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Must everything go through the anti-war movement?

The Social Question in Europe

- Debate -

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Frank Slegers replies to Alex Callinicos

In his interesting contribution on the London ESF, Alex Callinicos writes that the war is the dominant issue in world politics. He adds that there is a necessary connection between the Bush war drive and neoliberal globalisation. He further states that it is a disagreement on this analysis that is at the base of the critics who say that the war was too prominent in the London ESF.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Euromarch9a-3.jpg>]

Euromarch - fighting for jobs, against austerity

Is this so? Is this the fundamental disagreement with those who in the process of building the ESF stress the importance of the social question in Europe (like I do)? And is the question "what is dominant today in world politics" the good question to assess the role in the ESF-process of the social question in Europe?

I do not think so, and I do not recognise myself in this type of debate. If I stress the importance of the social question in Europe, it is not to underplay the importance of the war, but because it is impossible to build a counter-force to neoliberalism in Europe, on the level of the EU, if you do not address the living and working conditions of the mass of the working people in Europe itself.

I want to comment on this, as I think it is an important question now that we are preparing what might turn out to be a big European mass demonstration on the 19th of March in Brussels.

My opinion implies two ideas:

- (1) it is important to build a counter-force able to oppose neoliberalism on the level of the EU;
- (2) to do this, you need to address the living conditions of ordinary people in Europe itself.

On the first question. It is important to build a force able to act on the level of the EU for two reasons: not only because the EU is a political field with more and more impact on national politics, but also because in a globalised world it is less and less credible to build alternatives on the level of a single national state in Europe. You can resist on a national level, and stop some attacks, as the recent mass mobilisations proved in the Netherlands. But it is difficult to imagine global alternative politics, in Europe, being developed today at the level of one single national state.

This is why in the workers movement, and more particularly in the trade unions, many people are convinced that the only chance to save the European social model (social security + public services) against neoliberal globalisation, is on the European level. That is, paradoxically, why they turn to the EU for protection against neoliberal globalisation or, at least, hesitate to wage social or political struggles that could destabilise the EU.

This is a big strategical problem for the left today. If you do not build credible alternatives on the European level, the EU as it is today will fill the gap. So you need to build on the European level, inside the EU, a force able to act as a counter-force against neoliberal EU-policies: inside, not only or merely in a geographical sense, but chiefly in the sense that it addresses the EU-politics. Only if such a force on the European level is massive and legitimate enough, we will be able to escape the actual deadlock that you need a European wide response to neoliberal globalisation, but that there is nothing serious on the European level but the EU.

This, of course, does not mean you have to build a European social movement on top of and separate from social movements in the national states. It is more like learning to act together on the European level, dealing with the EU, its policies and its institutions. Why stress this European dimension? Because the fact of life today is that there is a succession of mass mobilisations on the national level, with general strikes and huge mass demonstrations in one country after another, but a big delay or gap once it comes to do the same on the European level.

There is a real possibility to overcome this deadlock today, as more in particular inside the trade-unions there is a double tendency:

- (1) more and more trade-unions are convinced of the importance of the European level. The credibility of union politics limited to the national level to face neoliberalism is losing ground;
- (2) in the past such a European orientation implied in general unions subordinating to EU-neoliberalism (the ETUC serving as a mediating force), but today this is less true. The Belgian unions, very "pro-European", for example openly criticised at several occasions positions taken by the ETUC (lastly the positive ETUC-response to the Kok-report).

Inside the unions indeed, the conviction is growing that there is more than one option once you decide to go European. One option is to accept the framework of neoliberal EU-policies, and escort those without questioning their provisos (this is basically what the ETUC is doing, at least since the Delors-presidency of the Commission and the neoliberal turn of EU-policies). But you can also act inside the EU questioning its policies, accepting conflict inside the EU, and mobilise to change the balance of forces to support your own point of view. The way the Belgian unions took the initiative to impulse a European wide opposition to the Bolkestein-directive is emblematic for this second approach. But it is much more widespread than this. The impressive adherence of trade-unions especially in Europe to the social forum-movement, since the second WSF and the first ESF, is a sign on the wall that the consciousness is growing inside the trade-unions that things are going the wrong course in Europe, and that the trade-unions need allies. This has nothing to do with a smash-the-EU policy. But it are the concrete developments that could open breaches to alternative policies.

On the second question. If you want to build a genuine European mass social movement, this movement has to address the living conditions of working people in Europe. Doing this encounters different obstacles. Important layers of the no global movement, for example in youth but also many ngo's, are mobilised on issues like the north-south divide, global ecological questions, war and oppression, and consider the living conditions of working people in the rich countries as secondary at best, or worse, as expressions of "euro-centrist egoism". The trade-unions at the other side, for who the social question is core business, often come to the no global movement to enlarge their own vision with new horizons, and not to put the social question on the agenda. Now and then they even consider the social question as too important a question to take the risk of loosing control of its gesture.

To make things worse, often the social question as it is understood in the no global movement refers to the most exploited and oppressed, and not to the bulk of working people (the "middle class"!). Personally I strongly disagree with those voices, for example some people in the No Vox movement, who advocate a world wide alliance between the most oppressed and exploited, excluding from this alliance the bulk of working people in the rich countries and their "egoistic" trade unions. If we do not overcome these limitations, the no global movement in Europe will remain an ethical movement with a legitimate appeal in public opinion, but unable to change the core relationship of forces with neoliberalism. It will be unable to build a force that actually challenges the EU-policies, and thus failing to do what should be the main contribution of the Europeans to the world movement.

All this is not simple. So we need to debate it. This debate will not really happen if it is a debate between those who "underestimate the war" and those who "underestimate the social question".

I feel some urgency, for several reasons. First, I am impressed by the massive delay we have, faced with the neoliberal forces that are building the EU.

Second, I think the ESF will lose its legitimacy if there is no progress on this question. After all, it is surprising how easily people describe the ESF as a sterile talking shop, when you know how many networks and campaigns are being built up through the ESF. At the heart of this deep rooted defiance is scepticism about our willingness to oppose the overall neoliberal dynamics of EU-policies. This movement is driven by the understanding that neoliberalism is a global political force, that you need to oppose as such. So single issue campaigns (Bolkestein, Tobin tax, against privatisation,...) do not convince, and rightly so, if they are not linked with a global political battle against EU-neoliberalism.

Thirdly, we decided on the mobilisations on the 19th and the 20th of March, with a European mass demonstration on the 19th of March in Brussels. This demonstration could be a turning point, if we are able to reach out to working people. Those who waged the grandiose battles against the neoliberal reform of the welfare state in the different countries should have the conviction that the demonstration on the 19th of March will bring their struggle on the European level, to continue the fight all together. It will not be so easy to convince people of this, and that the demonstration in Brussels will be more than a one-shot operation, with no continuity afterwards. This is why the demonstration in Brussels only makes sense if this movement firmly decides that the living conditions of ordinary people in Europe are one of its core concerns in the long run.

This not to forget about the war, or to blur the links between austerity policies and the war drive. The Belgian organisations opposing the war already signalled their will to demonstrate that day in Brussels in one form or another.

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