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ESF

European Social Forum: strategies for changing the world

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Among the various plenaries, seminars and working groups at the European Social Forum was a discussion - 'Euros' Strategies for Social Transformation'.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/esf02.jpg>] Phil Hearse challenged the theses of Holloway

John Holloway began his intervention by noting that there were two points on which it is easy to agree: capitalism is a catastrophe for humanity and we do not know how to bring about change. From that starting point we have to ask whether we should build a party and try to take state power or, on the contrary, turn our backs on the state and to try to achieve change outside it. Holloway is clearly in favour of the second option, given his balance sheet that the history of the left centred on the question of state power during the 20th century is one of betrayal of emancipatory ideals once it arrived in power. This, according to Holloway, is due to the fact that when we enter into a relation with the state, there is no symmetry between this institution and ourselves, so the generalized tendency is to push us in a direction opposed to the self-determination of those "below". He took as an example of what he suggests the strategy of the EZLN and the creation of the Assemblies of Good Government. He considers that by this road, while ceasing to collaborate in the construction of capitalism, it will be possible to advance towards a new way that will make possible another world. Neither an electoral strategy, nor waiting for the "last crisis" of capitalism can be used to build an alternative.

While starting by expressing her agreement with many things said by Holloway in his assessment of the left, Hilary Wainwright expressed disagreement with his proposals. She considered that Holloway made a false polarization between the strategy of self-organization on the one hand, and power on the other: "the fact that there were defeats does not mean that everything we tried to do was bad". Work in the representative institutions cannot be abandoned, we have to be at their centre and to put them at the service of a participatory democracy. She argued that the experiments made at local level in many places, including in London before they were stopped by Margaret Thatcher, show that it is possible to advance in this direction. Obviously the goal must also be to challenge capitalist relations within the framework of the State. The real problem consists in defining what should be the subject of this radical change to which we aspire: this is the aspect on which we are confronted with the need for reinventing the party and the type of the relations it has with the social movements, with the aim of finding new ways of making policy and building the organization.

Phil Hearse challenged the theses of Holloway, starting from an assessment of what occurred recently in Argentina: the high level of self-organization and radicalization of the movement which took place there during recent years found itself in a major political dead end, which allowed the re-composition of the "political establishment" and increasing fragmentation of the forces which had led this process. The incapacity of the left to create a regroupment capable of meeting the needs for this movement was the fundamental weakness that explains the relative retreat that we see today. He also referred to the case of Venezuela, as a different experience, because there the process of popular mobilization, against a putschist line and in support of Chavez, appears to have propelled certain sectors towards their own self-organization and, at the same time, to take up the slogan "we want to be the government". As for the Zapatistas, the problem they confront and that they cannot solve alone, is the major causes of poverty in the Indian communities, which would require a change at the level of the whole country.

Fausto Bertinotti started by underlining the fact that there is today more capitalism than ever, than there is more exploitation of labour, both in intensity and in scope, and more destruction of nature, with China as an extreme demonstration of all that. In these conditions that we are confronted with the challenge to the "welfare state" social compromise in Europe and that we must develop resistance to "the permanent war", which we are also suffering on a social level. Casualization of work is the dominant trend and, as a result, the question of the revolutionary subject is not posed in relation to the manufacturing worker or the student as in the 1960s, but to a very plural subject from the point of view of social conditions and construction of identity. But for the need for revolution to become relevant

again, there would have to be a transformation of politics; and this needs new dialogue between parties, movements and associations, as happens at the European Social Forum and as his party tries to do in Italy.

There were many speakers in the ensuing discussion. I will limit myself to mentioning some of the most significant. Alex Callinicos (of the British SWP) polemicized both with Holloway and Wainwright. He pointed out to the former that even if we want "to turn the back on the State" this latter does not turn its back on the people, especially when they are fighting and self-organized, as we have seen in Argentina, in Mexico or currently in the European Union against antisocial policies. To the latter, he said that if he agreed with working in the representative institutions, it was not to reform them but to replace them with another type of democracy and state. Jose Iriarte "Bikila" (of the Basque organization Zutik) indicated his agreement with Holloway in regard to the self-critical assessment of the left during the twentieth century, but he recalled that in any revolutionary situation the question of power is posed openly. If one does not replace the existing official power by that founded on workers' and people's self-organization, the first is quickly revived and puts an end to the second. He used the example of June 1936 in Catalonia and the failure of the CNT to illustrate his thesis. Finally there were many contributions by Italian delegates, indicating both their agreement with Bertinotti and their doubts on the compatibility between a governmental alliance with the centre-left Olive Tree and the theses he defended on the reform of politics.

In his final intervention Bertinotti nuanced these doubts, stating that participation in a government must be seen as one means of political action but that we should always start from the presence in the movements which should be the principal function of an oppositional left wanting to encourage forms of self-organization and dual power.

Hearse insisted that we should beware of the mythical concept of the revolution as something that explodes suddenly; that the major problem for the left is to progress towards an accumulation of forces which will make it possible to win hegemony in situations which could become revolutionary crises. Wainwright underlined that, in the context of the fight against neoliberalism, we should distinguish between the aspects where we fight against the state and those where we demand policies that are favourable to the workers, taking the example of the need to prevent privatizations. Finally Holloway reaffirmed his rejection of any strategy of taking power (according to him, what happened in Russia and October 1917 was a defeat). He said clearly that he did not deny that movements could have a certain type of relation with the state (always to be against it) and he rejected the need for a party to build a new subject of overall change.

To sum up: this was a very interesting discussion that will no doubt continue in other forums and in writing. One regret - the absence for health reasons of our comrade Daniel Bensaïd, whose contribution would no doubt have further enriched the discussion.

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