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Europe

The new stage and its difficulties

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Faced with an employers' offensive seeking to impose counter-reforms throughout the European Union, largely spontaneous social mobilizations have borne witness to the legitimacy crisis of the neoliberal model, already apparent in the success of the movement for global justice.

However, a hiatus persists between the breadth of this rejection and the difficult renaissance of a political project which can give a content to the massive demand for "another possible world". How can the radical left, whose political and institutional visibility has increased in a series of European countries, develop the political responses that the mass movement, albeit still unconsciously, is expecting?

The war against Iraq and its aftermath constitutes an important moment of verification for the conditions of struggle and political at the political level and in terms of legitimacy; however, the mobilisations against war and neoliberal policies, despite their historical perspectives. Two aspects should be stressed. Imperialism, despite its enormous material means, has emerged divided and weakened unprecedented size, have prevented neither the war nor the worsening of living conditions on a world scale. The confrontation between the two camps continues. Attention is increasingly focused on the reorganization of the forces on the ground.

The further we are from the end of the war, the more the perception of its political consequences tends to vary. Presented initially as a cakewalk, the US invasion had begun to encounter a tenacious resistance with a popular component that seemed to denote a long-term struggle. This 'pessimism' disappeared with the disappearance of Saddam's army. The road seemed favourable to US imperialism for a reconquest/remodelling of the entire Middle East; Bush even announced his intention of dealing with North Korea. Today, the dynamic has reversed. The US government is foundering in Iraq: the problem is no longer military, but political; and Bush is desperately seeking support in order to get out of the quagmire.

US pressure on Syria, Iran and, in a different way, on Saudi Arabia is real. But it cannot act now to destroy the state apparatuses of these countries. It is, rather, the urgent stabilization of the conquered country which is the prerequisite to any sizeable political-military operation.

The defeat of Bush's policy to pacify Israeli-Palestinian relations amplifies the difficulties. All this could boomerang on him - domestic policy (budget, economic revival and so on), state lies about Iraq, the launch of the electoral campaign for the November 2004 presidential elections.

The impasse in the Middle East reveals the limits of US supremacy. The US is a superpower, and the only one in the world; but it does not have the means to exercise an integral control over the planet. To subjugate the planet, including its own allies in the imperialist camp and its valets, is beyond its means. All of a sudden, the contradictions inside the imperialist system have become manifest.

The two most striking political facts are the following. First, the Franco-German axis, at the head of the EU, has marked the limits of 'US governance' - from before the outbreak of the war and the reverses of the invasion - notably through forming a coalition with Russia (and China). Then, there has been the resurgence of a coalition of the 'non-aligned' (the G20 or G21), at the Cancun summit, around Brazil, India, South Africa and China. Brazil, relaunching the Mercosur and promoting Latin American economic relations as alternative to the FTAA, has pioneered this new audacity. At the Cancun summit, a certainly fragile coalition has thus succeeded in halting the disastrous liberalisation of the agriculture of these countries. It is important to note that the open conflicts inside the

transatlantic bloc (EU, USA) has created the space to strengthen the demands of the third world countries. Cancun has brought back memories of Seattle.

Conflicts between the US and EU

The major political fact is the growing autonomy of the European Union in relation to the US and the conflicts which accompany it. In analyses of 'imperialism' and the world situation, the EU is generally forgotten and US supremacy taken for granted.

For about 15 years, from the end of the 1980s to the end of the 20th century [1] it has constituted a single market of a size comparable to that of the USA, and on this productive and commercial strength is built an autonomous monetary system. [2] The state apparatus of the EU is certainly incomplete, but the already existing supranational structures (the Commission, the European Council, the Central Bank, the Court of Justice) and a series of constraining interstate norms now frames its functioning. A commercial entity which initially operated in a 'spontaneous' and dispersed manner now acts in a concentrated and political manner. This is felt inside and outside the EU.

The contradiction which has broken out inside the transatlantic bloc is neither fortuitous nor random. The new tendency to conflict between the EU and the US comes from two opposed movements which are strengthening. On the one hand there is the erection of an EU state apparatus - which in any case, would have rebalanced the prior relations of force with the US - and its concrete activity in the world arena; on the other hand, there is the US dominant class embracing a unilateralist and activist strategy - trying to control the overall imperialist system very closely.

The era of unmediated US domination since 1945 is reaching its end. The omnipresence, omnipotence and activism of the US state apparatus in the service of US multinationals come up against international interests - not only the EU, but also other great and medium powers. Exacerbated competition and inter-state rivalry multiply conflicts hidden and open, big and small, economic and political. The limits of the US empire appear, its contradictions also.

European opposition to the US within NATO had already briefly materialised during the Afghanistan war, reappeared in 2003. France and Germany confronted the US desire for domination. They paralysed NATO around the Turkish question. And in building an alliance with Russia and China at the UN, inside the Security Council, they blocked the US strategy and exposed it to international isolation.

The EU: a new legitimacy

Paradoxically, this intra-Atlantic conflict has given the EU a broad popular base for the first time. This will be a significant political factor, initially inside the EU. The gigantic operation of imposing a Constitution on the EU and the European elections of June 2004 tend to consolidate this gain.

Thus, where all the costly campaigns to popularise the EU's image had failed, the war - or rather the wars, notably that of the Balkans - has succeeded. Without there being unanimity inside the dominant classes, politicians of all stripes, in particular the social democrats and the Greens, are fully exploiting this turnaround. The EU is presented as a counter power, an alternative to the US. According to a 'Eurobaromètre' opinion poll, Europeans now have confidence in 'their own' defence forces and believe that Bush is 'increasing insecurity in the world.'

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/04_sandc.jpg]

The tendency is general but its breadth is variable according to the country. The result is most spectacular in Germany - the country which lived for 40 years facing the Stalinist bloc and under the occupation of the 'allies'. The reversal of political climate there is complete. The country which had been devoted to its US protector against 'communism' has in a few years (since 1999), made two colossal leaps. First, it has broken the taboo of an army which according to the Constitution was forbidden to leave national frontiers. And after Iraq Germany can position itself at the forefront of a 'European' defence which will defend the interests of European imperialism. We have come full circle. The US war has allowed the Franco-German nucleus, supported by a large majority of member countries, to retake the initiative inside the EU.

The 'new' legitimization of the EU is not based on democratic and social 'values' (as was the case since 1957 - the treaty of Rome - until the 1980s), but on the empty shell of the 'alternative to the USA' and the strengthening of repressive apparatuses (army, border police, 'antiterrorist' measures and so on). The overwhelming majority of established political parties, whatever their disagreements on certain principles, are ready to support a draft Constitution which is entirely neoliberal, bellicose and antidemocratic. This includes conservatives, liberals, greens, social democrats and even some communist parties (like the German PDS for sure, while others mull things over).

The pathetic fate of British Prime Minister Blair is directly linked. His strategy was to position himself next to Bush during the war to force Britain to the head of the EU and the process of monetary union (the euro). Through this defeat and the scandal which has affected him personally (in relation to state lies concerning the death of the scientist David Kelly), he has undoubtedly lost all usefulness for the British dominant class. To the point that Blair has now made a U-turn by accepting the Franco-Belgian- German concept of a 'military defence' of the EU, autonomous of NATO. Others are impatient to take over: his rival, Gordon Brown, or the Liberal Democrats. The second effect is a crisis unprecedented since 1945 in the Labour Party. The enormous anti-war movement, initiated by the global justice movement and attracting many Labour activists, has shaken British society. It was carried into the very heart of social democracy by significant trade union sectors, fusing resistance to the war and to Blair's cynically pro-bourgeois policies.

The Italian and Spanish governments have not suffered the same discredit as Blair. Despite exceptionally numerous and combative mobilizations neither Berlusconi nor Aznar have been punished electorally.

On the other hand, the European governments, whether 'pacifist' (France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg), basking in their opposition to Bush, or pro-war (Italy, Spain) have not dared to impose any 'sacred union' between employers and workers to paralyse struggles (Blair was the exception, violently attacking the fire-fighters' strike).

On the contrary, throughout the preparations for war and during the war itself social conflict was maintained. That indicates the limits of European legitimacy. The EU and its national governments remain deeply discredited. The employers and the governments console themselves with a well-oiled institutional mechanic which progressively and systematically rolls back social benefits.

The renaissance of the social movements

Europe has experienced a wave of trade union mobilisations unprecedented for 20 years. In nearly every country we have witnessed phenomena 'for the first time in a long time': in terms of breadth or fierceness or duration but more, important still, in terms of a new capacity of initiative 'from below' (rank and file workers, local teams of activists, intermediary apparatuses). We should also stress the 'outside' intervention into the established workers' movement: associations, NGOs, third world solidarity groups, ecologists, and at a more organised level, global justice activists.

All this indicates a renewal of the labour movement - trade union, social and political - which will break new ground.

This reorganization/renaissance is the most optimistic factor in this first great wave of struggle which affects nearly all of Europe. For in general, these struggles have not ended in victories, have not obtained their concrete objectives. The trade union movement remains organically weakened. In most cases, it is workers in the public sector who form the mass and hard core.

In the private sector conditions of hiring and firing are often much more arbitrary. The real massacre of jobs - the so-called 'restructurings' - continues at full pace. The (east) German metalworkers and the Fiat workers - the heart of the industrial working class - went down to defeat after a memorable combat. The Italian experience is particularly disturbing. Italian workers were able to struggle under a left union leadership (the FIOM) in a context where since spring 2001 there has been an extraordinary social rise combining by waves: sectoral general strikes, 'central' general strikes, the eruption of the global justice movement since Genoa, the antiwar mobilisations whose hegemony is manifested by the peace posters in the windows of millions of families, and above all, a beginning of interaction between the trade union movement and the global justice movement.

Three new, dynamic factors stand out from the recent experiences:

1. The level of combat, despite its defeat, opens a new perspective in the eyes of militant layers. The forms of struggle change - a democratic rank and file capacity, radical actions and so on. Then, we see everywhere the appearance of a new generation of trades unionists, less ideologically trained but no less hardened in confronting trade union, party and state structures.
2. But it is first and foremost a beginning of renewal of trade union cadres. In each country, from each great struggle, each national workers' movement, there are precious indications of the renaissance of the trade union movement. But it is only a beginning, after a major defeat of the working class and a structural weakening of the trade union movement. Thus, we must recognise a hiatus between the breadth of the mobilisations on the one hand and on the other, their political and organisational sedimentation.
3. The third factor is the extra-ordinary vitality and creativity of the movement for global justice on the international scale.

The latter has succeeded in forming, in a short time, an international movement as reference point for a multitude of social forces. It has then given birth, through an exceptionally complex phase of the international situation, to an anti-war movement with an impact unprecedented in history. Which has not stopped it from laying the roots of a new European social movement (the ESF in Florence and, now Paris/St.Denis). Today it faces two challenges: to work with the labour movement in the 'rich' countries and to progress towards understanding the 'social question' in the advanced capitalist world, particularly the exploitation of labour and the oppression of women.

Intuitively there is the sentiment that the fate of the two movements - global justice and trade union - is linked, because they face the same enemy - the dominant classes 'of the north', the imperialist states. However, this does not resolve the problems of demands, organisation, strategy and so on. Two difficult problems are posed, notably because for 20 years or so the gap between youth and the workers' movement has only grown.

Firstly, inside the movement for global justice, it is necessary to understand the role of the wage earning class - as exploited class and as determinant social force for defeating neoliberal politics,. Secondly, inside the traditional trade union movement (the unions in the ETUC) there is a search for partners after the quasi-disappearance of the organised union lefts in most European countries. We should not fool ourselves on the relationship of forces; the wage earning class is on the defensive; it is subjected to a continued social regression. At the end of the day, if nothing changes, demoralization threatens. What will the outcome be?

Bertinotti's turn

A proposal has come from Italy, the country that has had the largest, strongest, most varied and richest political and social experiences in Europe. The PRC has been fully involved in building the global justice and trade union movements, including working to liberate an anti-capitalist, revolutionary 'new political subject' in tune with the movement and 'going beyond' the PRC. This was the turn at their last congress, in April 2003.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/06_fb.jpg]

Fausto Bertinotti

Today Fausto Bertinotti, the leader of the PRC, makes a very mitigated balance sheet of this, both for the movements and his own party (The Guardian, August 12, 2003).

The gap between the extent of the social mobilizations and their weak expression in the political sphere (electorally and for the parties) has provoked a change in perspective for the PRC. Given the failure of the movement, the priority has become bringing down the Berlusconi government by a coalition between parties, the 'centre-left' (social democracy, the Olive Tree of Prodi,) and the PRC, supported by the whole of the union and social movement in order to form a new left government.

The spark to this turn was the failure of the referendum (June 2003). The goal was to widen a law ('article 18;) that would prohibit 'unjustified redundancies' in companies of less than 15 employees. It was a very important social law. And the proposal was very radical, given the neoliberal environment. There was savage opposition from the employers' organizations, the Berlusconi government, DS (social democracy, in the opposition) and two of the three major trade-union confederations (UIL, CISL). By lowering further the threshold, the mass of men and women workers, young people and casualized workers were involved. That had a strong civil aspect, because it spoke to families in difficulty and non-trade-union groups, which often form part of the global justice movement. The PRC succeeded in constituting a broad coalition, which embraced the whole of the social, political and citizens left (PRC, Greens, PdCI, the FIOM, the trade unions at the base, and also the CGIL, and ARCI the main cultural movement). The referendum did not achieve its goal: the level of participation - 25,7% of registered voters - was too low. But more than 10 million supported the proposal, which is enormous. What political conclusion should we draw from such an extraordinarily contradictory situation?

From this 'failure', Bertinotti made his 'turn'. From the weakness of this movement primarily based on the social and political currents of the radical left, he has developed a new perspective. It aims at the short-term fall of the Berlusconi government through an alliance with 'the centre-left' (the socio-liberal parties of the 'Olive tree') to form a government, in which the PRC will participate. It is a question "of opening a path, a beginning of an open programmatic discussion, nourished by conflicts, and a goal, the fall of the Berlusconi government and the realization of a programmatic alliance which is a candidate to govern the country". (Document adopted by the 'National Leadership' of the PRC, Liberazione, September 25). All the tactical difficulties and problems are there: the broadest unity of action including with neo-liberal social democracy to drive out a right-wing government; the battle for hegemony of the - social and political - radical left within this 'united front'; the public political debate to develop a programme of action, the formation of a new 'centre-left' government; and the entry of the PRC into such a government. This latter will be all the more marked by social radicalism, according to Bertinotti, because it will be carried by the movement, in a phase where the social-democrat/reformist program is impracticable in capitalism today, and neoliberalism is completely discredited.

The problem is not the unity of action, nor in fact an electoral bloc to beat Berlusconi if the very antidemocratic electoral law makes it necessary; but the PRC's already announced commitment to enter a government whose programme is already determined! Experience will decide. The main motivation of the PRC leadership is obviously the electoral failure and limited growth of the party after an extremely fertile phase of self-activity and

self-organization of young people and the popular masses, a radical line of the PRC in tune with them, and the enormous activity of its militants who played an important part in the movement.

At the root of this hasty turn there is a real difficulty: we are in the first stage of the rebirth of the social and political movement; its organizational recovery is limited, but its legitimacy in society is already well-established. The anti-capitalist/ radical parties are still a minority, but have already succeeded in entering elected political assemblies.

It follows that we cannot ignore the intrigues of a right-wing government that multiplies attacks against social (and often democratic) rights. While avoiding electoralism, the effort for a stronger showing in elections is useful for the visibility of an anti-capitalist alternative.

On the other hand, making a programmatic governmental alliance with the social-liberal parties is likely to bring one into discredit as has been the case for several parties, from the French Communist Party to the Belgian Ecologists. Their organizations are in tatters. The still more serious danger is that such a governmental alliance inevitably pushes the anti-capitalist parties that join it to adapt to governmental participation and, worse, to limit the autonomy of the social movement. Both the party and the movement will be sucked into the political convulsions that such operations require.

The 'political question': out of reach?

We have to maintain firmly the path to the development of the social and political movement, giving it every latitude to spread its wings in action, to create a culture of freedom of expression and pluralism, to reinforce its programmes, its analyses, its organizations. The question of the 'political expression' is unavoidable and imperative. But for the radical left it is unfortunately posed in a vacuum; parties, elections, government, the state are taboo questions. Everybody talks about them but it is taboo in the movement. The gap between the breadth of the social movement and the necessarily political strategy remains taboo: just to what point?

In the absence of an overwhelming sweep of commitment, there are only disparate elements that will help us bridge the gap.

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Four factors can help:

1. The extraordinary novelty of the situation in that there exists now, for the first time for 25 years, on a worldwide scale, although it varies from country to country, a broad protest and internationalist/globalist layer. It has a stunning capacity for worldwide initiatives, which for the moment escape the grasp of socio-liberal conservative or institutional forces. Within it a social and pluralist left is a fundamental element. It is within this movement that we find the energy and consciousness for forming a new anti-capitalist political formation. But inertia, distrust, reticence, misunderstanding block this solution. Meanwhile they leave the political conclusion of the social activity to the traditional political parties of the social-liberal left.
2. The movement through its scope and the social problems it raises now contains a deep contradiction: how to achieve the major demands which form its identity (Tobin tax, cancellation of third world debt, fight against social inequality) and over and above those how to get to this 'other world' which is possible? The demand for 'another left' flows logically from this. If you say 'strategy' and 'programme' you must say also plurality of organized opinions, indeed of political currents, movements and parties. It is said and repeated that the movement is 'anti-capitalist'. 'Potentially' anti-capitalist yes, anti-establishment or anti-system, certainly. But some elementary references for anti-capitalism are lacking: the need to take economic power away from the big multi-nationals; a

radical change and reorganization of political power from below; the need for a majority, and thus democratic, social force to contest the financial oligarchy which governs us. These ideas are not discussed, and even less accepted. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons that explains why 'politics' remains mysterious or distasteful for a good part of the movement.

3. There is a very active political life 'outside the movement'. The governmental parties are a strongly polarizing factor; their action affects the mass of the population. In most European countries it is easy to discern the social-liberal left which is turn and turn about in government or in the opposition. How can the movement refuse to take a position on the concrete policies that are proposed or implemented? Or make alternative proposals. What is more, this is a real political battle. But politics weighs more and more heavily in the movement and faced with the movement. Thus discredited and worn-out social democracy seeks desperately to 'become part' of the movement. It has found support from reformist individual personalities. For example in France the Cassen-Nikoviev leadership of ATTAC has lined up with the SP and CP to attack the political and social radical left. The movement will not be able to avoid having to organize in one or several parties or in currents with a single party.
4. This process of slow, latent political clarification is undoubtedly going to come to the surface in the next few months. For all the reasons mentioned, but above all because of the European elections in June 2004. For the EU and the parties which are committed to it, this is a wonderful opportunity to legitimize and contract this capitalist and imperialist Europe from Finland to the Mediterranean, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Russian border. The difference, the conflict between the social-liberal left and the anti-capitalist left will be revealed in the eyes of millions. How can the thousands of movement activists and supporters remain on the sidelines. On this occasion it will not just be counting the votes on election night. It is battle to win 'hearts and minds'.

Two major events are taking place in the immediate future: the European Social Forum will bring together several dozens of thousands in the 'workshop discussions' and several hundred thousands in the Paris demonstration. Millions of people are going to make a political choice in the 25 member states (450 million inhabitants). The two must be linked.

From the Forum we hope for a new push towards common mobilizations to push back neo-liberal politics and to carry the question of social rights into the heart of Europe - without forgetting the fight against the war. These questions will also be at the heart of the electoral campaign of June 2004.

The activists of the social left must grasp this opportunity. We must get involved. The situation is favourable. For the first time a series of - broad and pluralist - parties and movements which have been working together for several years in the Conference of the European Anti-Capitalist Left (see International Viewpoint 353, September 2003) have announced their wish to form a European party. They are not so arrogant as to claim that they already form the new political force in our continent capable of fighting effectively to impose social demands and to fight for 'another world', 'another Europe'. They are holding out their hands to tens of thousands of women and men asking them to get involved. A new anti-capitalist political force must respond to the European Social Forum.

[1] All this is very much more complicated. The EU is a very recent assembly of national entities which are relatively homogeneous on the economic level and possess very old imperialist apparatuses. Its construction has been a contradictory process characterised by multiple economic, historic, cultural and political inertia.

[2] Michel Husson notes in 'Le Grand BLUFF Capitaliste', La Dispute, 2001, p 184, the key role for states of control of international investment, and exchange rate policy among the main world currencies.