars.

The PST also works for democratic control of the distribution of public funds and an end to the pillage of the national patrimony. We fight to give a renewed content to the concept of the left, to the anti-capitalist struggle. These references, which had a historic anchoring in our recent history, have become opaque for society, subjected to the media discourse on consumerism and free consumption which have replaced the notions of equality and citizenship.

The PST works tirelessly to overcome the generational rupture which is placing left currents in a ghetto. It also works to establish links to the dynamic forces of change, to build together a dialectic which helps put in place an alternative to the current impasse. It does so convinced of the specificity of the historic dynamic which has weighed on the social movement of this country and of the fact that the national and social questions have evolved at different rhythms and that national oppression has always been prioritized over social oppression, which has obscured the social consciousness of the Algerian proletariat. From this flow all the drifts of recent history, of which it is necessary to make a critical inventory, so as to rebuild and advance.

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[1] Ahmed Benbitour, a minister in five successive governments and head of government. He is an economist and former consultant with the World Bank and IMF. He chose to join the liberal opposition to the existing rentier system, after having overseen the policy of privatisation of public enterprises. See Ahmed Benbitour, L’Algérie de l’espoir, Éditions Dar El Khaldounia, 2015.

Le pétrole et le gaz naturel en Algérie – Comment les Algériens ont gagné la bataille de la récupération du pétrole et du gaz

Mahdi Sâaad-Eddine is a member of the leadership of the Parti socialiste des travailleurs (PST – Socialist Workers’ Party, Algerian section of the Fourth International)

**Syria- The new balance of terror**

The scorched-earth war of the Assad dictatorship, backed by allies Russia and Iran, against the Syrian Revolution has attained a critical victory with the conquest of the rebellion stronghold of Eastern Aleppo. Now the left must place a premium on understanding the lessons of what happened—and what it will mean for the region. Ashley Smith interviewed Daher about conditions in Syria and the situation for the remnants of revolutionaries after Aleppo, as well as the role that Hezbollah, Lebanon’s Shia fundamentalist party, has played.

**AS:** After the conquest of Aleppo, Assad’s counterrevolution seems to have decisively set back the Syrian Revolution. What impact will this have on the remnants of genuine revolutionaries? Also, how have the Islamic fundamentalist forces that came to predominate in the opposition to Assad’s regime responded?

**JD:** The loss of Eastern Aleppo is, of course, a big blow for the various opposition forces, but especially for the democratic opposition forces. The regime and its allies targeted Eastern Aleppo because of its political and economic significance.

We must remember today that the Syrian Revolution began as a mass popular uprising against the dictatorship. Just like everywhere in the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the people rose up for democracy and liberation. And in Syria, the people liberated whole sections of the country from Assad’s regime.

The revolution faced both Assad’s counterrevolution, backed by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, as well as a counterrevolution waged by Islamic fundamentalist forces like al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front, now renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey backed many of the fundamentalist forces, while the U.S. tried to manipulate and steer the rebellion into an orderly transition to preserve the regime without Assad, although they have progressively abandoned even this position.

Eastern Aleppo was the most significant of all the liberated cities that had begun to create a popular democratic alternative to the dictatorship. The regime has most feared progressive and democratic organizations and activists, even with all their imperfections.

All the global and regional powers also want to liquidate the Syrian revolution’s democratic aspirations in the name of the "war on terror." Donald Trump’s victory in the U.S. elections will most likely lead to some grand coalition to prosecute this aim. Tragically, each defeat of the democratic resistance has strengthened and benefited the Islamic fundamentalist forces on the ground. The fall of Aleppo has produced the same results. But this time, it has also produced splits and conflicts between different Islamic fundamentalist forces in the countryside around Idlib and Aleppo.

On January 23, Fateh al-Sham, the former al-Qaeda affiliate, launched attacks on armed opposition groups, first on the [Free Syrian Army, or FSA] coalition of Jaysh al-Mujahideen and then other Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and Suqur al-Sham.
Fateh al-Sham justified this new offensive as preemptive acts to "thwart conspiracies" against it by the armed opposition forces attending the negotiations held in Kazakhstan. In response, several armed opposition groups, including other Islamic fundamentalist movements, expelled Fateh al-Sham from areas around Aleppo and Idlib.

In a defensive move, Jaysh al-Mujahideen and six other armed opposition groups announced their merger with Ahrar Sham in northwestern Syria in order to fend off the assault by Fateh al-Sham. A few days later, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham responded by announcing the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition composed of Jabhate Fateh al-Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zinki and three other Islamic factions.

The establishment of the two rival coalitions was accompanied by a series of defections from Ahrar al-Sham to HTS, including Abu Jaber Hashem al-Shakh, the former general commander of Ahrar al-Sham. Since then, dozens of armed opposition battalions and their leaders have chosen a side, either merging with Ahrar al-Sham or HTS.

Since the mergers, infighting was nearly completely ended, continuing only through propaganda and official statements. The unaligned Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades are pressured to join one of the two coalitions, at the risk of being repressed if they don't.

The local populations, which have long opposed the fundamentalists, have expressed anger about these internal clashes, and many even staged protests calling for an end to them.

The future of the struggle for liberation against the regime by Arabs, Kurds and others for a better Syria is getting darker every day, and there are no grounds for optimism in the short term. Nevertheless, even in these dire circumstances, there remain some local and democratic popular struggles against both the regime and its reactionary Islamic fundamentalist opponents.

**AS: What will be the likely outcome of the Russian-backed negotiations? What is the role of the various imperial and regional powers in imposing a settlement and could it hold?**

**JD: First of all, it is important to say that these negotiations are really between different wings of the counterrevolution. On one side, you have Assad's regime and its backers, Russia and Iran.**

On the other, you have Turkey, along with armed opposition groups, both the FSA networks and Islamic fundamentalist groups. Mohammed Alloush, a representative of Jaysh al-Islam, a Salafist group supported by Saudi Arabia, is leading them.

Turkey has reached a rapprochement with Moscow and no longer demands the departure of Bashar al-Assad. Now it is solely focused on preventing any form of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria.

The democratic and civilian components of the popular movement are completely sidelined in the negotiations, and with that, so are the initial objectives of the revolution for democracy, social justice and equality.

There have been no clear outcomes from the negotiations in Kazakhstan, despite a public relations coup for the three powers sponsoring the talks. They reaffirmed and reasserted their influence in Syria and on various actors in the country.

Assad, Russia and Iran have successfully recast their counterrevolution as a fight against "terrorism" in Syria. Turkey has now joined that chorus, as has the U.S. under Trump.

In a new development, Russia and Turkey are now engaged in joint military acts. At the end of December, Russian jets assisted Turkish military forces and its allies in attacking ISIS targets around the northern Syrian town of al-Bab. In mid January, the Russian and Turkish air forces conducted their first joint air operation to strike ISIS fighters in the suburbs of al-Bab.

Even the U.S. backed the Syria peace talks in Astana and hoped they would produce a settlement. There is now, and has been for a while, a near consensus between all international and regional powers around some key points: to liquidate the remnants of the revolutionary popular movement; stabilize the regime in Damascus and retain Bashar al-Assad at least for the short to medium term; oppose Kurdish autonomy; and wage joint war to defeat ISIS and Fateh al-Sham.

I don't think any real change on the ground can occur without the departure of Assad and his clique. Without, there is unlikely to be an end of the war, let alone any kind of transition towards a democratic system.

As a result, the war will likely continue in some form, with a catastrophic impact on Syrian civilians. Assad's regime and its allies will continue to crush everything opposing them.

**AS: What's your explanation for why so many left and antiwar organizations have betrayed the Syrian Revolution?**

**JD:** Some sections of the left and antiwar organizations have analyzed the Syrian revolutionary process only in geopolitical terms. They looked at it from above, as a contest between various states, and ignored the revolution from below entirely.

Of course, imperial and regional powers did intervene in the revolution for their own purposes. On one side, the Western states, Gulf monarchies and Turkey attempted manipulate and use the uprising.

On the other, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah backed Assad to the hilt. Much of the left wrongly considered the latter an "anti-imperialist" bloc. This analysis led some to deny or ignore the revolutionary dynamic.

The truth, however, is that the Syrian Revolution was not a cat's paw of other powers. It began as a genuine mass movement from below for the overthrow of the regime and for freedom and dignity, just like all the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa.
Sections of the left that discount the revolution and only see it as a contest between imperialism and so-called anti-imperialism ignore the fact that the major powers allegedly opposed to Assad have also collaborated with him. For example, Assad and the U.S. collaborated during the so-called "war on terror." Turkey and Qatar enjoyed very close relations with Syria's regime before the uprising. And Saudi Arabia was the main foreign investor in the country before 2011.

And after the revolution started, the U.S. was not committed to regime change, but an orderly transition to preserve the regime minus Assad. But the U.S. even abandoned this stance, striking de facto collaboration with Assad against ISIS.

Both sides of the imperial and regional rivalry share one commitment in common—the defeat of the popular revolution in Syria and throughout the region. The last thing any of them want is radical democracy anywhere in the Middle East.

So many sections of the left dismissed the Syrian Revolution. That only intensified after the expansion of ISIS and its terrorist attacks in Europe and Turkey. Since then, the right and this section of the "left" agree on the need to preserve Assad's regime and the other dictatorships in the region in order to defeat ISIS.

Ironically, this puts both the right and this section of the "left" in agreement with the Trump administration and American imperialism. So much for the so-called anti-imperialist left's anti-imperialism!

The various imperialist and regional powers’ adoption of this so-called realist policy toward Assad in the hopes of getting rid of ISIS will fail. We have to remember that Assad and the other powers fueled the development of ISIS and similar sister organizations.

They emerged as the result of authoritarian regimes crushing popular movements linked to the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The interventions of regional and international states have contributed to ISIS’s development as well.

Finally, neoliberal policies that have impoverished the popular classes, together with the repression of democratic social and trade union forces, have been key in providing ISIS and Islamic fundamentalist forces the space to grow.

The left must understand that only by getting rid of these conditions can we resolve the crisis. That means we have to side with the democratic and progressive groups on the ground fighting to overthrow authoritarian regimes, defeat the counterrevolutionary Islamic fundamentalists, and replace neoliberalism with a more egalitarian social order in Syria and the region.

But there is a deeper problem on much of the left that predates the Syrian uprising. Too many who call themselves socialists looked to states like Stalin's Russia in the past or other similar regimes today as either representatives of a better society, or at least as opponents of American imperialism.

That led them to turn a blind eye to those societies’ structures of exploitation and oppression. And in the cases of China and Russia today, it leads them to deny the reality of those societies’ capitalist and imperialist policies.

I think what is at stake on the left is how we understand socialism, anti-imperialism and solidarity. As leftists, I believe our support must go to the revolutionary people struggling for freedom and emancipation from below, and not authoritarian and capitalist states, or any regional and international imperialists.

Only through their own collective action can workers and oppressed people achieve their goals. This concept, which is at the heart of revolutionary politics, tragically faces profound skepticism on some sections of the left. This is the real problem, and it must be overcome by a new generation of socialists.

**AS: What should Syrian radicals do now to prepare for the next round of struggle in the coming years?**

**JD:** First Syrian radicals should call for an end to the war, which has created terrible suffering. It has led to massive displacement of people within the country and driven millions out of it as refugees. The war only benefits the counterrevolutionary forces on all sides.

From both a political and humanitarian perspective, the end of the war in Syria is an absolute necessity. It is the only way to give space for the democratic and progressive forces to reorganize and return to playing a leading role in the struggle for a new and democratic Syria.

Likewise, we must reject all the attempts to legitimize Assad's regime, and we must oppose all agreements that enable it to play any role in the country's future. A blank check given to Assad today will encourage future attempts by other authoritarian states to crush their populations if they came to revolt.

Assad and his various partners in the regime must be held accountable for their crimes. The same goes for the Islamic fundamentalist forces and other armed groups.

We need to gather and unite the democratic and progressive actors and movements against both sides of the counterrevolution—the regime and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents. We have to build an independent front based on opposition to all forms of discrimination.

We have to rekindle the popular movement for radical change of society from below. We have to rebuild coalitions like "al-Watan," established in February 2012 by 14 progressive and democratic organizations.

It was involved in the popular movement to overthrow the regime and replace it with a democratic state. The regime repressed it and it has
since disappeared. But it is a precedent on which we can rebuild the mass movement in the coming years.

**AS: Your new book on Hezbollah is a case study of one of the most important forces of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. What is Hezbollah’s project, and what role has it played in Lebanon and regionally?**

**JD:** Lebanon’s Hezbollah is one of the most important Shia fundamentalist parties in the Middle East. It has been supported by Iran since its official establishment in 1985. It follows the theory of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist—Willāyat al-Faqîh—established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first of the Supreme Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran that hold ultimate political power in the country.

Hezbollah officials have repeatedly declared that Wilāyat al-Faqîh is not a political stand that can be subjected to revision. Membership to Hezbollah is conditional on allegiance to the Wilāyat al-Faqîh.

The level of Iranian financial support today is difficult to determine because it is largely channeled through non-governmental routes. Estimates, however, range from between $100 million and $400 million a year.

Hezbollah receives funding directly from the Wilāyat al-Faqîh himself. The Iranian Supreme Leader has sole control of the distribution of these funds to Hezbollah, and this is why it is largely unaffected by changes of governments in Iran.

Hezbollah’s initial objective was to establish an Islamic regime, despite the near impossibility of such a task given the multi-confessional reality of Lebanese society.

At first, it rejected the sectarian system that divided up power between different religious groupings in Lebanon. But it abandoned that stance to become one of the main players in the country’s sectarian system today.

Hezbollah’s evolution was linked to various factors, including the new political leaders that succeeded Khomeini, who sought to improve relations with the Western and Gulf states; the development of Hezbollah as a mass party that was no longer primarily composed of young radical clerics and individuals who sought to impose a model similar to Iran; and, finally, Hezbollah’s need to protect its armaments and its growing political and economic interests inside Lebanon.

The class composition of Hezbollah’s leadership also changed. A new fraction of the Shia bourgeoisie in Lebanon and in the diaspora became increasingly influential inside the party. And the upper echelons of the middle class involved in liberal professions were also playing a growing role within the party.

With this change, Hezbollah became increasingly integrated into the existing economic and political system. It has turned to various clientelist practices and become trapped in the typical corruption of Lebanon’s establishment parties.

Hezbollah now represents a section of elite Shia interests against other bourgeois fractions, especially the one gathered around Rafic Hariri and, after his assassination, his son, Saad Hariri. The latter led the March 14 Alliance, which was supported by the Gulf and Western states, particularly after Syria’s withdrawal from the country in 2005.

The political opposition of Hezbollah to the Hariris’ March 14 Alliance should be understood as inter-capitalist rivalry on the national scale, between two blocs linked to different regional and international forces. Despite their rivalries, however, these two blocs have joined a government of national unity.

Thus, Hezbollah does not constitute a challenge to Lebanon’s sectarian political system, nor its neoliberal capitalist system. On the contrary, it sees this system in much the same way as any other sectarian political party – as a means to serve its own interests.

And it has collaborated with other elites against various social and political forces that attempt to overcome sectarian divisions among the country’s popular classes in the fight for a more egalitarian order in Lebanon.

**AS: How has it used its opposition to Israel as a means to consolidate its position in Lebanese society?**

**JD:** One of the key reasons for the emergence of Hezbollah was Israel’s new invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Two things contributed to its rise: the Amal party’s suspension of its resistance after Israel’s first withdrawal in 1985; and the Syrian regime’s repression of nationalist and communist forces.

That left the door open for Hezbollah to position itself as the sole resistance movement. The Syrian and Iranian regimes bolstered its position with massive support. The Ta’if agreement, which formalized the end to Lebanon’s civil war in 1989, acknowledged Hezbollah as the sole military resistance to Israel.

Hezbollah’s armed capabilities have played an important role in the diffusion of the party’s political ideas, and its struggle against the Israeli occupation and its incursion into Lebanon brought huge popularity to it.

Hezbollah’s military prowess is also perceived by large sections of the Shia popular and middle classes as a form of compensation for their historic, political and economic deprivation. This gives the party a critical instrument of communal leverage in the Lebanese sectarian political system.

Today, any plan that seeks to disarm the resistance will be construed as a form of communal disempowerment for the Shia and would be strongly opposed. This feeling was only strengthened with the rise of Sunni jihadist forces in the region in the last few years.

Hezbollah’s military and security apparatus has been a key and central element in the development of the party. Its purpose today is clearly to guarantee the party’s political position in the sectarian political...
status quo and its economic interests in the Lebanon’s neoliberal economic system.

At the same time, its armed wing also serves other purposes, such as the defense of the Islamic movement against any attempts to weaken it, the repression of dissent within the Shia population, and the intimidation of other Lebanese forces that might challenge it.

It plays the role of the "police" to guarantee security in some Shia-populated areas as well as an "army" to prosecute various interests in foreign countries.

**AS: What has Hezbollah done in Syria? And what impact has that had on its base inside Lebanon and its reputation in the broader Middle East?**

**JD:** Since the end of 2011, Hezbollah has intervened to fight alongside the Syrian regime’s armed forces against the popular uprising. Its fighters have played an important role in several of the regime’s military confrontations.

Hezbollah sent its veteran commanders to lead the less experienced Syrian regular troops in street fighting. They also took care of the training of some pro-regime militias known as "popular committees" that became paramilitary auxiliaries of the regime called National Defense Forces. They also established Syrian Shia militias that engaged in all sorts of sectarian attacks.

Hezbollah justified its military intervention as a way of defending Palestine and the resistance against Israel. Of course, this was a lie.

At the same time, it presented the struggle in Syria to its Lebanese Shia base as an "existential battle" against the Sunni extremists they called "takfiris." It found fertile ground for this idea among the Shia in Lebanon, especially after Sunni jihadists launched a wave of sectarian attacks in the country beginning in 2013.

This discourse was an important part of its legitimation of its counterrevolutionary intervention in Syria. Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria has enflamed the level of sectarianism between Sunni and Shia communities in Lebanon.

The growing insecurity in Shia areas, the intensified sectarianism in Lebanon and Middle East, and the massive casualties suffered by Hezbollah fighters in Syria have provoked dissatisfaction among sections of Lebanese Shia and even in Hezbollah’s membership.

But Hezbollah’s hegemony over Shia has meant that vocal criticisms have been limited. A majority of the Shia population still remains strongly supportive of, and reliant on, Hezbollah.

No one has managed to organize an effective alternative to Hezbollah and Lebanon’s other sectarian parties. So most in the Shia population believe that in the current situation a weakened Hezbollah would weaken the Shia more generally. They do not trust the Lebanese state and army to guarantee their security against jihadist forces.

Indeed, the party has been successful in recruiting large number of new members from Lebanon’s Shia population to meet the growing requirements for manpower in Syria. The large majority of Hezbollah’s popular base is now convinced that the movement’s survival depends on its ability to assist the Syrian regime to remain in power.

That does not mean that Hezbollah’s dominance among Lebanese Shias is stable. It faces real contradictions between its proclaimed support of the "oppressed of the world" and "resistance" on one hand, and its backing of Lebanese neoliberalism, the country’s ruling class and Assad’s brutal regimes on the other. These contradictions will pose challenges for it to maintain its popular base.

Any truly emancipatory project requires a rupture with the sectarian and bourgeois Lebanese political system, which Hezbollah and other establishment parties defend. These criticisms of Hezbollah can be applied to authoritarian regimes in the region and other Islamic fundamentalist movements in their own political context.

Despite all the challenges in this counterrevolutionary period, we must seek to rebuild large movements in Lebanon and elsewhere that unite people against oppression of any group, overcome sectarian divisions, and challenge the region’s existing political and social order.

We have to connect democratic and social demands with opposition to all the imperialist and regional states. We have to build a new progressive politics based on the idea that the masses of people are the agents of their own emancipation. There is no other alternative.

**Feb 7 2017**

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Ashley Smith is a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in Vermont and is on the editorial board of the ISR

**Pakistan- Awami Workers Party condemns ongoing attacks by religious fanatics**

This is to express our deep sympathy with those whose loved ones lost their lives today at Lahore blast. 8 martyred and several dozen injured at
Nicaragua- "Daniel Ortega is a political turncoat and the task today is to avoid consolidating his family dictatorship"

Henry Ruíz, Commandant of the Revolution, a member of the historic national leadership of the Sandinista Front (FSLN), is a quasi-legendary figure in Nicaragua. He was one of the leaders of the main rural guerrilla front. He spoke with the magazine Envío on the situation in Nicaragua and called for abstention during the presidential election of November 6, 2017. Envío transcribed his remarks and published them in full in issue No. 414, September 2016. This is an edited version.

How did we get where we are today? And I am not saying: how did the Sandinista Front get there? Because the Sandinista Front does not exist. Today, only a political group around the caudillism of Daniel Ortega continues to maintain the acronym FSLN, but there is no longer any mystique, no more norms, programmes, debate: there is nothing left. And who is responsible for that? Those who are responsible for the fact that Daniel Ortega is where he is, are first and foremost those who fought against the dictatorship of Somoza, all the generations who for forty years fought a dictatorship and then allowed this individual to be in power today. For years there were significant contradictions, but we let time pass... Yes, we are guilty, some more than others. Now, we see a budding dynastic dictatorship before our eyes, facing our conscience and defying us.

Dictatorships are very painful political experiences. And if those who are primarily responsible for this dictatorship are the men and women who have allowed Daniel Ortega to get to where he is today, we are the first who must remove him from his position. It is up to us to take the first step. The mission of confronting Ortega is down to us, the men and women who experienced Somozism, who confronted it, who lived through the war of imperialist intervention in the 1980s: we are the ones who saw democracy begin as a system based on law, where pluralism was not a danger and written law seemed to be respected. To take back the banner of social justice which in recent years has deteriorated will today be part of our struggle.

A large majority of young people, however, do not comprehend the consequences of the institutional genocide practised by Ortega during the last ten years, by reforming the Constitution and demolishing the institutions. But I am convinced that, sooner or later, young people will understand that this struggle is not only ours and that they need to become part of it. And they will do so if they see in our struggle and in our commitment correct ethics and political practice, far removed from opportunism, from the corruption that exists alongside these nefarious practices. The task before the whole of Nicaraguan society today is to eliminate this dictator from the government.

Let us recall only a little bit of the most recent history. After Daniel Ortega lost the elections against Alemán [2] and Bolaños [3], there already existed in the front a hidden struggle, a malaise: many Sandinista militants, organized and unorganized, no longer wanted him to continue to be a candidate for the presidency. Why just Daniel, only Daniel...? We saw that this man, who lacked charisma, was not succeeding in regrouping Sandinism. With this conviction, we started a movement in May 2004, putting forward the presidential pre-candidacy of Herty Lewites for the Sandinista Front.

In January 2005, we brought together 10,000 Sandinistas in Jinotepe. The assemblies that we were organizing with Herty were massive, and we were meeting Sandinistas again. And we began to feel that we had come together again. It was our idea that a force should emerge within the Front to recover the principles which were then being torn to pieces, a force which would defend national sovereignty, which would rediscover the mystique and which would really fight for the poor. But at the beginning of 2006, Herty was expelled from the Front and once again Daniel Ortega was the self-appointed candidate. And when the campaign for that year’s elections began, Herty died suddenly.

In 2006, Daniel Ortega won the elections and returned to the government. Did he win them...? At ten o’clock in the evening Eduardo Montealegre [4] hastened to recognize Ortega’s victory, without
waiting for the count to finish. And 8 per cent of the votes were not counted. If they had been counted, even with an electoral council that was already totally rigged at the time, it would have resulted in a second round between Ortega and Montalegre. I think Montalegre would have won a second round because he would have been able to rely on an electoral and political alliance. And I do not say that because I wanted Montalegre’s to win, but to make the point that it is positive for a left-wing force to be able to confront the right and to win or lose in open, transparent and democratic elections. To say that the left must be ready to risk losing power and that alternation in government is a reality that we must accept, both in the framework of representative democracy and in that of direct democracy. But for Daniel Ortega none of that counts for anything. This election he won in 2006 was not a clean victory. And this lingering doubt weighs on the political history of Ortega and his party.

When Ortega began to govern in 2007, those who had launched the project of Herty Lewites said, "Well, let's give him a chance, maybe this guy has changed." And we said that because, having seen the government’s programme, we looked at it with economists who had supported Herty and we said, "It’s not bad, it shows some signs of wanting to get out of neoliberalism to begin building a developed national economy. Give him a year to see how he does." But this programme was one thing and the political turn of this guy was another. He went quickly to the Central American Institute of Business Administration (INCAE) to meet with the most important entrepreneurs in the country, and there, with them, he decided what would be the economic policy of his government; the same one that governs us to this day and which is based on what he told them that day: "Take care of the economy and I will take care of politics".

As a result of all this, what country do we have today? The agrarian reform has ended and the concentration of land in the hands of a minority has returned. Latifundism is progressing fully, though still with some tasks to perform. And now, the looting of the Caribbean coast! They cut down the forests to take the wood. And where the presence of gold is suspected, the land is already indicated on the map to give concessions to B2 Gold. Is Daniel Ortega concerned about ecology? That does not worry him, for him the encyclical Laudato Si is a pure fantasy of Pope Francis. What is important to him is to amass wealth between "us". And this "we" is he and his family, his allies and the richest people in the private sector.

Poverty is a political problem and it will not be overcome in Nicaragua with the economic policy that Ortega is implementing. To make a big deal of the numbers, debating whether we are growing by one or two statistical points in the indicators of poverty is a way of deceiving us, taking us away from the common vision we need to have on how to build a prosperous and sovereign nation. At the present time, is wealth being created in Nicaragua? It is clear that it is being created, but the question is: where does it go, who gets it? In 2015, $1.2 billion in remittances arrived in Nicaragua. And this year, Ortega has granted more than $1 billion in tax exemptions to big entrepreneurs. So who is contributing to the economy of the country? Our exiled workers or big capital? And the poor who have remained in the country continue to make up the biggest workforce in the informal sector, because this sector accounts for almost 80 per cent of our economy. And what about teachers, low-paid public employees, who have to have three or four jobs to earn enough income to maintain their families and survive? These are the opportunities that the sacrosanct market gives them today!

Moreover, Ortega will leave us a country that is seriously indebted. The oil contract signed in 2007 by Hugo Chávez Fria with Daniel Ortega Saavedra, which left Ortega with over $4 billion in those years, could have changed the social profile of Nicaragua. Ortega has been governing for ten years and, with this money, we would have escaped the vicious cycle of macroeconomic growth, compounded by the widening of the social gap. We would have been able to change by giving a good part of these resources to improving education, which is always the most formidable lever for the development of a society and a nation. But that money went to Ortega, to his circle of power, to his family and his allies. And today we have a debt to the Central Bank of Venezuela, which is now our creditor, and I am sure it will claim payment of this debt because that money belongs to the Venezuelan nation's wealth. (…)

Who is Daniel Ortega? A Sandinista fighter who has the merit of having spent seven years in prison. Afterwards, he said that he was tortured every day of those seven years, but he invented it. Hugo Chávez called him "a guerrilla fighter", but Daniel Ortega did not participate in any guerrilla warfare. He was co-ordinator of the Governmental Junta of National Reconstruction, President of the Republic in 1984, in 2006, in 2011 and in 2016 he will again be President of the Republic. He was a man who had not even a plot of land to be buried in and now he is a potentate, because he has made politics into a good business, forgetting the ethics and principles that should the govern the ethics of a revolutionary fighter, as people believed at one time that he was.

The language in which describes himself as committed to solidarity, as a socialist and a Christian, is no more than a sickening rhetoric designed to deceive the activists of his party and the poorest among the popular layers. Daniel Ortega is a political turncoat. He is a man who has gone over, lock, stock and barrel to the ranks of the right, adopting the most reactionary capitalist economic policies in modern history and practising the arts of corruption. Has he built a dictatorship in Nicaragua? We have spent a lot of time discussing whether or not it is a dictatorship. We said: it is not a dictatorship, because there are no political prisoners, no political assassinations, no torture, no repression... Now it has already been confirmed that we have all that, as happens in the repressive menu of all dictatorships.
And although there has been very little of that, wait, because if he stays in government, there will enough of it, enough for everyone.

If this government was democratic, why did it need the sovereign security law? This law puts a threatening weapon in Ortega’s hands. Why does he want to have direct command of the police and the army, without the normative scrutiny of a civil court? So that there is no intermediary in a crisis where he is losing control. In such a situation, Ortega will give the order to repress "adequately". This law, the doctrine of sovereign security, allows the new State Security, which seemed not to exist, but which does exist, to repress everything that the eyes of the dictator consider to be detrimental to his political system.

How can we not see that it is a dictatorship, and furthermore a family dictatorship. It sounds like Somoism. With a difference: Daniel Ortega has gone further than Somoza. He "broke the circle" by adding to his dictatorship the ingredient of choosing Rosario Murillo as vice-president. (…) Prior to the appointment of Rosario Murillo, people asked me if I thought she would be chosen as vice-president. I answered negatively because it did not add anything politically to Daniel Ortega. The vice-presidency corresponds to a concept of political alliance and has utilised it on several occasions. So why nominate her? He would do so only if he had a double problem. First of all, if he feels that he no longer has the ability to organize the Danielist Front, still however known as the FSLN, by giving it the command structure to make it function as a machine. Secondly, if he does not feel sure he can complete another five-year term. Moreover, as Daniel Ortega does not like to work, Rosario Murillo is hyperactive and takes care of everything… All this must have decided Daniel Ortega to choose her as a formula for electoral politics and for his succession. (…)

Are there any contradictions at the head of this dictatorially regime? There are many. Rosario has had them with everyone. Some people have lost the battle against her. Others have moved up thanks to her. And some have been thrown out. There is movement in both directions: some people are removed from the leading circle while others become part of it. In the midst of these contradictions, Rosario and her children have assumed ever more responsibilities in the state apparatus. So far, I believe she will win the internal battle. Other contradictions that all these people have between them concern the distribution of profits… The novelty is that the decision to impose her as vice-president is causing Daniel serious internal problems and this undermines the organic support he has maintained so far. (…)

However, Danielism is strong. Because the main contradictions have not yet unfolded. There are already economic shocks, because this abusive government is clashing with some chambers of the Nicaraguan Supreme Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP). This is where the contradictions will increase. Once the money "touches someone’s head", they always want more money. "The devil’s excrement," as someone put it. It is a model based on greed and those who become part of it always want more money. Up to now, big national capital and transnational capital are happy with Daniel, they are very happy. He offers them everything and furthermore he satisfies them. And then, look at the repression he ordered when, a short time ago, the workers of a free zone rose up to demand better wages and more humane working conditions: to obtain it, they asked for the support of "Commandant Daniel and Comrade Rosario." And what a commandant, what a comrades! Repress them! The order was given so that this bad example would not extend to the 110,000 women and men working today in the free zones, the only source creating formal jobs that is impelled by this regime and its neo-liberal associates. The same thing happens in the public sector: the person who shows any reluctance or does not mention "the commandant and the comrade" in public statements about his administrative work is fired. (…)

I am now a member of a small political movement, the Patriotic Movement for the Republic (MPR). It is a movement, not a party, because it has neither programme nor statutes. It is a political project, with political goals, which seeks political solutions to the problems of this country and seeks to change the economic policy that this dictatorship has imposed on us. We are the product of what was in its time another movement, initiated only by Sandinistas, the Movement against Re-election, Fraud and Corruption. With these three objectives, we have grouped several comrades and citizens who are gradually developing political ideas.

In our movement, we consider non-perpetual re-election as a principle and a historical necessity in Nicaragua, in order to break with caudillism. We consider it fundamental to establish non-perpetual re-election in a new political constitution that we must win. The defence and the practice of the secular state are also a principle for us. Another principle that we advocate is popular ratification, eliminated by the Alemán-Ortega pact. We advocate it, convinced that the system of political parties must be transformed, because as it functions today it necessarily leads to unprincipled alliances and political cronyism, which always lead subsequently to all the evils of corruption. This is why we propose candidatures ratified by the population, which allow political movements and civil society to engage in politics and participate in elections, united by common programmes and objectives and without the conventional barriers. The social movement exists today in Nicaragua, but it does not participate in politics, because the laws on parties prevent it…

The Movement for the Republic considers as a political emergency the annulment of Law 840 on the concession of the canal [6], because it is an attack on national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Daniel Ortega must be accused of being a treacherous politician, deserving a political judgment that will serve as a lesson to any politician, party, or assembly: a judgment that shows that national
sovereignty is sacred and sacrosanct and that it cannot be played with in the name of whatever reason that is alleged to be important. A political abuse such as that committed by Ortega in the concession of the canal is mortal and deserves the highest penalty at the level of the highest crimes.

(...)

What is to be done? The conscience of citizens must not be flouted, which is why we propose abstention. We must not vote. If, on November 6, the streets are deserted, we will know that abstention has won and that Ortega has lost [7]. And the next day, Monday, November 7, we must continue to meet, because the next step is to bring about a massive movement to annul Law 840. (....)

Law 840 has constitutional status. It requires two-thirds of the members of parliament to cancel it. But if the MPs cancel it, the Chinese Wang Jing will come down on us, because under this law he can claim damages from international tribunals for the losses caused. That is what the law says. So that if we do it "step by step", Wang Jing will take us to court. And on that level, we do not know whether the concession of the canal, to the amount of 50 or 70 billion dollars, has already been converted into financial derivatives, which can circulate on the speculative market. Who is going to answer this question, when we obtain the cancellation of the law? If we do it by the votes of the MPs, Wang Jing will start a case against us. But if we call on the people to take to the streets, demanding the cancellation of the law, we will have moral support and national and international political weight. This must go through a plebiscite. And a mass movement will not allow the plebiscite to be organized by the Electoral Council. There are enough honest personalities in this country to organize it. The masses in the street will give us the moral authority to annul this law and then to draft a new constitution. (....)

We will not win this in one day. Organizing politically is not like making a "piñata" [8]: we set a date, we invite the people of the neighbourhood, we buy the "piñata", in due course we break it and everyone rejoices. No, organizing politically requires patience. The objectives must be clear. When I am asked what the aim of this massive movement for a plebiscite will be, I reply: "To bring down Ortega." We are not going to drive him from power by an armed movement, but by a powerful social movement, and that way we will save a lot of blood. And we must already start, but we must have patience. Patience and clarity of purpose. That is how the struggle against Somoza was: sustained, sustained, sustained and so it grew and grew and grew...

[1] Staying for nine years in the mountains, he was baptized "Modesto" by a peasant fighter because of his personal qualities. After the triumph in July 1979, he was appointed Minister of Planning, then Minister of External Cooperation, in direct contact with the international solidarity movement. After the electoral defeat of the FSLN in February 1990 (Daniel Ortega lost the presidential election to Violetta Chamorro), he assumed the responsibilities of international relations and the treasury of the party until the extraordinary congress of the FSLN in May 1994. Defending the criterion of "internal democracy" within any revolutionary force, he was then candidate for the post of general secretary and was defeated by Daniel Ortega in a proportion of 7 votes against 3. Promoter of the "necessary renovation of Party "during the intensification of the internal crisis of Sandinism (from September 1994 to February 1995), he continued to participate in the leadership of the FSLN. He left the FSLN in 1999

[2] Arnoldo Alemán of the Alianza Liberal party won the presidential election of October 1996 against Daniel Ortega. However, Ortega concluded a power-sharing pact with him, which enabled the two parties, Liberal and Sandinista, although historically and politically opposed, to control the vast majority of state institutions.

[3] In November 2001, the liberal Enrique Bolaños won the presidential election by a clear majority, with 56.3 per cent of the vote, ahead of Daniel Ortega who won 42.3 per cent.

[4] In the presidential election of November 2006 the candidates were Daniel Ortega (FSLN, officially 37.99 per cent of the votes); Eduardo Montealegre (ALN, right, 28.30 per cent), Jose Rizo Castellón (PLC, right, 26.21 per cent), Edmundu Jarquín Calderón (MRS, left, 6.44 per cent) and Edén Pastora (AC, left, 0.27%), Daniel Ortega was declared elected in the first round.

[7] According to the official figures, the turnout in the elections of 6 November 2016 was 68.2 per cent, the level of abstention 31.8 per cent and the FSLN of Daniel Ortega obtained 72.5 per cent of the votes cast. On the contrary, for the political scientist José Antonio Peraza, interviewed by Envio (http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5272 ), "the data of the voluntary observers indicate an abstention that exceeds 70 per cent and could reach 80 per cent". The Envio editorial (http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5270 ) points out that "the most qualitatively significant group in the plural composition of the 6-N abstentionists is that of the FSLN sympathizers. (...) Historical activists of the FSLN and their families, these people who voted for Daniel Ortega all their lives, who always thought and felt with their red and black heart, also decided not to go to vote. They felt marginalized, disagreed with Murillo's candidacy for the vice presidency, seriously questioned the government and did not find a way to express it. They expressed it by abstaining."

[8] The piñata is a receptacle filled with sweets which is broken with sticks on the first Sunday of Lent during a masked ball. In Nicaragua, this term refers to the transfer of state property to FSLN officials during the transition period following the electoral defeat in February 1990.

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Nicaragua-Sandinism or “Danielism”?  

The recent elections of November 2016 - won by the presidential ticket of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), Daniel Ortega Saavedra and Rosario Murillo (vice-president) - reopen the debate on the evolution of this party, particularly among those who supported the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Having been the hegemonic party from July 1979 until February 1990, the FSLN lost the presidential election to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, candidate of the Union nacional opositora (UNO), a grouping of right, centre and even left (the Socialist Party and the Communist Party) parties! The UNO also won the legislative elections. This defeat put an end to the revolutionary process that opened in July 1979, with the fall of the Somoza dictatorship, and for sixteen years enabled neoliberal governments to govern the country, liquidating most of the revolutionary conquests of the previous decade (including the agrarian reform). From a political-military organization, born in the armed struggle against the Somoza dictatorship, the FSLN became a political party competing for power through the electoral process. Apart from the consequences of its defeat and the disquiet caused by the piñata (privatization of state property for the benefit of the FSLN and its leaders), Sandinism was not insensitive to the (political and ideological) consequences of the implosion of the "socialist camp with the Soviet Union at its head" (a famous formula of the 1950s), which was then considered as a counterweight to US imperialism by several sectors of the Latin American (and world) left.

During the 1990s, the FSLN adopted a re-centred policy, allying itself with former enemies (in 2006, the candidate for the vice-presidency for the coalition Unidad Nicaraagua Triunfa, led by the FSLN, was a former sympathizer of the counter-revolution in the 1980s) and making pacts with its political rivals (such as the one with the Liberal President, Arnoldo Alemán, in 1998). Divergences with these orientations led to the departure of historical militants and the creation of new political formations, such as the social-democratic Movimento renovador sandinista (Sandinista Renewal Movement, MRS) and the Movimiento por el rescate del sandinismo, (Movement for the Rescue of Sandinism, MpRS) - created by members of the Izquierda Democratica tendency.

Today, the FSLN is controlled by Daniel Ortega (eternal candidate for the presidency) and his close entourage. Of the nine commanders of the national leadership during the 1980s, two (Tomás Borge Martínez and Carlos Nuñez Tellez) have died, only one (Bayardo Arce Castaño) remains in the present FSLN, the other six have retired from political life or distanced themselves from the line of their former party. One of them, Henry Ruiz Hernández, recently made this bitter observation: "Today, only a political group around the caudillism of Daniel Ortega continues to maintain the acronym FSLN, but there is neither mystic nor norms, programmes, or debates, there is nothing left.

A sign of this change of optic was given in an interview with the Argentine newspaper Clarín (8/11/2006) by Tomás Borge Martínez, the last founder (then living) of the FSLN. Borge defined the new line: "Working for the poor, but without fighting with the rich because it is possible. (...) Part of the revolution must come back: health for all, literacy programmes, the decline in infant and maternal mortality. But we were arrogant and I hope that the evils of an arbitrary agrarian reform, the nationalization of foreign trade or the arbitrary expropriations will not return. Now, we are a realistic, lucid left, faithful to the interests of the poor".

Another element of this mutation: in the 1980s, the FSLN was supported by the grassroots Christian communities, influenced by liberation theology. After his electoral failure in 2001, Daniel Ortega became reconciled with the traditional Catholic hierarchy and more particularly with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, Archbishop Emeritus of Managua and old enemy of the revolution (in 1996 and 2001, he had specifically supported the anti-Sandinista candidates for the presidency). In November 2006, following a campaign by the Catholic and Evangelical churches, the FSLN parliamentary group voted (along with the right) for a total ban on abortion, abolishing the right to therapeutic abortion introduced in 1893 by the Liberal government of José Santos Zelaya. A few months previously, Rosario Murillo (electoral campaign coordinator for the FSLN, who had become deeply pious) declared on August 15, 2006 to Radio Ya: "We defend and fully agree with the Catholic Church and the other Churches that abortion basically affects women, because we never recover from the pain and trauma of an abortion. When you have resorted to it or you have had to resort to it, you never get over it.

However, despite these new orientations, the return of the FSLN to power (in January 2007) was considered by the Latin American left and sectors close to the "Bolivarian" processes (including in Europe) to be "the second stage of the revolution", defined (including in the Constitution) as "Christian, socialist and based on solidarity". Having joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the government of Daniel Ortega was able to implement a series of Venezuelan-funded social programmes - Hambre Cero, Usura Cero, Bono Productivo: between 2008 and 2015, it received $3.612,700,000 under the oil agreement with Venezuela. However, in view of the current crisis, the loans from the public oil company (PVdSA) decreased from $435 million to $309.4 million between 2014 and 2015.

However, we cannot speak of an alternative model of development. Indeed, "Nicaragua is a key site in the 'near-shoring' strategy of multinational enterprises. These enterprises cooperate with
national governments to establish production areas exempted from labour protection clauses and import taxes, where they can freely exploit local labour to produce consumer goods destined to be sold in the United States. For Nicaragua, these “free trade zones” represented in 2014 exports of $2.4 billion. (…) Neoliberal ideas continue to guide Ortega’s economic policies, just as the anti-poverty initiatives financed by ALBA dominate the public face of its administration. Recognition of this fact helps to explain an apparent paradox: in recent years, Nicaragua has won the superlative praise of left-wing governments and neo-liberal institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund." [7]

Today, although poverty has stagnated in recent years, “inequalities have reached aberrant levels: the patrimony of wealthy Nicaraguans (0.003 per cent of the 6 million citizens of the country) is equivalent to 2.7 times the national GDP. The informal sector alone accounts for more than three-quarters of the working population. And the strong tendency to emigrate does not diminish, the increase in remittances sent to their families constituting, moreover, the main factor – more than the social programmes - in limiting poverty". [8].

Nicaragua, however, is experiencing social struggles. Recently, 12 workers were arrested and charged, simply for protesting against the dismissal of their trade union representatives in June 2016, in front of the SAE-A Tecnotex plant, belonging to a South Korean group, in the Tipitapa free trade zone. The workers’ protest against these dismissals was violently dispersed by the riot police, and these workers await a court ruling which could inflict up to three years in prison. [9].

Another problematic issue is the Grand Canal of Nicaragua megaproject, which was awarded to a Chinese consortium in Hong Kong (whose shares have recently fallen by 85 per cent on the stock exchange, the owner’s fortune declining from 9 million to 3 million euros, according to Le Monde Economie of December 5, 2015). A 116-year concession would allow the group HKDN (Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development) to build and operate a transatlantic canal cutting through Nicaragua from east to west for 278 km, including 105 km in the middle of Lake Nicaragua (or Cocibolca), the second largest freshwater reservoir in South America. [10]. This ecologically disastrous project is challenged by the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences and by the local people who would be expelled from their homes to make way for the canal: “The peasants directly affected by this gamble completely reject the concession. In spite of intimidation, blackmail, deception, threats and direct repression, the government has failed to dislocate the resistance of a popular movement that has already organized 57 marches against the canal, three of them on a national scale. (…) According to the experts, this project has not yet demonstrated that it can be economically feasible, ecologically viable or socially beneficial. Whatever happens, it is clear that the poor in Nicaragua will not benefit from a growth model based on mega-projects that are oriented first and foremost by the interests of transnational corporations and their local partners”. [11].

No more than in the 1980s, no one is demanding that Nicaragua (a country of the South, poor and little industrialized) should embody the quintessence of socialism (which cannot be built in one country). But it is clear that the present government’s orientation differs greatly from that resulting from the victory of 19 July 1979 over the Somoza dictatorship.

[1] Henry Ruiz Hernández, "Daniel Ortega es un transfuga política y la tarea hoy es evitar que consolide su dictadura familiar", Envío, n ° 414, September 2016. We have published large extracts of this article: see “Daniel Ortega is a political turncoat and the task today is to avoid consolidating his family dictatorship”.

[3] In 1985, Barricada (the FSLN daily) published a survey on clandestine abortions, opening a debate, which was not carried to its conclusion, within Nicaraguan society and feminist associations, but which did not lead to a step backwards like that In 2006. See Marie-Thérèse Sautebin, "Débat sur l’avortement au Nicaragua: le tabou est levé", La Brèche, bi-monthly of the Parti socialiste ouvrier, No. 364, May 24, 1986.

Hans-Peter Renk is an activist of SolidaritéS, an anti-capitalist party present in French-speaking Switzerland and in the German-speaking Swiss canton of Basel, which publishes the bi-monthly SolidaritéS (www.solidarites.ch). He participated in the movement in solidarity with Central America and spent time in Nicaragua on several occasions as part of the Voluntary Work Brigades, between 1981 and 1989. He is a supporter of the Fourth International

Nicaragua- A feminist view

María Teresa Blandón, who comes from a rural area in northern Nicaragua and was a guerrilla in the Sandinista revolution, is today one of the most critical voices of Nicaraguan feminism. We met on the premises of the Programa feminista la corriente, a feminist network which, since 1994, has been a reference in Central America for the study of feminist theory: investigations and surveys, training of leaders, alliances for the defence and promotion of women’s rights and gender equality. María Teresa Blandón granted a long interview in May 2016 which is published below, almost in its entirety.

We begin by talking about what might be called "the new aesthetics of the Front", a kind of ideological and visionary renovation that distinguishes the second stage of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), starting, say, from its electoral defeat in 2001: María Teresa Blandón interprets it as "the result of a detailed analysis of society, very opportunely used for specific political purposes".

"The new symbols are the expression of a syncretism within the Front that is largely disguised. The earlier symbols corresponded to another epoch, to another discourse, and to another ideal, at a..."
moment in history when it was necessary to reinforce the narrative of the heroic guerrilla, of the man - I deliberately say man - who is good, noble, committed, ready to give everything for the country. The earlier symbols corresponded to the story of a heroic guerrilla who was to be admired because he was ready to die for his country and for the ideals of justice ".

María Teresa Blandón recalls an era "associated with war, death, suffering, with the individual who abandoned his family to build a transcendent revolutionary family." An epoch which no longer exists: it has been supplanted by a supposedly pacified and pacific democracy, by a period of consumption which disguises as political what is purely economic.

"This new political proposal by the Front had been in the making since the 1990 election defeat. In times of neo-liberalism, of consumption, when people want to forget the war, the dead, the wounds caused by the war, when they want in a certain way to leave mourning in peace, this Front which consecutively lost three elections - in 1990, 1997 and 2001 - needed to build new symbols. For whom? For the bulk of the electorate, young people with a fragmented history, because probably their parents did not want to talk to their sons and daughters. Some have an idea of revolutionary purism, others have inherited great resentment towards what the end of this revolution meant. Many stories and narratives depend on where their parents were, but they are fragmented narratives, because in this country we have not succeeded in investing in the recovery of historical memory. There are many narratives, but they do not constitute dialogues, they are not connected. Young people have pieces of history, and this history is in a place where it no longer fits in, where their parents have pushed them to a more individual search so as to satisfy the growing needs in a consumer society.

"The discourses and the new symbols of the Front point to this, in order to appear as a viable alternative for youth, but without this weight of the revolutionary mystique of the decade 1970-1980. More like a joyful, playful proposal, with something that points to solidarity, but starting from very basic tasks that connect with a religious idea. To be Christians, in solidarity with the poor, but without giving up the interests of their own development. What previously could be seen as individualism, we must now make compatible with socialism and symbols must be joyful".

"The red and the black come from mature Sandinism, they were very strong symbols, but also very terrible, associated with the guerrilla struggle in Latin America; they are part of a lineage that is associated with pain, death, suffering, danger, with the very fact of risking one's life.

"Now we have joyous, multi-coloured symbols, with very simple messages and very ambiguous names, in order to talk to young people without questioning the conservative beliefs of the adults. Because one of the themes that affected the Front more in the 1980s was a permanent questioning of certain conservative religious ideas. Indeed, the first theme adopted by the "new" Front is: "We are Christians, socialists and we are based on solidarity". So with "Christians" in the first place, this marks a very important difference in the new symbols and aesthetics of the party."

The streets of Managua tell us more about the new symbols and the new icons than any expert. The references are no longer to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, but rather to a Hugo Chávez in an esoteric version which, as the Nicaraguan journalist Sofía Montenegro writes, "with a feathered snake and cheap Christmas trees, is the confirmation of a bad taste that is bomb-proof ".

On the shores of the lake, the FSLN created the Salvador Allende port, a kind of pleasure park with restaurants, bars and nightclubs. The entrance costs five cordobas - "for the maintenance of the park," explains the policeman at the entrance. The complex is (re)presented as an enclave of well-being and relaxation, which seems to materialize the words of Marí Teresa Blandón: attractive for young people, reassuring for adults. The Allende quay is a place where the inhabitants of Managua can amuse themselves, in accordance with the values of Christian solidarity, a space emptied of any spontaneity and finally also of any excess. In line with the new rhetoric of peace and social security, this park seeks to transmit protection and care. In visiting it, nevertheless, one sees the presence of a disturbing closure of the public space, an artificial enclosure surrounded by metallic barriers which separate this supposed oasis of a happy Sandinista apology from the deserted wasteland that surrounds it.

"The symbols are syncretic, because this society is syncretic: that comes from a very conservative religious belief, quite old, which coexists with a certain imaginary where the theme of colours, stones, tarots is also part of a way of trying to explain the world and what is happening there. It is a mixture of all that: it is interesting to note that this is not the product of a debate but that it is authentic because the ideologist of the Front par excellence is Doña Rosario Murillo and she really believes in all these elements. (...) She is a woman who is very much the expression of the cultural syncretism of Nicaraguan culture and she translates this personal experience into an ideological and discursive experience. She eventually managed to have that experience expressed in the entire structure not only of the party, but of the government."

Speaking of Rosario Murillo - wife of Daniel Ortega and coordinator of the Communication and Citizenship Council - as the intellectual author of the principal changes made by the Front in recent years, I spontaneously ask why "La Chayo" has not sought a rapprochement with feminists, why she has not attempted to co-opt this movement into her aesthetics and her logic. "Because it is not possible," says María Teresa Blandón, "because she is very intelligent: her strategy is to create a counter-
movement of women who can reproduce this logic of love, in the most traditional idea of the family unit, the woman capable of encompassing children, men and companions ".

"She tried to do it. But it was not possible, not only because of the merit of the feminists, but because machismo is very crude, very obvious, because it causes much suffering. This discourse on the role of women as protectors and nurses of the private space, although coming from the religious framework, is confronted by very terrible experiences: sexual abuse, violence, abandonment by fathers, exploitation of women's work, harassment in the streets, sexual harassment at work. This is a lot and it has not fallen into a vacuum, because in this country feminist ideas circulate, they have not stopped circulating during the last forty years, feminists have not ceased to denounce this situation and there are collectives of women almost everywhere. So the discourse of reconciliation, love and forgiveness comes up against a daily experience of discrimination and is confronted by a feminist discourse that denounces machist abuse.

"Rosario thought, I think, that it would be easy to marginalize the feminist collectives, but she did not succeed, neither in her discourse nor in reality. However, everything was done. First, they began by threatening to imprison our leaders. I remember when, in 2006-2007, they threatened to imprison nine leaders of the movement for helping a child who had been raped to have an abortion. It was the first campaign against feminists that had been launched by the government. A campaign of defamation and persecution began in 2008-2009 against certain organizations; the Autonomous Women's Movement, the Women's Network in Matagalpa and the Venancía Group. We had an enormous capacity for denunciation and mobilization, so then there began a low-intensity campaign to encourage all the organizations of the Front and the institutions of the state to close all the doors and all the possibilities of cooperation and information to the feminist groups. And then came the present strategy, more silent but more targeted, aimed directly at preventing NGOs and development cooperation from financially supporting women's organizations.

"They have tried everything to make our lives difficult by preventing us from organizing marches, such as the one on March 8, which, over the last three years, has been regularly organized, and it is a constant battle. Rosario knows that there is a very hard and very strong leadership in the feminist movement, and that it is very disenchanted with the Front. She knows that there is an incurable wound, the denunciation of Daniel Ortega by Zoilamérica, [1] and she knows that feminists, after this denunciation, will never again negotiate with the leadership of the Front. It is an old and deep wound, without a solution. Feminists have publicly denounced Daniel Ortega for sexual abuse and Rosario as an accomplice. There is a sort of open war: we are denounced more than prosecuted, I would say. There are no feminist prisoners, threatened with death, murdered for being feminists, but there is enormous hostility on the part of governmental and party structures towards feminists. "

This brings us to the theme of the denunciation of machismo and of the feminicides that constitute an open wound throughout Central America, but which are not given the proper attention. "Are we talking about feminicides in Nicaragua? I ask.

"Yes, feminicides, that is the term used here.... Every year, 70 to 90 women are murdered in a country of six million inhabitants, it is a horror. And the trend is increasing. Now we have had 30 cases this year: most of them happen within the framework of couples or engagement relationships. Recently, in a neighborhood of Managua, a 14-year-old boy murdered a 12-year-old girl out of jealousy. They were engaged, and the boy was told that she was seeing someone else, and he killed her. These facts are directly connected with macho nature in all its excesses. In this country, harassment in the streets, physical and psychological violence within the family and sexual abuse are very strong. And all women, regardless of their nationality, feel that it is very difficult to walk the streets of this country. "

The situation presented by María Teresa Blandón confirms that, as everywhere in the world, in "Christian, socialist and solidarity-based" Nicaragua, the binomial romantic love-patriarchal oppression continues to plague all of couple and gender relationships.

"The truth is that in this question of love, men and women are being taken for a ride. We work with men and women on themes that relate to sexual and reproductive rights and one of these themes is love. From an ideal-unreal-oppressive love, constructed on a sexist key, by the deceitful discourse on eternity, fidelity, total involvement, of course women are the ones who come out losers, because we are the ones who are most disgusted by the reproduction of this narrative that makes love the synonym of plenitude. Women are more involved than men in this relationship between romantic love and violence; and it is very difficult for women to unlearn this deceptive narrative of romantic love, this need to love a man and to be loved. As Kate Millet said, "Love is the opium of women." This is what happens with romantic love. And strangely, it was thought that now with this supposed sexual freedom, this conservative ideology of romantic love would change, but it has not. On the one hand, we find ourselves with an antiquated,-oppressive,-ill-intentioned ideology of love as the main source of fulfillment of women and as the most wonderful state in the world and, on the other hand, with demands made in the context of the sexuality of desire, of hedonism. But this other demand is not widespread and it has a class feel about it: it is not offered to poor, Black and Indian women. They propose sex without love, erotic liberties to the women of the middle class, with a certain capacity for consumption. "

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Thus, by proposing the destruction of romantic love, María Teresa Blandón advocates the rebuilding of a love freed from patriarchal bonds for all women, non-exclusively.

"Solidarity between women disappears for other reasons: consumption and the neo-liberal ideology foment rivalry between us, and not in relation to a man, because this man belongs to nobody: fidelity is a completely conservative commandment; nobody takes anything away from anyone, why should we make such a drama out of it? Let us teach this woman that if her man no longer wants her because she no longer attracts him or for whatever reason, throughout her life she will be able to have many loves and that this disappointment will not take away her capacity for pleasure. Of course, she will feel unhappy, abandoned, as we have all felt when they rejected us, but we are not going to die from love or the lack of it.

“We have to be realistic: I cannot tell a woman to be in solidarity with me because she does not suffer, I have to be able to face the fact that I can stop desiring a man - if we are talking about a heterosexual relationship - and that I can stop being desired: we must teach girls that desire is ephemeral and that love has many aspects. This helps us to be more free, to take apart the fallacious side of romantic love. Women waste too much time, very precious time when we should be busy creating, struggling, fighting, thinking. Women invest too much time in loving relationships, especially with men. I am working at least on this: okay, this break was painful, but a woman learns to recover and does not feel bitter, she learns to recognize her body and helps it to strengthen her capacity for love And orgasm: if the two things go hand in hand, then that's great, but if they don’t, that's how it is."

"Is it so difficult for this discourse to be accepted and disseminated in this country," I ask her, to conclude this discussion.

"Difficult? Horrible! We need to prepare young women to have experiences as many times as necessary, without them feeling bad, unworthy, so that they feel comfortable in their capacity for experience and that they get up again after a disappointment. In our radio programme, we have been saying this all the time, for the past three years. It is the radio of the Central American University, run by the Jesuits We pay for space and psychological aggression, starting when she was eleven years old and continuing until the date she denounced him in the Nicaraguan press for having inflicted sexual abuse and various forms of physical violence. There is one session every month, for six months. Each session lasts two days and we seek to diversify the groups: Afro, Mestizo, Pacific Coast, Caribbean, hetero and homosexual, lesbian... well, it is open to anyone who wants to join. And we also do campaigns, we publish a guide "to good loving relationships" which has been a resounding success, with radio messages, signs by the roadside and on the back of buses. We have had about forty presentations with young people at a national level, they were delighted. And although we cannot always be on campaign, because it is hard going, especially economically, we do not stop working: it is an effort by all of us, ongoing work, a constant effort. This is what we do."

They are already doing that. It is a lot, but it’s not enough. Although the feminist movement, like the peasant movement in the canal zone - which we will discuss in another article – is moving ahead, it is not sufficiently strong to change the reality of Nicaragua. This country, which will have presidential elections in November under the watchword of the "Christian, socialist and solidarity-based Republic", is marked by obvious structural differences, by the excessive power of the leaders, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, and by a gross and dangerous machismo. Nevertheless, although the path of change is long, there is no shortage of people who are committing themselves to it, and it is not by chance that the most active figures in this struggle are women. During the recent events in South-east Mexico, the Zapatistas constantly reminded people: "If there are no women, there is no revolution".

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[1] Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo is the daughter of Jorge Narváez and Rosario Murillo, who is at present the wife of Daniel Ortega. In March 1998, the stepdaughter of the president - Ortega was then a member of the National Assembly of Nicaragua - denounced him in the Nicaraguan press for having inflicted sexual abuse and various forms of physical and psychological aggression, starting when she was eleven years old and continuing until the date she denounced him. Ortega then asked the judge of the First Criminal Court to dismiss the complaint, claiming that he enjoyed the privilege of immunity under Article 139 of Nicaragua’s Political Constitution and that the offenses allegedly imputed to him supposedly took place between 1978 and 1982, and therefore fell under the statute of limitation on the date of the denunciation. During this trial, which effectively ended with the court accepting Ortega’s argument, the feminist movement accompanied and
supported Zoilamérica’s denunciation, condemning not only Ortega, but also his wife for failing to denounce him and for covering up this offense. This gave rise to the incurable rupture of which María Teresa Blandón speaks. (Author’s Note)

**Australia- Trump’s China aggression drawing Australia closer to war**

The Trump administration appears set on a confrontation with China sooner rather than later, and the Turnbull government has given every indication that it will be riding shotgun with the US when that happens. These are dangerous times.

Even before Trump was elected, he had made clear his belief that the US needed to slap down China, which he considers a threat to US domination of the Asia-Pacific. He is by no means the first president to take that view: Obama’s so-called pivot to Asia was driven by the same assessment. But Trump is ramping up the rhetoric and dispensing with some of the diplomatic niceties.

During the Republican primaries, the billionaire blamed China for America’s economic woes. He threatened to impose a 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports. He named the country a “currency manipulator” for allegedly suppressing the value of the yuan to make its exports cheaper. He threatened to hold up China’s nomination as a “market economy” at the World Trade Organization, limiting its access to the full benefits of WTO membership.

How far Trump goes on each of these issues now that he is in office remains to be seen. But since his election, the direction of US foreign policy toward China has been unmistakable. There was his taking a phone call from the Taiwanese president, the first US president to do so since 1979. This was followed by tweets attacking China on trade and its stance on UN sanctions against North Korea. And, most significantly, Trump threw into question the “one China” policy, the basis of US-China relations for four decades.

Trump has named a string of China hawks to senior positions. They include national security adviser Michael Flynn, National Trade Council chief Peter Navarro (author of Death by China) and Robert Lightizer, appointed to head the Office of the US Trade Representative. Steve Bannon, Trump’s chief political adviser and now member of the National Security Council, is another China basher. Bannon told a caller to his talkback show in March last year: “We’re going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years, aren’t we? There’s no doubt about that”.

But perhaps the most stunning confirmation of the aggressive turn by the new administration was a comment by new secretary of state Rex Tillerson. At his confirmation hearings, Tillerson threw all the diplomatic evasions out the window. On China’s activities in the South China Sea, he declared: “We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island building stops and, second, your access to those islands is not going to be allowed”.

All this comes in the context of Trump’s plans to “rebuild” the US armed forces, including boosting the US naval deployment to the Asia-Pacific more aggressively than Obama’s pivot. China for its part is rapidly expanding its military capabilities.

**Australia and the US war machine**

If the US and China come to blows in the South China Sea, Trump is looking to Australia and Japan, the US’s two most longstanding allies in the region, as backup. This would mean drawing Australia ever closer to battle alongside the US.

Large parts of northern Australia are being prepared as a springboard for the US and Australia to fight wars in Asia. So far as the US is concerned, Australia is ideally placed for this role because it is out of reach of most Chinese missiles, sits close to some of China’s major trade routes and is therefore well positioned to attack Chinese shipping, and has a huge interior that can be used for live-fire exercises.

The US is already rotating 1,250 marines through a base in Darwin every six months, and there is an increase in the frequency of US warship visits. By 2020, the number of marines in the northern capital will double. While in the Northern Territory, the marines are being trained to seize and hold enemy territory. The US is also flying B-52 bombers from the Tindal RAAF base in Katherine. Although talks last year to base long-range B-1 bombers and aerial tankers in Darwin have stalled, they are a sign of things to come.

The US also has access to the North Australian Range Complex (Bradshaw, Mt Bundey and Delamere) for live-fire exercises. On the west coast, the government is spending nearly $400 million to upgrade the Stirling naval base near Perth to turn it into a hub for visiting US warships and submarines operating in the Indian Ocean.

The Defence White Papers of 2013 and 2016 have set out substantial increases in military spending precisely to boost Australia’s assistance to the US in the event of a conflict with China. While spending is being cut across other portfolios, the military is having money thrown at it, its budget rising from $32 billion in 2016-17 to $59 billion in 2025-26. A dozen new submarines, 100 new F35 fighter bombers and dozens more surface ships and surveillance aircraft will be acquired. All are designed to be “interoperable” with the US military – that is, ready to be deployed in combat alongside the US.

Future joint US-Australian military operations in Asia already feature in the biennial “Talisman Sabre” exercises, which involve 19,000 Australian and US personnel conducting land and sea exercises in Shoalwater Bay near Rockhampton. Like the base in Darwin, these exercises are designed to train military personnel to seize beachheads in enemy territory. In coming years, 14,000 military personnel from another strong US ally, Singapore, will also start annual exercises in Shoalwater Bay.

Of more military significance even than these facilities are the extensive military and intelligence
cooperation shared by the two countries. Pine Gap satellite tracking station near Alice Springs and North West Cape (the Harold E. Holt Naval Communications Station) in Exmouth, Western Australia, are the jewels in the crown. These two stations allow the US and Australia to maintain 24-hour global surveillance of enemies, allies or, as Edward Snowden revealed, civilian populations at home.

As well as Pine Gap and North West Cape, the extensive intelligence sharing between members of the “Five-Eyes” partnership (the US, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Canada) involves three ground satellite stations at Kojarena, near Geraldton, along with surveillance facilities at HMAS Harman in the ACT, the Shoal Bay Receiving Station in Darwin and the Learmouth Solar Observatory in Western Australia. The US has also been invited by Australia to establish a maritime surveillance operation facility, including an airstrip for aircraft and drones, in the Cocos Islands, 3,000 kilometres north-west of Perth.

Such is Australia’s importance to US war planning that US Pacific command chief Harry Harris told a Senate committee in Washington in February last year that the US relied “heavily” on Australia for its advanced military capabilities. The US cannot launch a single ballistic missile, guide a single drone or provide signals to a single ship or submarine operating anywhere from the Arabian Gulf to California without intelligence provided by Australia. We are embedded at the heart of the US war machine, even without a single shot by the Australian army, navy or air force.

Turnbull government backs Trump

The Turnbull government is egging Trump on with his aggressive foreign policy. The prime minister and his cabinet colleagues are determined to ensure that the US stays focused on the Asia-Pacific, and they are even more anxious that it do so now that Trump has abandoned one of the linchpins of Obama’s pivot – the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

On Trump’s election, Turnbull told reporters that “a stronger United States means a safer world”. Foreign minister Julie Bishop has urged the US to “maintain a strong presence” in the Asia-Pacific. In the aftermath of Trump’s inauguration, Turnbull emphasised the warm relationship between the two imperialist powers: “We have fought side by side with the United States in every major conflict since the First World War and the relationship is very, very engaged, it’s very close, and it operates at so many levels ... It’s not just between two leaders, it’s at every level”.

The Labor Party, loyal to the US alliance to the last, has barely said a peep. In response to Turnbull and Bishop’s comments, shadow foreign minister Penny Wong simply “encouraged constructive US engagement in our region”. No-one on the shadow benches has rejected Tillerson’s calls for a confrontation with China. And shadow defence minister Richard Marles has been openly demanding that the Turnbull government send the Australian navy to join highly provocative US “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea.

Some former political leaders and senior defence bureaucrats, such as Paul Keating and Hugh White, are apprehensive about Trump’s bellicose rhetoric towards China and are urging the Turnbull government not to follow the US into a conflict that could have potentially disastrous consequences for Australian trade and investment. But for now at least, in terms of Australia’s military posture and forward planning for the armed forces, the Australian government is showing no signs of slowing a confrontation with China alongside the United States.

We have to put a stop to this escalation of Australia’s involvement in war planning in the Asia-Pacific. Our leaders talk about ensuring US “engagement” in the region. Let’s remember what this means. US engagement since the outbreak of the Pacific war in 1941 has cost the lives of millions of civilians and those of hundreds of thousands of US and Australian military personnel as well. More such engagement in a confrontation with China could have incalculable and ruinous consequences in blood and treasure.

The US empire has never been anything but barbaric – from dropping the atomic bomb on Japan and supporting the slaughter in Indonesia in 1965 to invading Vietnam and Cambodia and propping up murderous dictators all over the region.

Now the empire is in the hands of a leader who is lashing out in every direction, threatening still more death and destruction. It’s more than past time that Australia broke military ties with the US war machine and abandoned its support for the empire.

5 February 2017

Tom Bramble is a long-standing left-wing activist and member of Socialist Alternative in Brisbane. He teaches industrial relations at the University of Queensland.

Africa- Introduction to Pambazukas

Special Edition on the labour movement in Africa

In the face of multiple crises of profit-driven socio-economic systems that have driven millions of people in Africa into hopeless poverty, the urgent questions of our time are quite clear: How do we change the balance of class forces in favour of the working class? What are the radical reforms around which a program of mass action could be initiated? How do we form mass workers’ parties all over the continent? What about organisations of the jobless, the landless and the homeless, the feminist structures, the youth?

Humanity has entered an interregnum of long duration and ever-increasing morbid symptoms. This conjuncture will generate a whole layer of populist leaders and movements, and new waves of suppression and militarism for the foreseeable future. These are the ways in which capital would attempt to survive the multiple crises that beset the
profit-driven socio-economic system – in specific the breakdown of the world capitalist system since 2008. So this confluence of historical events will also spawn enormous struggles all over the globe that the left-wing should prepare for in earnest.

Are we ideologically equipped for this? Ideology is an imperative site of struggle. For sure, we should start with our ideas about transformation and grapple with what that would mean in practice for the left-wing on this mercilessly exploited continent. A frequently voiced criticism of Marxism(s) on this landmass is that it is Eurocentric and was developed by ‘white’ males, and is therefore not of relevance. Similarly, the opposition to Marxism(s) in Latin America continued for a very long time due to the perceived harsh evaluation of Simon Bolivar by the young Karl Marx. Fortunately, the works of the Argentinean radical thinker, José Aricó, has put that to rest now. Clearly, it is high time that we fully debunk all these misconceptions about Marxism(s) on this continent as well.

The essentialism that dismisses Marxism(s) in such a cavalier manner does not even begin to wrestle sufficiently with that theory of transformation, and fails to provide a left-wing alternative to the socio-economic crises. In fact, in contrast to Marx’s political attitude towards Bolivar, that revolutionary intellectual was appalled by colonialism in Africa and elsewhere, and referred approvingly to the resistance of the slaves. The critique of the (anti-social) logic of capitalism – and the urgent need to transform it – reverberated throughout Marx’s writings when he, for instance, pointed out the fate of colonised peoples, i.e. that with ‘the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production’, Africa was turned into ‘a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins’. Similarly, in The German Ideology, he remarked favourably on the fugitive slaves of all the colonies and the insurgent slaves of Haiti.

Indeed, the so-called marginal works of Marx provided a strident criticism of slavery in the southern parts of the USA, colonialism in India and Ireland, etc. So, the left-wing today still fight for the universal values that arose out of class struggles (e.g. of the ‘black’ Jacobins) in the aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. After all, the emergence of industrial capitalism cannot be comprehended without acknowledging the links with colonial capitalism in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The pan-Africanism of the elite, the conservative ‘black’ nationalism and the third wordism of a Frantz Fanon represent a political cul-de-sac. If anything, this era requires the hegemony of the working class – whatever the social manifestations of that class might be as unemployed, casual or part-time workers, etc. And the continent actually has a long history of Marxisms and anti-capitalist struggles. Cases in point include the noteworthy correspondence of the Workers’ Party of South Africa with Leon Trotsky in the early 1900s; the remarkable leadership provided by the South African revolutionary socialist Isaac Tabata over a period of several decades; the anti-colonial resistance of Jonker Afrikaner and Jakob Marengo in Namibia, etc. In every single country on this continent is to be found valiant histories of anti-colonial fighters and anti-capitalist activists. It is just that we have yet to complete the writing of this crucial history. And it is an urgent project for the organic intellectuals of this continent and the left-wing in general.

Another pressing task is the promotion of multilingualism. We should strengthen the network of left-wing activists on the continent by finding practical ways to overcome the language barriers presented by English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, etc. There must be linkups with left-wing translators, and the development of effective multilingual programs. We need to convert all the crucial left-wing literature into key African vernaculars. Surely, the works of Antonio Gramsci, André Gorz, Rosa Luxemburg, Amilcar Cabral, Neville Alexander and many others deserve to be translated into African languages. And this would constitute a vital part of the cultural liberation of the continent. This special issue of Pambazuka News could regrettably not obtain papers from North Africa, where massive struggles are ongoing, probably due to the language barriers. Nonetheless, the translation of the paper on Congo Brazzaville published in this edition shows that it is possible.

Besides the ideological aspect, the struggle, of course, is also about the organisational forms that this assumes. This Special Edition is fortunate to host the first public debate on the recent conference of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), the largest trade union on the continent. Following that meeting of December 2016, some of the political questions ought to be clear by now: How do we change the balance of class forces in favour of the working class? What are the radical reforms around which a program of mass action could be initiated? How do we form mass workers’ parties all over the continent? Should workers’ councils be founded? What about organisations of the jobless, the landless and the homeless, the cívics, the feminist structures, the youth committees, the reading groups, and so forth? Does it make any sense to prioritise the struggle for a living wage in the context of mass unemployment? Should the left-wing not be calling for the abolishment of the wage system and rather put forth radical reforms that would benefit the entire working class?

Radical reforms could focus on, for example, the demand for 50 litres of water and 1 kilowatt hour of electricity to be provided free per person on a daily basis, food banks that prepare one free meal per day, a basic income grant, and, in the longer term, the equal distribution of jobs and wealth, a shorter work week, social housing, etc. A crucial conversation would have to be about whether or not the working class should support industrialisation or, alternatively, what kind of industrialisation must be tolerated in light of the ecological crisis which holds tremendous implications for this continent. Any serious left-wing project ought to permanently keep this calamity in mind.
In the final analysis, the challenge for the left-wing is to link up with the jobless, the landless and the homeless in a mass workers’ party and to unite employed and unemployed, formal and informal, permanent and temporary, urban and rural, women and men, young and old, ‘black’ and ‘white’, etc. Political lessons from elsewhere would suggest that the left-wing – not the trade unions - should take the lead in building such a workers’ party.

And it ought to be a non-sectarian leadership that could combine the entire working class and all those left-wing political tendencies that concur on mass action as the primary way forward. In fact, as we always insist, trade union members should join such a mass workers’ party as individuals, and not as a bloc. The patient building of a revolutionary mass party with a politically conscious cadre is a better option in the longer term.

Lastly, we would like to thank all the contributors to this Special Edition for their significant inputs – without their time, effort and commitment this issue would not have materialised. And it was important to receive articles on dissimilar countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Congo Brazzaville, the Ivory Coast and Namibia. The unevenness in mass consciousness among different working classes is evident, but this should not demoralise us in fighting for another world that is possible.

Similarly, the comrades of Pambazuka News ought to be recognised for their exceptional role in providing a platform for left-wing discourse on the continent over so many years. This publication has become central to continent-wide discussions and should only expand.

It is our hope that this edition on ‘The Labour Movement in Africa – Prospects and Challenges’ will likewise contribute meaningfully to the much-needed ongoing dialogues among left-wing activists. In deliberating on the prospects and challenges, let us be guided by Gramsci’s aphorism, viz. optimism of willpower, pessimism of intellect.

On behalf of the Marxist Group of Namibia, I dedicate this Specific Edition to all the working class leaders of this continent – in particular to the memory of Johannes Nangutuvala, the leader of the Namibian general strike of 1971-72, who died under mysterious circumstances while in the company of a Swapo securocrat. Memory is a weapon.

A luta continua!
Shaun Whittaker, Guest Editor
Thursday 26 January 2017

**Ecosocialism- Nature is priceless, which is why turning it into natural capital is wrong**

An increasingly popular line of argument is that, by turning nature into capital, it is possible to reconcile a capitalist growth economy with conservation. In this way, proponents assert, conservation can be expressed in a language that economists, policymakers and CEOs understand.

But this strategy is not just self-defeating. It is a dangerous illusion that masks the way capitalist growth undermines conservation itself.

The concept of natural capital is hot. Over the past decade a growing network of actors and organisations has banded around promotion of this concept as the key to the future of sustainable development. At the recent World Conservation Congress, natural capital was front and centre, with a launch celebration of the Natural Capital Protocol and announcement of yet another new coalition to develop private finance for conservation.

These, and many other initiatives, describe natural capital in simple terms as the nature, water, or the air that we live with on a daily basis. The Natural Capital Forum, for example, says the concept refers to the food we eat, the water we drink and the plant materials we use for fuel, building materials and medicines. This example - and indeed most others - are premised on the fundamental assumption that “natural capital” can become the basis for a sustainable economy.

Clearly, things are not this simple, as even many proponents of these initiatives acknowledge. What’s worse is that the two main assumptions in this agenda (nature can become capital and provide services, and this could be the basis for a sustainable economy) are based on fundamental fallacies. They will not reverse the negative effects of our global growth-economy. They will in fact make them worse.

**What “capital” really means**

The fact that the food we eat and the water we drink apparently need to be labeled “natural capital” only becomes meaningful in the context of capitalist growth. In this context everything should, in principle, become “capital”.

It is therefore vital to be clear on what “capital” really means. In daily conversations and some economic theory, the term is frequently defined as a “stock” or as “assets”. More accurate, however, is to see capital as a process, a dynamic. It is about investing money (or value) in order to make more money (or value). In short, capital is “value in motion”.

Capital in a capitalist economy is therefore never invested for the sake of it. The aim is to extract more money or value than had been invested. Otherwise it would not be capital.

It follows that the move from “nature” to “natural capital” is not an innocent change in terminology, another word for the same thing. Rather, it constitutes a fundamental reconceptualisation and revaluation of nature. Natural capital is about putting nature to work for capitalist growth – euphemistically referred to as *green growth*.

The move from nature to natural capital is problematic because it assumes that different forms of capital - human, financial, natural - can be
made equivalent and exchanged. In practice - and despite proponents’s insistence to the contrary - this means that everything must potentially be expressed through a common, quantitative unit: money. But complex, qualitative, heterogeneous natures, as these same proponents acknowledge, can never adequately be represented in quantitative, homogenous money-units. And even if we try, there is an untenable tension between the limitlessness of money (we can always generate more money) and the limits of natural capital (we cannot exchange evermore money-capital into natural capital, for all eternity). Natural capital is therefore inherently anti-ecological and has little to do with giving value to nature, or rendering this value visible. It is the exploitation of nature to inject more value, and seeming legitimacy, into a faltering capitalist growth economy.

**Failing capital markets**

Another assumption is that natural capital can form the basis for a sustainable society. In practice, however, it has become clear that investing in natural capital is not all that attractive for most companies, investment firms or even governments. So, even if a price tag has been put on nature - which can never adequately capture its total value - recent research shows that markets for natural capital and ecosystem services are mostly failing. In practice they are usually not even markets at all. Rather, they are subsidies in disguise.

Further, actual private investments in natural capital are negligible compared to investments in unsustainable economic activities. This is because these are much more profitable, and hence a much better form of capital or “value in motion”. When Ecuador, for example, asked government and private actors to invest in conservation of the Yasuni protected area, the promised investments stayed far below what was hoped for. Actual donations were much lower still. As a result, the country is now allowing companies to drill for oil in the park.

The common argument made by proponents of natural capital, namely that it helps to make the value of nature visible, is therefore deeply flawed. The value of nature is perfectly visible to investors. They know that destroying it is far more profitable than saving it.

**Destruction for protection?**

An even more fundamental point is that destruction of nature is increasingly becoming the basis for the conservation of nature. Programmes built on natural capital are usually geared towards offsetting the destruction of nature, which becomes the main source of the money needed for investing in conservation. In the logic of natural capital, investments in unsustainable economic activities are therefore “compensated” by equal investments in sustainable activities.

This practice, which in theory should lead to no net loss of – or better yet, net positive impact on - nature and biodiversity, leads to an untenable contradiction. It means that nature can only be conserved if it is first destroyed.

But as indicated above, this is still mostly a virtual problem since actual investments in conserving natural capital have remained insignificant. Even worse, companies generally invest much more in strong lobbies to keep environmental regulation to an absolute minimum. If they really believed that conservation would be profitable, there would be little incentive to pursue this lobbying any more.

**From quantity of growth to quality of life**

The conclusion is clear: natural capital is no practical or realistic solution to integrate nature into the economy or make its values visible. It is a dangerous illusion that will not only worsen but also legitimate the environmental crisis. And while some probably really believe in its potential, most of those at the helm of the current economic system must see on a daily basis that natural capital is illusory.

But by participating in it, they also know that more fundamental questions about the logic of our economy and who benefits from it are not asked. And hence they do not have to provide any answers. But we do have to ask these questions: should we not start weaning ourselves off an economy predicated on an unsustainable quantitative growth-fetish? Should we not build an economy focused on people, nature and equality rather than one based on putting forth money only to ultimately make more money? Most especially, should we not build an economy focused on quality of life rather than quantity of growth?

With some imagination, the answers are not only straightforward but also practical, logical and truly sustainable.

Professor of Geography, Environmental Management and Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg; Research Associate, Stellenbosch University; Professor of Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University

**Science- How science has been abused through the ages to promote racism**

Individuals have used race to divide and denigrate certain people while promoting their claims of superiority. Some of these individuals were, and are, respected in their time and their fields. They include philosopher and scientist Robert Boyle and sociologists like Hans Günther. Others who've been guilty include biologists like Ernst Haeckel and historians such as Henri de Boullainvilliers.

What is the history of racially based classifications of humans? And does it have any scientific validity?

**Starting with Kant**

The eminent philosopher Immanuel Kant was arguably the first "scientific racist". He maintained that dark-skinned Africans were “vain and stupid”. He insisted that they were only capable of trifling
feelings and were resistant to any form of education other than learning how to be enslaved.

By contrast, Kant maintained, light-skinned Caucasians were “active, acute, and adventurous”.

Renowned German anthropologist Johann Blumenbach used skull anatomy to divide humans into five races:

- Caucasians (Europe and western Asia);
- Mongoloids (eastern Asia);
- Malays (south-eastern Asia);
- Negros (sub-Saharan Africa); and
- Americans (North and South America).

But he disagreed with the common view that humans from sub-Saharan Africa were inferior. Blumenbach’s "benign" racial categorisation persisted well into the 20th century.

Samuel Morton drew on refined, quantitative assessments of skull anatomy to provide further “scientific evidence”. He claimed that interracial intellectual variation is reflected by the interior volume of the skull, and that this justified the use of Blumenbach’s groupings to determine relative racial superiority.

He regarded the Caucasian as:
... distinguished by the facility with which it attains the highest intellectual endowments and Africans as
... joyous, flexible, and indolent; while the many nations which compose this race present a singular diversity of intellectual character, of which the far extreme is the lowest grade of humanity.

“Scientific racism” was used to justify the ownership of slaves, as well as colonialism. It reached its pinnacle in eugenics, a “science” espoused by the British statistician and sociologist Francis Galton at the end of the 19th century.

Eugenicists advocate the “improvement” of humanity by promoting reproduction between people with desired traits and reducing reproduction between people with less-desired traits. Eugenics featured in race-related legislation like Nazi Germany’s Nuremberg Laws and apartheid-era South Africa’s edicts.

Genetic evidence

Genetic studies have examined “racial” variation from a molecular perspective. My early mentor Richard Lewontin, an evolutionary biologist from the University of Chicago, was a pioneer in this. His research suggested that 90% of modern human genetic diversity is found between individuals within populations. The tiny balance is due to variation between populations.

This view was confirmed by subsequent studies based on DNA by, among others, Lynn B. Jorde and Stephen P. Wooding. The DNA among all human populations is 99.5% similar.

Populations of the geographically much more restricted chimpanzee exhibit more than four times the genetic variation that’s found between human populations. Chimpanzees are humans’ nearest living evolutionary “relative”.

Their research shows that when humans are studied from genetic or anatomical perspectives, the pattern that’s discovered is not diagnosable geographically discrete clusters. The norm is gradual, geographically uncorrelated variation in traits and genes. This is even true within peoples who are traditionally thought to be racially homogeneous. There is no evidence of evolutionarily significant racial variation in either genes or anatomy.

The exception is skin colour. Around 10% of the variance in skin colour occurs within groups and about 90% between groups. People living near the equator have darker, more melanin-rich skin than those who live at higher latitudes. Darker skin is strongly selected for because it is a natural sunscreen that limits harmful effects of high ultraviolet rays.

Recent genetic studies indicate that skin colour may change radically within 100 generations because of natural selection.

Genetic racism revived

This overwhelming scientific evidence has not prevented recent studies based on DNA allele frequencies from claiming that there are as many as eight races of humans.

British scientific journalist Nicholas Wade used these studies to claim that natural selection between “races” produced differences in IQ, the efficacy of political institutions and countries’ levels of economic development.

These genetic studies are fundamentally flawed for three reasons:

- Taxonomic studies aimed at determining the validity of races should be based on characters. These are features that are invariant within populations. They should not be based on traits like eye colour and gene alleles, which vary within populations.
- Samples used in the DNA-based studies mentioned above were “cherry picked” geographically to maximise differentiation between human populations, and
- The DNA-based evolutionary racial “trees” were generated by a statistical technique that is designed to produce tree-like patterns which reflect average, not absolute, differences between sampled items. This technique formed the basis of an approach to the construction of evolutionary trees called “phenetics”. It has been decisively discredited and generally abandoned.

Evolutionary origins

DNA and anatomy-based findings support the “Out of Africa” theory. This holds that modern humans
originated in Africa. Archaic African Homo erectus immigrated into Eurasia between 1.4 million to 1.6 million years ago.

About 90,000 to 92,000 years ago, a second form of humanity, modern H. sapiens, also emigrated out of Africa. This species replaced populations of Homo erectus already in the north.

Attempts to justify the scientific reality of human races warrant no further discussion. They cannot be used to assess racial “superiority”. “White” and other non-African people are in fact evolutionary refugees from Africa. After settling in Eurasia, it took only an evolutionary heartbeat for them to lose much of their epidermal melanin.

Dark-skinned humans outside of Africa are descended from migrants who “regained” their “blackness” in equatorial regions elsewhere.