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European Social Forum

Birth of a new European social movement

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The European Social Forum held in Florence in November 2002 will go down in the history of the workers' movement.

Before any analytical consideration, we should recognize the scale of this event: the 65,000 people who for three days (November 7-9) filled the 'Fortezza da basso' (the 'fortress from below' - an appropriate name!) the 400 plus spaces of discussion, a profusion of documents, articles, books, leaflets, pamphlets; a multitude of informal exchanges and networking; proposals, actions, campaigns. The ESF: a joyous fair, a popular university, a constituent assembly, an international and internationalist community, a new movement which is organizing itself: a dizzying birth full of triumphant energy.

The demonstration: an unforgettable show of strength, an aspiration to utopia, and a youth which seizes hold of politics. Thousands of placards, banners and red flags; 'a million' voices that shouted their opposition to war, and beyond that their desire for another world and another Europe, another life for the whole planet. But not without concerns: the joyous perspective of 'another world and another Europe' was overshadowed by the war that is being prepared and the economic catastrophe which is threatened, the unbearable irresponsibility of the dominant classes who do not hesitate to repress, imprison and kill.

The battle for Florence

Before speaking about the ESF itself, let's review the immediately preceding period. During the weeks up to the demonstration on Saturday afternoon, the risk of a violent repression 'like Genoa' had hung over our heads. The Berlusconi government had demanded and obtained suspension of the Schengen agreement from the other governments of the European Union [EU]: the ability to bar foreigners from access to Italian territory. The ESF, it was said, should be 'cancelled', then 'postponed' for some weeks, then 'moved' to another town apart from Florence... the more the fateful date approached, the more the campaign of criminalization orchestrated by the Berlusconi government intensified. The fact that 'Corriere della Sera', which thinks of itself as Italy's most serious newspaper opened its pages to a hysterical diatribe by Oriana Fallaci where all the anguished nightmares of 'Western civilization' were deployed (Islam, terrorism, the Black Block, the return of Communism, the sacking of Florence, historic capital of Western civilization... everything but the 'yellow peril!') was a sign of the repressive scenario openly unfolding. As was the bringing of charges against 40 activists for their participation in the demonstrations in Naples in April 2001 and Genoa in July 2001 (on the basis of a Mussolini-era law concerning the 'establishment of a subversive organization!')

It should be concluded that the attempt to smother this immensely popular movement through legal or violent means has not succeeded. Hence, another approach is adopted: to integrate or co-opt the movement, through the agencies of social democracy and... the state subsidies.

A lesson should be drawn for the next meeting of the ESF, and the one after that; to exist, meet, and demonstrate as a European movement will be a test of strength. The Europeanization of the social, political and citizen's movements will obviously take place against the EU governments, which shows what they are really thinking when they speak of the 'European Union'.

A genuinely European movement

The Florence meeting undoubtedly marks the birth of a new European social movement.

The ESF was genuinely European in its composition, leadership, elaboration, themes, social and political pluralism, as well as in the diversity of its committees, associations and movements. The preceding counter summits had certainly attracted participants from all EU countries, but it was the host country which had largely taken the initiative and the bulk of the organization, agenda, participation, speaking duties, respective weight of movements and so on. Thus, the very successful counter summit in the Spanish state (in early 2002), with its multiple mass demonstrations (200,000 in Barcelona) was very marked by the national, indeed regional context - with foreign delegations very much in the minority.

It is not by chance that the meeting in Florence was not a 'counter summit', but the first meeting of the ESF. The latter was the result of long preparation and systematic work from March 2002 onwards, on a Europe-wide level and calling on all the know how and strength accumulated over the years. A real 'European coordination' was thus set up through a process of collaboration on the basis of movements and activists who had shown their worth. Meetings took place in Brussels, Vienna, Thessalonica, Brussels again, Rome, Barcelona and Florence. The Internet allowed all those interested to follow, communicate, influence, and intervene. Parallel to this, the Italian coordinating group carried out impeccable work both on the political, organizational and infrastructural levels. Above all, that meant systematically creating a consensus, which could not be flabby at the risk of mortgaging the implementation of decisions.

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Without the strength of Italian comrades - based on the incomparable rise of the movement and the political ambiance in that country and their experience on the ground - there would not have been an ESF on this scale, depth or national and European importance. Nor would it have been possible without the involvement, from the beginning, of the non-Italian movements. A systematically inclusive, often laborious approach was needed to 'Europeanize' the project. It has borne fruit and created a participatory international dynamic. Around 20,000 of those who attended the Forum came from outside Italy. That was unexpected, because if it is easy enough to arrange a multinational panel of speakers, the same is not true of audiences. Indeed, in the places of discussion (lectures, workshops and so on), there was a great 'national' diversity (obvious from the earphones of the listeners and the booths for the translators). That was also apparent from the political material that was massively circulated in every language of the European continent.

Two weaknesses were apparent. First, the ESF was essentially an affair of 'Latin Europe' compensated to some extent by an extraordinary anti-war mobilization from Britain and a strong and representative presence from other countries. Geographical distance was not the sole reason. The youth and social radicalization is still very unequal in Europe. Even in the turbulent zone of southern Europe, the socio-political conjuncture and the state of the 'movement' are very unequal, Italy and Greece being the most advanced. Secondly, there is a considerable backwardness in the development of a political-programmatic position on the EU; it is striking that there does not yet exist any programmatic 'common sense' in relation to the EU as there is in relation to globalised capitalism and its institutions. The style of debate, with a plethora of speakers - following the legitimate demand for national and ideological pluralism -favoured neither the exchange of views among speakers nor intervention from the floor. However, this is only the beginning.

What has been established is a first structuring of the movement, a rare cohesion, a will to go forward, an already concretized perspective of actions and campaigns that can influence the political situation in Europe.

The hazards of European identity

All the organizational efforts in the world (and Europe!) are vain if there is not a strong level of political conviction. 'European' identity (consciousness) has certainly been born through an accidental and often paradoxical process, but under the best auspices possible, those of mobilization from below 'for another Europe', breaking with the EU, its institutions and politics.

The defeats of the traditional workers' and trade union movement in the 1980s and 1990s, the 20 years of quasi-total neo-liberal hegemony over society and state institutions, the active complicity of European social democracy; all this had sapped traditional socialist activity. Apart from this tradition, which is more than a century old, 'new' movements, weak but symbolic and very legitimate (like the movement for the cancellation of the Third World debt or the European marches against unemployment) have revalorized social action and critical thought, while an active and generous youth was captivated by themes of ecology and aid to the Third World.

At the same time, from the early 1990s, mobilizations began, on a reduced scale, to challenge the role of the international financial institutions. Big workers' mobilizations (notably the huge general strikes in Belgium, Spain, Italy, Greece) were not uncommon, but despite their massive and heated character, the workers' movement had lost both its propulsive and its attractive capacity in relation to the rest of society. The mass strikes in France during the winter of 1995 were a political turning point in that country, but with little European impact, except on the very politicized and very optimistic layers of the radical left. The European Marches against unemployment - a French initiative - brought people from all over Europe to the EU summit in Amsterdam in June 1997 and launched the first real European social movement of the new period. A 'new' social question emerged in this wealthy Europe, directly related to the conditions of existence of the poorest layers. It laid the keystone of the edifice that would be the ESF. But it remained very marginal in two senses: the workers' movement, under the thumb of social democracy, remained apart (indeed openly hostile) and the activist sectors of the ecological movement and Third Worldist movements were above all focused around the international institutions of globalized capitalism (the IMF, World Bank, WTO trio). The European 'centre' was by far the most active and organized, but it was outside of Europe that the new movement caught the world imagination: the confrontations in Seattle (November 1999) and the Social Forums in Porto Alegre (in early 2001 and 2002).

From 'anti-globalization' to Europe

Paradoxically, when the movement in Europe reacted to Seattle it defined itself in opposition to 'globalization' and largely ignored the EU (its role, politics and so on) and even if there were demonstrations and meetings at the Lisbon, Nice and Gothenburg EU summits, they were over-determined by the 'global' problematic. The real founding battle of the movement on the European continent concerned a meeting of the G7+1. The confrontation at Genoa (desired, planned and applied by Berlusconi) in July 2001 would mark forever the consciousness of the young and less young of the movement. First, by the attempt to break the latter through levels of state violence unseen for 25 years. The moral victory that followed has spread across the continent beyond actively engaged or politicized activists. However, another decisive awakening took place: that the EU governments have policies that attack the living conditions of people in Italy and in Europe. The problematic of the EU as supranational state is transforming the movement. First because in Italy, and uniquely there for the moment, a dynamic interaction between the 'movement of movements' and the traditional workers' movement exists and the latter is drawn to participation in the social struggles. Secondly, the new social movement and the classic trade union movement are being pushed into demonstrations against the EU. At Brussels, in December 2001, there were 20,000 in the street, the ETUC having mobilized 60,000 workers the previous day. The movement survived September 11, despite the media steamroller - don't demonstrate or raise demands when we are at war, when the West is threatened by 'barbarians'! In Spain in spring 2002 there were an impressive series of mass demonstrations - all under the threat of violent repression. Nothing came of it. In

Barcelona, we were 200,000 strong! And the Ålan of the movement was not misplaced, given the complete success of the 24-hour general strike and the fact that the Spanish trade union movement had dared to call it.

It is 'our' dominant classes, and the neo-liberal and social liberal parties, who have taught the movement how and why to transform the European anti-globalization movement into a movement of social combat in our countries and against the EU. A concrete European identity for the movement has been forged through a series of battles to exist and survive and the decision by the World Social Forum (WSF) in January 2002 in Porto Alegre to organise 'regional' Forums was timely.

The rediscovery of the EU

In decentralizing the WSF towards the different continents, in this case Europe, the Social Forum changed its nature: from a propaganda movement, it became a movement of action intervening, alongside others, in the everyday life of workers, youth, women, immigrants... with all the consequences that flow from that.

This first happened at the Italian Social Forum (in Genoa). All of a sudden, it became the centre of gravity in Europe of the revival of the workers' and social movement as a whole. Very quickly after the events of July 2001, the Italian SF spread and rooted itself in hundreds of towns and municipalities across the country, creating links and convergences between the nuclei of the movements, participating, initiating, and strengthening the various struggles; anti-war, anti-authoritarian, for civic rights, as well as workers' mobilizations. It amounts to a veritable centre and a political laboratory for the whole continent. It is alone, for the moment, in its scale and depth. But the tendency is the same everywhere: the ESF and its movements are caught up in the thread work of society.

More precisely, the 'movement of movements' - as it is called - faces the social question - that of the living and working conditions of the mass of the population - and the political question - the range of means to impose themselves on the state-institutional structures. This is a problematic of another dimension and order. This passage is complicated: the 'movement' as such is not prepared for this (even if the leaders and activists are!); and 'the movements' which compose 'the movement' are still less so, because of their heterogeneity (in terms of themes, organizations, functioning, behaviour, immediate and fundamental objectives, formal and informal links with society, sociological nature, material base and so on): the big/subsidized and small/self-sufficient NGOs; the movements for the defence of human rights, Amnesty International, ARCI (Italian Cultural Association, of Catholic origin, with a million members), the Social Centres, the trade union structures... It amounts to a genuinely complex dialectic. Formally, 'the movement' - general - is nothing other than the sum of the component movements. In the concrete, it is supported by cadres and activists who are deeply involved and who in fact commit 'their specific movement'. They often identify 'intuitively' with the strong programmatic ideas ('another world is possible', 'the world is not for sale') and the large-scale initiatives (like the appeal of the social movements). In other words, they practice politics in the strongest sense of the term: all the basic questions of life in society are approached. They constitute de facto 'political entities' ('political subjects' as the Italians say) which concern themselves with the entire public sphere, apart from that of elections and political parties. But nobody is fooled: the links between the movements and the politicians (parties and governments) are multiple and continuous. And the most 'anti-party' actors of the movement are not averse to making contact, 'on an individual basis' and 'without committing the movement' (sic) with the political-politician world.

More complicated still is the eruption of 'society from below' faced with a movement which developed 'from above', often starting from small nuclei, around determined themes and group methods of work - with a certain type of mentality which goes with all that. Bertinotti, the secretary of Rifondazione Comunista, says correctly that 'the movement' "is highly 'self-centred'": its practical priority is its own development and reinforcement. It amounts to a process of establishment of a new socio-political movement. The leading layers reason on the basis of this priority:

the mastering of internal contradictions, that is the unity of the movement, is determinant. It is not artificial for it embodies considerable gains which have made it a political factor of the first level on a world scale. But the unavoidable necessity of intervening directly into society, "in the day to day", raises all the questions around strategy, tactics and demands. The wage earning class, with its struggles, mobilizations, demands and organizations, is moving into action. It reminds the 'movement' which, starting from Seattle/Genoa, has unblocked the historic impasse of the workers' movement, that without a majority social force one cannot change the relationship of forces with the dominant class and its state. More than that: 'the movement' needs help in order to realize its own demands. The meeting between the 'movement of movements' and the 'real movement' of the wage earning class will regenerate and reorganize the social movement overall on an anti-capitalist, internationalist, feminist and ecologist basis.

Radical left vs. social liberal left

Speaking politically, Florence was the theatre of a clash not seen since 1968, between the radical left and the social democratic left.

The second meeting of the WSF in Porto Alegre (January 2002) had heralded the fact: social democracy could not continue to ignore 'the movement'. The appearance of the political leaders of the Second International in Brazil was a first attempt at rapprochement with the aim of regaining credibility, notably among the young generation.

Florence went further: the European trade union movement, the ETUC and several of its trade union organizations, 'demanded' to participate. Thus, in accordance with the rules established by the ESF, they organized several spaces of discussion, participated in big debates with the currents of the trade union left, and sent delegations to the mass demonstration. It was the CGIL, the main Italian organization, which demanded to lead a contingent of 200,000 of its members in the demonstration, and contributed to its stewarding! The (main) French, Spanish, Greek, German, and Belgian leaders spoke and many of the cadres and activists were either sent by their leaderships, or came under their own steam. Moreover, the political wing of social democracy had asked to participate in the central debate (5,000 participants) where 'the representatives of the social movement question the political parties', each European current being represented: Besancenot (LCR, France, anti-capitalist left), Elio di Rupo (PS, French speaking Belgium, social democratic), Rosy Bindi (Christian left), Bertinotti (PRC), a German deputy (Greens)... as well as Cassen (ATTAC), Nineman ('Globalize Resistance') and so on.

Two remarks can be made. First, something unprecedented: the radical left (in the broadest sense of the term) has - in political debate and in the streets - imposed a 'united front' on social democracy, still largely in the majority in the workers' movement, itself very much in the majority inside the working class. It amounts to a real victory, contrary to what the ultra-left currents think (they wish to expel the social democrats from the ESF). Symbolically, first: these people did everything in their power to boycott and break our movement. When the social democrats dominated the governments and institutions of the EU, between 1998 and 2001, they attempted to stop European demonstrations. Jospin, D'Alema and others had blocked the frontiers. They allowed police to fire on demonstrators (Gothenburg); the European Council of Interior Ministers drew up a tactic to crush the movement in early 2001 (implemented in Naples, Gothenburg, Genoa...). In Florence, they came to 'Canossa', to make honorable amends! More importantly for the future, in going themselves to the ESF the social democratic leaders (political and trade union) could no longer prevent 'their' militants from getting involved also, and deeply; that goes for the trade union sectors, in the minority in their Confederation, and delegates and militants: the perspective of a 'European trade union left' is thrown up.

Hence the battle between a radical left, strengthened, and a social liberal left with weakened hegemony, is put on the public agenda at a European level. It is fundamental. It is immediately pertinent. With the probable war against Iraq in the short term, an economic recession, with governments in Europe of the aggressive right and some weighty social liberals (Blair, Schröder, Sweden, Greece): political clarification will advance at a high velocity, including 'in the

street'. In such a conjuncture, and such a relation of forces, the fight to refound the workers'/social movement on an anti-capitalist basis is on the agenda.

In perspective

For the radical (social and political) left, the first priority is deploying itself within European society, starting from the ESF: its campaigns, initiatives, networks, and co-ordinations. Besides the anti-war movement, a campaign for social rights is a priority (not the only one) for stopping the uninterrupted neo-liberal offensive. It is a huge political issue, because such a campaign, waged in every EU country over several years opens a unifying field of social activity. The fight for rights directly draws in all the parties, singularly the social liberals and the governments, obliging them to take a position. That poses the question of the relationship with the EU, as state structure, and the obligation on the movement to define a programme that deals with all the questions of a European/internationalist alternative.

The EU has passed to a new imperialist-neo-liberal offensive, very concentrated in time, from now until June 2004 (the date of the next European elections). That will lead to a convergence between the political parties and the social movement; more precisely, it will push this latter to concern itself with politics.

It is on the basis of these coordinates that the revolutionary left must conceive its construction. If this analysis is correct, the crisis of the social liberal programme (which remains the line of European social democracy) should free the live forces until now dominated by the social democrats, the trade union bureaucracies and the associated left parties (some CPs and Greens). The 'movement of movements' can be the spearhead, the pole of attraction and can strongly influence the political dynamic - firstly in the most advanced countries.

However we should not misjudge the stage we are in. It is an intermediary stage that requires intermediary solutions. If the revolutionary left seeks, legitimately, to strengthen itself, that should not cut across the potentialities which will open at another level. The first solution is to revive and structure the trade union/social left, immediately and internationally.

Secondly, to offer a political framework adapted to the 'new' militants and affiliated to their consciousness, receptiveness, culture, behaviour - in short: a 'political education' which is anti-capitalist and pluralist, where they occupy the centre of gravity. Thirdly, faced with the aversion felt by the militant layers of the social movement towards the radical political parties, we must put forward proposals for electoral campaigns which guarantee an effective participation. That implies that the existing parties renounce any hegemonic pretence but on the contrary participate on a basis of equality in the organizational forms appropriate to common action - before, during and after.