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Introduction to the European Conference

The international situation facing the European left

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We must carry out seriously, together or separately, reflexions and debates which bring up to date the perspective of socialism, of a socialism for the 21st century.

The LCR has taken the initiative of this European conference, for two reasons:

- The first is to underline the relevance of the lessons of “May 1968” for the class struggles of today.
- But the second is to renew or establish the dialogue between most of the representative anti-capitalist and revolutionary organizations in Europe, to have an exchange on the analysis of the situation and also to see what it is possible to do and to discuss together in a more serious way... Well, of course, this is only one small meeting, a small beginning, but I believe that it should be taken seriously. In any case we take it seriously.

Because this is the first time, for a long time, that so many revolutionary and anti-capitalists organizations are meeting together to discuss... Everyone and every organization has their own history, their tradition, their policies but all of us, with our own criteria, analyze the situation in terms of a new epoch or historical period – the period of capitalist globalisation, the collapse of Stalinism and of the former USSR, and of new evolutions of the workers’ movement. All of us feel the need to discuss or re-discuss a series of key questions on the political, strategic and programmatic levels, and to do so on an international level. This report is only an introduction to the discussion. The ideas that we submit to the discussion come, of course, from the French experience, and are therefore partial, but we have to start somewhere. But we are convinced that in order to go forward we need a discussion which goes beyond national frameworks. We need each other.

The main tendencies of the international situation...

*Because this conference is taking place at a particular moment, a moment of a crisis of capitalism, a global crisis.

We are no longer in a situation where the ideologists of capitalism presented their system to us as the end of History.

* What dominates, in the present conjuncture, is the crisis: a financial crisis, a banking crisis, a credit crisis, a crisis of over-accumulation of capital. The banks have lost billions of dollars or Euros, which they are making the workers and the peoples pay for. Admittedly, the capitalist world has experienced for several years high rates of growth. It has reconquered new spaces with the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union, the countries of Eastern Europe and China. Globalisation is experiencing a new configuration, new relationships of forces, with the growth of China and India, but the contradictions are there: the US economy is going into recession. And that threatens Europe.

*The socio-economic effects of this capitalist crisis sharply affect the life and the work of millions of people. The tendencies towards the overexploitation of the labour force – precarious work, pushing down of wages, the lengthening of working hours, are the principal demonstrations of this, and women are among the first victims of precarious work and of this overexploitation. The attacks against the rights of immigrants, the attack on

undocumented migrants, the xenophobic and racist campaigns against foreigners have become one of the central dimensions of these attacks against democratic and social rights. The food crises and the hunger riots demonstrate the destructive consequences of this capitalist system. About a dozen countries have experienced these explosions of hunger.

*The ecological crisis, with climate change directly related to greenhouse gases, pollution of all kinds, which causes catastrophes that are called natural but which are in fact the result of the unrestrained search for capitalist profit.

*The oil wars, today in Iraq, tomorrow against Iran or other countries. Aggressions against the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples. The militarization of the principal imperialist powers testifies to the way in which the ruling classes are preparing to deal with this crisis, but with two major contradictions:

– the resistance of the peoples...and American imperialism is now experiencing a new Vietnam in Iraq...

– and the asymmetry between American military power and its weakening position in the world economy.

*You may say that we are catastrophists, once again... but no, it is necessary to take the measure of the crisis, and of its global character... Even though there is no situation without an exit for capitalism, this system is in an impasse. The solutions of the system to its crisis are increasingly expensive for humanity, in terms of work, living conditions, but also quite simply of life...

The offensive of the Right and how it is evolving

*This crisis leads to a situation where inter-capitalist contradictions, but also social contradictions between the classes, are being sharpened. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the ruling classes, through governments of the Right and of the Left, have deployed an arsenal of counter-reforms, which have called into question a series of social gains, concerning social security, public services, the standard of living and working conditions. The European Union, moreover, has constituted one of the principal vectors of this reorganization against the rights of the workers and the people. Today, the requirements of international competition, for a worldwide market of the labour force which draws downwards the standard of living of the workers, are leading the ruling classes to deploy new social attacks. The latest elections in Europe, in France, in Greece, in Italy, in the United Kingdom demonstrate that the ruling classes are equipping themselves with leading groups, parties and governments which are ready for battle, a “muscular Right”, a Right that draws support from populist parties like the Northern League in Italy, a Right that is getting ready for confrontations to call into question the social gains of the workers and their organizations.

The social-liberal evolution of social democracy

*But faced with the offensive from the Right, social democracy adapted to the liberal-capitalist counter-reform. It went from reformism to reformism without reforms and now to reformism with liberal capitalist counter-reforms. Each delegation will be able to give their own examples of the application of neo-liberal measures by social-democratic governments. That corresponds to an increasing integration of the political and trade-union apparatuses of social democracy into the higher echelons of the state and the capitalist economy. The symbol of this integration is the nomination of one of the principal leaders of French social democracy to head the IMF. And on the political level, this

evolution is being expressed in a process of transformation of the PS into an “American-style democratic party”, as the transformation of the Italian left has just illustrated, from the ex-PCI to the “Democratic Party”. The result of this policy, and there once again the Italian experience is a lesson for us, is this: the traditional Left, supported by Communist Refounding and the centre-left, went into the government to manage the affairs of the bourgeoisie, and the outcome is that it is the Right of Berlusconi, Fini, and Bossi that is back in power. We should note, with differences according to the countries, the support of the Communist parties for this social-liberal evolution, pointing out however the particular cases of the Greek and Portuguese CPs, which are neo-Stalinist and at the present stage anti-Socialist... Now of course, the Right and the Left are not the same thing, especially for millions of voters of the popular classes, but it is necessary to record a historical change in social democracy: a major integration into globalized capitalism. This evolution is also taking place on the trade-union level, where the trade-union leaderships of the ETUC are having to take on co-responsibility for neo-liberal policies, in particular within the framework of the EU. The evolution, over the last few years, of the Spanish Workers’ Commissions, the Italian CGIL, and now the French CGT, in the framework of the implementation of neo-liberal policies, is extremely significant.

Some indications of the social and political relationships of forces

*In such a situation, it should be recognized that there has been a degradation of the social and political relationships of forces, to the detriment of working people. The ruling classes have taken decisive steps forward in terms of capitalist reorganization. Workers’ and popular struggles are on the defensive. There is unequal development of the class struggle, depending on the countries. But the ruling classes have not been able to inflict major defeats on the proletariat. In spite of his declarations about the “British model”, and his will to copy Mrs. Thatcher and Tony Blair, Sarkozy is encountering enormous difficulties in applying his policies. There is social resistance. Lately we saw the strength of the Greek general strike. Strikes like that of the rail workers in Germany show that there is in certain sectors a real combativeness. The force of the anti-war and global justice movements in a series of countries testifies to the potential that exists. In France the year 2005 saw three major crises: the success of the “no” in the European referendum, the explosion in the suburbs, and the massive demonstrations against precarious work and the CPE... but that did not prevent the victory of Sarkozy. There is in this situation a major responsibility of the leaderships of the traditional Left, which played into the hands of the Right. We thus have a situation where in spite of social resistance, and elements of political crisis, the bourgeoisies are pursuing their offensive.

Proposals for questions to be submitted for discussion

*In this situation of historical change, of a globalized capitalism and a social-liberal evolution of the Left, we think that we need a new discussion on the main lines of an anti-capitalist policy and the prospects for building and rebuilding, not only anti-capitalist forces, but also a new workers’ movement, new social movements, for discussing policies for the trade unions and for different associations, and links between social movements and currents and political organizations, in the context of the emergence of an anti-capitalist alternative.

a) To take into account the changes in capitalism, the massive development on the international level of the proletariat - of wage-earners - , the effects of the reorganizations carried out by capital on the situation of the working class: the combination of new technologies in the framework of capitalist relations of production, the social differentiations within the proletariat, the phenomena of precarious work, the consequences of flexible work, the processes of individualization of work. How to formulate a policy which takes into account these new configurations, this “new working class”.

b) To work, reflect, analyze new questions like that of the ecological crisis and climate change, in order to define an ecosocialist policy which puts forward demands on the terrain of the environment, while at the same time attacking the hard core of the functioning of the capitalist economy, which puts the search for the maximum profit before the respect of human beings and nature.

c) That also implies bringing up to date an anti-capitalist transitional programme which links immediate demands, democratic demands, demands in defence of women's rights, and demands for radical, revolutionary transformations of society, through the objective of achieving a new distribution of wealth by taxing capitalist profits. Such an objective implies in its turn attacking the power of the employers and making incursions into capitalist property in order to advance along the road of public and social property. We are not naive, and these objectives will require exceptional social mobilization, confrontations, clashes, ruptures with the capitalist system... In this confrontation, the aspiration towards and the need for democracy are decisive. A wide-ranging debate based on experiences of struggle, of workers' control and self-organization is decisive from this point of view.

d) Finally, on the strategic level, it is also necessary to verify the main outlines of a policy which can be enriched by a series of very important experiences of the last period, whether it is in Europe, in Italy or Germany, or even in connection with the situation in another country, on another continent - Brazil. We think on this point that it is necessary to discuss the modalities of policies which combine unity of action of all the left forces against the employers with a policy of intransigent independence with respect to parliamentary or governmental coalitions with the centre-left or social democracy. There again the Italian example reminds us of the hard lesson, that when sectors of the Left take part in a government that manages the capitalist economy and capitalist institutions, which today means social-liberal governments, they are led to support policies that are incompatible with the defence of the interests of the working class and the most elementary social demands, they are led to demobilize the workers, to disorientate them. It is for us a question that is capital for rebuilding the workers' movement. We have to do it in a completely independent way.

e) The forms of organizations are specific in each country, concerning organizations, currents, fronts, new parties, the organizations of the revolutionary Left, the breaks with the traditional parties. All that represents a space to the left of social democracy and the parties of the traditional Left. Everyone has their own experience and must learn from the experiences of others. We know very well that in a series of countries, history and unhappy experiments have led to the division of the anti-capitalist forces. In other countries, on the basis of mass political experiences or electoral experiences, there have been convergences and a coming together of forces. We have to continue along this road. It will be long, but while having a unitary policy with respect to the whole of the Left and the social movements, we think that there can be new opportunities to discuss, to advance along the road of an anti-capitalist alternative That is the meaning of this conference.

Elements of conclusion

Those are some questions which we submit to the discussion, but to conclude we would like to express a wish: today, this is a first meeting, these are first discussions. We must carry out seriously, together or separately, reflexions and debates which bring up to date the perspective of socialism, of a socialism for the 21st century. That will take time, but it is decisive. At the same time, we will discuss it this afternoon, we think that we all have responsibilities to try and act together in a united way on essential questions, in social and political resistance, in the fight against war, on the terrain of solidarity with immigrants, on the question of climate change. We propose to see whether we can do things together on these questions - there can be others. But we are convinced that it is necessary to try and advance along the road of unity anti-capitalist forces in Europe. Are we capable of it? That is the question.